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FROM COUNTERSPACES TO COMMUNITY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF BLACK COMMUNITY MAKING AT A PWI

by

Charles L. Watkins III

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2024

Dissertation Committee

Joseph Lathan, PhD, Chair
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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: FROM COUNTERSPACES TO COMMUNITY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF BLACK COMMUNITY MAKING AT A PWI

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined how Black college students build and maintain a sense of community at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Informed by relational sociological methodology and the conceptual framework of Black placemaking, this study foregrounded the nuanced process of community building, focusing on the interplay between Black students and the spaces—physical and digital—they cocreate collectively. This study particularly emphasized the significance of the Black Student Union (BSU) as a foundational Black student organization at PWIs. The following lines of inquiry guided this study: (a) How do Black undergraduate students at a PWI define the Black community? (b) What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI? (c) In what ways does the Black Student Union (BSU) contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI? Interviews were conducted with 18 members of the BSU. Additionally, observations were carried out in various Black spaces (e.g., Black resource center [BRC], classrooms, events specifically catered to the Black community). Social media accounts affiliated with the BSU, BRC, and Africana studies department were also analyzed. Findings from the study revealed a Black campus community defined by resilience and active engagement, with Black liberatory spaces serving as its foundation. The study underscored the significant role of the BSU as the cornerstone of the community while highlighting hidden labor costs in its sustainability. The findings from this study provided theoretical and rich qualitative insight into Black students' experiences.

DEDICATION

> The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.
>
> —James Baldwin

This dissertation is dedicated to Black students, Black educators, and Black people. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

> But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.
>
> —Isaiah 40:31

This dissertation was completed under difficult circumstances. The process changed me in ways I could not have imagined. This work would not have been possible without the love and support from my community. As such, here are a few of my acknowledgements.

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To Kamara Lee, Chamar, Dru, Corbin, Asa, and Charlie Belle: thank you for allowing me to be your Dad. You are the reason I wake up in the morning. You are the reason I work to build

a better world. I hope that what I have accomplished on this journey is an example of what is possible for you—anything.

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ORDER OF PAGES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vi

TABLE OF CONTENTS ix

LIST OF TABLES xiv

LIST OF FIGURES xv

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION 1

Enrollment Patterns 3

Persistence and Completion Rates 4

Postgraduation Outcomes 4

Campus Racial Climate 5

Purpose and Objectives of the Study 8

Research Questions 9

Significance of the Study and Empirical Interventions 10

Key Words 13

Organization of the Dissertation 15

CHAPTER TWO CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE 16

Critical Race Theory 17

Historical Context and Application to Education 17

Studying Space, Place, and Race Through Placemaking 19

Understanding Black Places Through Placemaking 22

How Black Placemaking Informed This Study 28

Review of Literature: Black Experiences on Campus 30

Barriers to Engagement and Belonging 30

Racial Campus Climate and Microaggressions ... 32
Campus Policing ... 33
Black Resistance on Campus ... 35
The Black Campus Movement ... 35
Social Justice in the Digital Age ... 39
Black Spaces on Campus ... 46
Conceptualizing Black Spaces ... 47
Black Cultural Centers ... 51
Black Digital Spaces on Campus ... 53
Black Student Organizations ... 55
Summary ... 64
CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY ... 66
Research Questions ... 66
Research Design ... 67
Qualitative Case Study ... 67
Research Method ... 68
A Relational Sociology Approach ... 68
Methods ... 70
Research Site ... 74
Interview Sample ... 75
Data Collection ... 77
Access ... 77
Informed Consent ... 78

Participant Selection 78
Interviews 79
Observations 80
Social Media Analysis 80
Data Analysis 82
Validity and Trustworthiness 83
Triangulation 85
Reflexivity 85
Thick Description 86
Member Checking and Peer Debriefing 86
Researcher Positionality 87
Summary 88
CHAPTER FOUR PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS 89
Drew's Influence on the Study 92
Research Question 1 - Defining the Black Community at SSU 95
Theme 1 - Beyond Numbers: The Vibrancy and Strength of the Black Community at SSU 95
Theme 2 - Hospitality and Support in SSU's Black Community 99
Theme 3 - Community as Family 103
Theme 4 - Engagement and Participation In the Black Community 107
Research Question 2 - Mapping the Black Campus Community at SSU 113
Intellectual Black Spaces 113
Summary of Intellectual Black Spaces 126

Physical Black Spaces 126
Summary of Physical Black Spaces 149
Communal Spaces Summary 156
Research Question 3 - The Role of BSU in the Black Community at SSU 157
A Typical BSU General Body Meeting 158
Summary 173
CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 174
Integrating Findings With Literature via Black Placemaking Analysis 176
Finding 1 - Community Defined by Resilience 177
Finding 2 - Community Defined by Active Engagement 179
Finding 3 - Black Liberatory Spaces Are the Foundation of the Black Campus Community 180
Finding 4 - Hidden Labor Costs in Sustaining the Black Community 183
Finding 5 - BSU Is the Cornerstone of the Black Community 185
Significance of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research 187
Methodological Intervention 188
Theoretical Intervention 189
Black Student Subcommunity Intervention 189
Implications for Policy and Practice 190
Implications for Policy 191
Implications for Black Faculty and Staff 192
Implications for Black Students and Families 192
Limitations 194

Coda 196

REFERENCES 198

APPENDIX A Informed Consent 225

APPENDIX B IRB Approval 228

APPENDIX C Instrument 1 – Student/Recent Alum Semistructured Interview Guide 230

APPENDIX D Staff Interview Protocol 233

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Student Participant Demographics 90

Table 2. Faculty and Staff Participants 91

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Liberatory Black Spaces ... 182

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better, but the instruction so far given Negroes in colleges and universities has worked to the contrary. (Woodson, 1998, p. 19)

Echoes of educational historian and scholar Carter G. Woodson's searing critique on the failure of higher education to adequately prepare and support Black college students in their efforts of self-determination can be heard in the lyrics of one of the most famous and influential college dropouts of the day, hip-hop artist and business mogul, Kanye West. West (2004) rapped, "Man I promise, she's so self-conscious, she has no idea what she doin' in college. That major that she major in don't make no money, but she won't drop out her parents'll look at her funny" (00:21).

I, too, identify as a college dropout, having been academically disqualified after only 3 semesters at my first undergraduate institution. I have always taken full responsibility for my early failures in college, attributing them to a lack of direction, poor study habits, and a general lack of appreciation of the benefits higher education offers; however, the passage of time and the acquisition of advanced knowledge and training in the sociology of higher education allows me to put my experience into a larger context. I was a shy, introverted Black kid with undiagnosed ADHD on a campus of over 50,000 students, with a Black student population of 4% who was harassed on multiple occasions by campus police. This place, with its large, overcrowded lecture halls, ill-tempered and intimidating professors, and emphasis on rote memorization and regurgitation instead of critical thinking and analysis was not built for educating students; rather, it was designed to school them. It was not built for people like me.

Over the past 2 decades, much research has been produced pertaining to the status of Black college students. Given the historical context of oppression in the United States, and increasingly volatile public discourse related to issues of race despite the increased attention to disparities in higher education (and beyond), access to and completion of undergraduate degrees have remained relatively stable for this population (Harper, 2014). *The Education Trust* estimated 6-year graduation rates for Black undergraduates nationwide to be 40.9% as of 2017 (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Those who do persist on to graduation face an uphill climb during their transition into adulthood, as evidenced by higher unemployment rates and student loan debt (Roksa & Arum, 2012), and even more abysmal graduate degree attainment rates (Strayhorn, 2016).

Despite recent positive indicators in terms of Black college student preparation, which include an increase in high school graduation rates and an increase in college preparatory class completion (e.g., A–G courses) by Black students, these outcomes have not translated into increased academic success as Black students continue to be underrepresented at state college systems. Universities of all types have failed to support their Black students toward graduation at the same rate as their peers of other races (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021).

Statement of the Problem: The State of Black Higher Education

Despite data that indicate college campuses have become more racially diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) and increased national attention on racialized oppression experienced by Black Americans stemming from the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in Summer 2020, which resulted in public statements of support for Black communities by senior university administrators (Casellas Connors & McCoy, 2022), the central problem concerning administrators and students alike in the 21st century continues to be the color line

(Cole, 2022; Dubois, 1903/2003). Recent data indicate the continued need for studying the experiences of Black college students who attend predominantly or historically white institutions (PWIs). In the following sections, I provide statistical data on the state of Black higher education and present a primer on campus racial climate.

Enrollment Patterns

Data from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI) reported in Fall 2020, Black students comprised 12.5% of all postsecondary enrollment. In 2020, the college enrollment rate for the 18–24-year-old Black population was 36%, which was slightly lower than the college enrollment rate of 40% for the entire U.S. population (PNPI, 2023). From Fall 2010 to Fall 2023, there was a 22% decrease in Black student enrollment, with the total number of Black students enrolled in postsecondary institutions dropping from 3.04 million to 2.38 million. Black undergraduate enrollment experienced a 25% decline, decreasing from 2.67 million to 1.99 million (PNPI, 2023). PNPI enrollment also data indicated Black students were more likely to attend public versus private higher education institutions. Black students also attend public institutions at much higher rates than they do private institutions. In Fall 2020, 67% of Black students attended public institutions (i.e., 42% attended public 4-year institutions and 28% attended public 2-year institutions; PNPI, 2023).

Black collegians are also much more likely to attend PWIs than historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In Fall 2020, 76% of the enrollment at HBCUS were Black students (PNPI, 2023). However, the overall trend in enrollment at PWIs has occurred for decades. In 1976, HBCUs accounted for 18% of Black college students. In 2021, only 9% of Black college students attended HBCUs (NCES, n.d.).

Persistence and Completion Rates

Black enrollment patterns in postsecondary education are important due to persistent gaps in graduation for Black students. As previously mentioned, Black students attend public institutions at higher rates than private institutions. However, Harper and Simmons (2019) detailed how public universities have failed to support Black students through graduation. The 6-year graduation rate for Black students at public institutions was 39% and 50% for white students in 2019; overall, 41% of public colleges and universities have a graduation rate of one third or less for Black students within a 6-year timeframe (Harper & Simmons, 2019).

College persistence is measured by the percentage of first-time, entering students who return to college at any institution for their 2nd year. According to a recent report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), college student persistence and retention rates have increased; however, notable disparities persist between Black and white students. At 4-year public institutions, persistence rates were 85% for white students and 78% for Black students at the time of the study (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). At 4-year private institutions, persistence rates were 89% for white students and 79% for Black students at the time of the study (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

Postgraduation Outcomes

Black students who persist and obtain a college degree face the harsh reality of inequalities in wealth and student loans debt. According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education that assessed postgraduation outcomes, 10 years after receiving a bachelor's degree, Black graduates who reported having an income had an average gross income of $59,100, and the national average was $76,370 (Cominole et al., 2021). In terms of wealth accumulation, 10 years after graduating, 47% of Black graduates reported owning a home,

compared to 63% of all graduates. Regarding retirement savings, 80% of Black graduates had some form of a retirement account, and 87% of all graduates had one (Cominole et al., 2021). Part of the reason Black graduates have less wealth than their white counterparts is because Black students shoulder a disproportionate amount of student loan debt, a burden that can significantly impact their mental well-being (V. Jackson & Mustafa, 2022). On average, Black graduates with a bachelor's degree accrue over $10,000 more in debt than white graduates with a bachelor's degree (i.e., $39,043 for Black students, $28,661 for white students). For Black graduate degree earners, the debt gap is wider, as they average $55,532 in student loan debt compared to $27,962 for white graduate degree earners (V. Jackson & Mustafa, 2022). Even 12 years out of college, Black graduates owe 13% more than they initially borrowed, whereas white graduates have paid down 35% of their debt (V. Jackson & Mustafa, 2022).

The data presented on the state of Black higher education is meant to hold higher education institutions accountable for not just selling the dream of upward social mobility, but to ensure the dream for Black students is actually achieved. In terms of the value of a college degree for Black people in the United States, echoing Martin Luther King Jr.'s analogy of a bad check (King, 1963).

Campus Racial Climate

Black students are not ignorant to the contradictions between the values espoused by university administration in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion and how Black students are treated and supported on campus. As Cox (2018) noted, "Black students face a series of unique yet overlapping and reinforcing barriers that undermine their abilities to enhance and pursue their passion and interests in connecting to the college environment" (p. 208).

Due to the permanence of racism (Bell, 1995) that is entrenched in institutions of higher learning, Black college students have traditionally been unable to fully participate in all aspects of campus life (Sedlacek, 1987). Despite actions by universities to increase and improve diversity efforts (Bonner, 2010), Black collegians continue to face challenges and barriers navigating the college landscape. The ways students perceive their college environment is known as campus racial climate.

Campus racial climate is a term used "to describe the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of faculty, staff, and students at a higher education institution toward students based on their race/ethnicity" (Hernandez-Reyes, 2023, para. 1). A synthesis of 15 years of research on campus racial climate revealed three primary themes:

1. Students' perceptions of the campus environment varied by race. Students with racially marginalized identities tend to perceive the campus climate as more hostile than white students.
2. Part of the reason why racially marginalized students perceive campus climate more negatively than their white peers is because of their differential experiences with racism and discrimination on campus.
3. Students from all ethnic backgrounds benefit socially and academically when colleges and universities facilitate cross-racial engagement. (Harper & Hurtado, 2007)

In a landmark study on campus racial climate Hurtado (1992) analyzed students' perceptions of campus racial tension, social self-confidence, institutional commitment to diversity, student-centered orientation, and resource/reputation orientation. A defining element of the study pointed to the importance that context plays in fostering a positive campus climate. Hurtado (1992) noted, "Perhaps no single element of the environment may work to produce

racial tension on college campuses" (p. 564). Instead, she posited a combination of historical and contemporary external factors and the relationship between students' and institutions' structural characteristics and diversity ideologies are critical for campus climate.

A multicampus qualitative study on racial climate that consisted of focus groups with 278 Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and white students found nine common themes across the institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Most notably, the researchers found there were gaps in social satisfaction by race, with Black students expressing the most dissatisfaction with racial climate. Harper and Hurtado (2007) also found white students overestimated the satisfaction of their minoritized peers. All the white students who participated in the study who served as leaders of a student organization like student government, yet the study revealed white student leaders were mostly unaware of the racial issues that existed on campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

The challenges experienced by Black collegians at PWIs are many and readily documented through literature and include declining enrollments, difficult transitions, lack of supportive relationships among faculty and staff, undue psychological pressure to prove themselves academically, unwelcoming environments with minimal social support, and racism and discrimination (Strayhorn, 2010). Black students who attend PWIs face a campus racial climate rife with challenges and barriers that limit their ability to succeed. Despite these challenges, Black collegians not only continue to exist at PWIs, but many also find ways to thrive. The question such a climate presents is: How? And, for what purposes? By examining how Black college students function and persist in light of the many barriers that exist, strategies can be developed to better support their navigation through college.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the ways in which Black undergraduate students navigate and experience campus life at a PWI. More specifically, this research sought to understand how Black college students build and maintain a sense of community at a PWI in the context of the contemporary era that included the COVID-19 global pandemic, social unrest, and expansive access to digital technologies. This study placed a particular focus on the Black Student Union (BSU) as a central student organization at PWIs, an underexplored area of scholarship in research on Black higher education.

In particular, my aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics involved in defining, establishing, and sustaining the Black community in the broader context of the main campus community, which is often characterized by oppressive structures (Feagin et al., 2014). Quashie (2012) stated, “Resistance is, in fact, the dominant expectation we have of black culture” (p. 3). In the context of research on Black students, sociologist Tichavakunda (2021a) noted the lens of resistance is frequently used to interpret the experiences of Black college students. However, Tichavakunda (2021a) cautioned that solely “understanding Black students through resistance alone limits the possibilities of educating, studying, and engaging Black students in a humanizing manner” (p. 1). By conducting extensive interviews with Black students, faculty, and staff; observing the presence of Black spaces on campus; and analyzing archival data, especially social media platforms, my aim was to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Black students use community to not only survive but also flourish in a PWI.

In this project, I operationalized the first tenet of critical race theory (CRT), which posits that racism is both a permanent and ordinary aspect of U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017;

Harper et al., 2009; Milner, 2007; Ray, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Given this assertion, the main objectives of this study were as follows:

- To present a comprehensive depiction of the Black campus community in a specific PWI.
- To identify and assess the structures, stakeholders, and institutional resources that support the Black community in a PWI.
- To assess the impact of physical and digital spaces on shaping the Black campus community.
- To provide a comprehensive analysis of how Black student labor sustains the community through a focused examination of the umbrella Black student organization known as the Black Student Union (BSU).

Research Questions

This study sought to provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of how Black college students build and maintain a sense of community at a PWI. The overarching research question of the study was informed by CRT and asked: How do Black college students build and maintain community in an environment where racism is endemic? (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper et al., 2009; Milner, 2007; Ray, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study drew upon a Black placemaking framework that foregrounded Black spaces as a valuable focus of analysis and recognized the agency and labor exhibited by Black people to create and maintain spaces of their own (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020). More specifically, the following research questions shaped the project's data collection and analysis, guiding the exploration along the following lines of inquiry:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) define the Black community?
2. What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI?
3. In what ways does the Black Student Union contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI?

These questions collectively provide avenues for investigating the diverse elements that shape the formation of community in a PWI, particularly by focusing on how Black students perceived the constituents of community; the interactions between students, faculty, and staff that foster a sense of community; and notably, the spaces Black students establish to foster and sustain community.

Significance of the Study and Empirical Interventions

Baldwin's (1998) *The Fire Next Time*, written amid the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, presented a powerful and incisive condemnation of the United States' inability to acknowledge and fulfill its commitment to granting full inclusion and democratic rights to Black Americans. Amid the ongoing fight for Black liberation, commonly known as #BlackLivesMatter or the Movement for Black Lives, the writings of Baldwin have experienced a resurgence in popularity among contemporary progressives and activists (Glaude, 2020).

The term "after times" refers to the social and political repercussions witnessed in response to the first Black presidency, as discussed by Glaude (2020). The names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor, among others, have become widely recognized due to their tragic deaths because of extrajudicial state-sanctioned violence. However, it was the murder of George Floyd in 2020, coupled with the

rapid and widespread dissemination of his final moments and his haunting words, “I can’t breathe,” through social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, that ignited a national movement to defy stay-at-home orders and take to the streets in the pursuit of Black justice (Hill & Brewster, 2022).

Similar to their counterparts in the 1960s, Black college students today are maturing during a period of significant social unrest. However, the additional impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which forced the college experience into predominantly virtual environments, created a distinctive situation that required a reexamination of the Black collegian experience. Streets (2022) argued Black collegians are battling a “dual pandemic” or “COVID context.” She asserted the COVID-19 global pandemic context reflected “the challenges Black college students currently face due to the COVID-19 pandemic layered on top of a historical and targeted epidemic that takes the form of anti-Black racism” (p. 92). A deeper understanding of the ecology of the Black student community at PWIs can impact the ways systems and policies can be created to better support Black students’ educational journeys.

This dissertation is indebted to the work of contemporary Black scholars who have taken a unique approach to examining Black student life in PWI contexts. Tichavakunda (2018) used ethnography to deeply interrogate how Black engineering students experienced their racial campus climate and cultivated a sense of engagement. Gilkes Borr (2019) examined the strategies and motivations for Black college students to find and create same-race friendships. In Hypolite’s (2020b) research, the focus centered on how Black cultural centers (BCCs) contributed to fostering a positive racial identity among Black college students. Lane (2022) took a contemporary look at how the BSU serves as a bridge or buffer to Black student experiences. Streets (2022) explored how Black students leverage technology to organize, build, and maintain

community by providing peer support. My goal with this work was to reconcile the various related concepts of these studies to paint a holistic picture of what it means to be a Black college student at a PWI in 2024. As such, this dissertation makes significant contributions to educational research, practitioner efforts, and university policy in the following ways:

- There exists a plethora of qualitative research on Black college students that relied primarily on interview data (Tichavakunda, 2020). In terms of methodology, this dissertation aimed to capture the multifaceted nature of Black student experiences by employing ethnographic data collection methods through a combination of interviews, observations, and analysis of social media data.
- Although a considerable amount of literature exists that explored how Black students use physical, digital, and social spaces to resist and cope with racism, there is a dearth of literature that examined the broader benefits of these spaces for Black students beyond the scope of resistance. Additionally, there is limited empirical research that explores the interconnectedness of these spaces. By adopting a Black placemaking conceptual framework (Tichavakunda, 2020) and acknowledging that Black students are dynamic individuals who navigate multiple overlapping communities or "social worlds" (Tichavakunda, 2018), this dissertation contributed to the existing body of research that strives to capture the richness and entirety of Black student experiences.
- Despite being recognized as the oldest and most prominent Black student government association (Kendi, 2012), there has been a notable lack of empirical research on BSUs. This dissertation aimed to fill this gap by focusing on the experiences of BSU members, thereby contributing to the limited existing body of research that explored the role and significance of BSUs in today's society.

Key Words

Black: I use the term "*Black*" to refer to a racialized group of people whose ancestry derives from the continent of Africa. The terms *African American* or *Afro American* may also be used interchangeably. Although race is a political and social construction, I capitalized the "*B*" in *Black* to assert respect for and recognition of Black humanity in the United States and throughout the African diaspora.

Black liberatory spaces: In this project, I coined the term Black liberatory spaces. Black liberatory spaces in PWI environments are dedicated places that prioritize the needs and interests of Black students. They encompass intellectual, physical, and communal spaces that explore Black history and culture, offer social gatherings for open discussion, and act as connectors to vital resources and networks. These spaces cultivate a sense of belonging and support, allowing Black students to thrive despite the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness, ultimately fostering academic success and a stronger community bond.

Black placemaking: Adopted from the work of Black sociologists (Hunter et al., 2016), Black placemaking as a conceptual framework in education analyzes how Black students make place and space in predominantly white college environments (Tichavakunda, 2020). In the scope of this study, placemaking can be best understood as an analytical tool to understand how individuals interact with, shape, and feel connected to the people and places they inhabit for living, working, and recreation.

Black Student Union (BSU): Established in 1966 at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) *BSU* is the common name of the foundational student government association dedicated to enhancing the Black student experience (Kendi, 2012).

Other names that may be used interchangeably with BSU are *Afrikan Student Union* and *Negro Student Alliance*.

Campus racial climate: *Campus racial climate* is a term used "to describe the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of faculty, staff, and students at a higher education institution toward students based on their race/ethnicity" (Hernandez-Reyes, 2023, para. 1).

Case study: A *case study* is a research methodology that necessitates a thorough examination of complex social phenomena in a predefined limited context (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Counterspaces: *Counterspaces* can best be understood as "sites of collective resistance and counter to dominant white spaces" (Tichavakunda, 2020, p. 12) and also "serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70).

Critical race theory (CRT): Since its adaptation from critical legal studies, the ideas of CRT have been used to analyze and understand issues in fields such as politics, gender studies, and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ladson-Billings (1998) advanced previous work on the application of CRT to educational studies by positing that the intersections of race and education are evident in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation.

Microaggressions: *Microaggressions* are defined as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60).

Predominantly white institution (PWI): The term *predominantly white institution (PWI)* is often used interchangeably with "historically white institution," and describes a college or university where over 50% of the students are white. However, I used both terms to recognize

the historical background of Black individuals being dehumanized as property, despite their significant contributions to the construction and maintenance of PWIs of higher education (Johnson, 2019). The term PWI is also used to reflect an institutional and attitudinal disposition of anti-Blackness in the academy.

Racism: *Racism* refers to policies and practices that influence the opportunities available to individuals based on their race or skin color and are shaped by their connection to established systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Omi & Winant, 2015; Zack, 2018).

Social media: *Social media* refers to online platforms and applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content in a virtual social environment. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, among others. These platforms provide various features like posting updates, commenting, liking, sharing, and messaging, facilitating real-time communication, and fostering virtual communities.

Organization of the Dissertation

In this introductory chapter, I presented the background and purpose of the study, along with the research questions. Chapter 2 explores the conceptual framework of Black placemaking and reviews relevant literature concerning Black student experiences in PWIs. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, including participant information and details on data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 elaborates on the study’s findings pertaining to the research questions. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a Black placemaking analysis of key findings situated in literature, along with the study’s implications.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The overarching research question for this qualitative case study was: How do Black college students build and maintain community in an environment where racism is endemic? To explore the origin and rationale behind this inquiry, I begin this chapter with a brief overview of critical race theory (CRT) and how it has been used to analyze the experiences of Black students through the lens of race. Then, I introduce the primary framework used to understand, study, and analyze the Black campus community at Sunnyside State University (SSU, a pseudonym): Black placemaking. In this section, I detail the history of placemaking as a theory and its connections to other concepts (e.g., Black geographies). Next, I describe Black placemaking as theorized by Hunter et al. (2016) and various literature that has used Black placemaking to understand Black life in different contexts. The following section introduces Black placemaking in higher education contexts through the theorizing of Tichavakunda (2020). This section concludes by highlighting how the Black placemaking framework informed the current study.

The literature review offers a comprehensive exploration of the ways in which Black students encounter and engage with various aspects of their campus environments. Recent research and seminal classics on the topic are represented in this literature review. I begin this literature review by describing how Black students experience campus environments at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Next, I describe relevant literature on historical and contemporary Black student activism in the academy. The literature review concludes with a description of how Black students navigate racialized campus environments through their manipulation of physical, digital, and communal spaces.

Critical Race Theory

Despite outcry from conservatives over the prevalence of CRT teaching in primary and secondary schools (Lang, 2020), my first exposure to this critical framework was during my master's program in sociology. CRT was introduced to me as a theory that could deepen my understanding of the structural nature of racism in the United States. CRT helped me to see the connections between policy, institutions, and how Black students experience their college environment. The following section provides a brief overview and history of CRT and its application to educational research.

Historical Context and Application to Education

CRT traces its origins to the field of legal studies, where, during the 1970s, legal scholars contemplated the advancements and retrenchments of the 1960s civil rights-era legislation. Ladson-Billings (1998) described an argument posed by Lani Guinier—which called for proportional representation for African Americans as an answer to their social and political underdevelopment—as a first look at how an explicitly racial analysis could subvert racist policy. Ladson-Billings also pointed to the scholarship of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman as being critical in CRT's early formation.

Black scholars have asserted the centrality of race and warned against the pernicious effects of structural racism since the early 20th century. W.E.B. Dubois's naming of "double consciousness" and Carter G. Woodson's critique of the role education plays in reproducing inequality both laid the foundation for future scholars to address the social, political, and cultural needs of Black Americans through a multidimensional lens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1998) advanced previous work on the application of CRT to educational studies by positing the intersections of race and education were evident in the areas of curriculum,

instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation. As Ladson-Billings (1998) lamented 2 decades ago, "CRT in education is likely to become the 'darling' of the radical left, continue to generate scholarly papers and debate, and never penetrate the classrooms and daily experiences of students of color" (p. 22). Harper et al. (2016) noted, "The burgeoning use of CRT in education research over the past 20 years has resulted in deeper, more sophisticated understandings of these and other racial problems associated with race and racism in postsecondary contexts" (p. 2). I argue for the continued use of CRT to improve academic and social outcomes for Black collegians.

CRT Tenets

Since its adaptation from critical legal studies, the ideas of CRT have been used to analyze and understand issues in fields such as politics, gender studies, and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Recognizing the importance of centering the voices at the margins of society, CRT rejects the universal approach to social justice and counters with the stance "that any program of emancipation would have to be built around the question of race first" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62). In a canonical forming piece, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) provided insights on the uses of counter-storytelling in education. They asserted counter-storytelling by marginalized groups works to challenge deficit narratives while recognizing the permanence of racism in society. Through the years, scholars have developed key themes or tenets of CRT to describe the ways in which race explicitly shapes the possibilities and outcomes for racialized minorities. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) presented six fundamental tenets of CRT analysis to serve as a framework:

1. Racism is ordinary
2. Interest convergence

3. Social construction thesis
4. Differential racialization
5. Intersectionality
6. Counter-storytelling

Racism Is Ordinary. The inextricable connection of racism in U.S. social life is critical for understanding Black students' experiences in PWI contexts. Harper et al. (2009) asserted, "Racism is a normal part of American life" (p. 390). A CRT approach combats this notion by uncovering and naming its hidden attributes. It is with this concept in mind that literature should reveal how racism affects Black college students. Traditional explanations of inequalities using single-axis views of oppression must be exchanged for an "intersectional" approach that recognizes the significance of both race and class (Crenshaw, 1989). Only through a thorough investigation into the ways racism permeates college campuses and impacts the Black collegian experience can we come to formulate appropriate responses and demands to solve the problem. Recognizing the permanence of race and racism in U.S. society and on college campuses sets the context for exploring how Black collegians navigate these spaces.

Studying Space, Place, and Race Through Placemaking

Scholars have developed theories to comprehend the intricate relationship between place and race. Termed "Black geographies," this concept was defined as "both an ontological subject of study and an epistemological way of interpreting and interacting with the world that is particularly attentive to experiences and critiques developed within black communities" (Allen et al., 2019, p. 1002). Black geographies emerged as a framework to understand physical location and agency as a political and social justice endeavor. McKittrick and Woods (2007) employed the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as a case study to underscore the

political nature of geography. Their study uncovered how racialized spaces influenced the production of space. The title, *No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean*, was drawn from M. Jacqui Alexander's reflection on the lost narratives of enslaved individuals in the Atlantic Ocean. The authors asserted the title illustrated the "tension between the mapped and the unknown, reshaping knowledge and suggesting that places, experiences, histories, and people that 'no one knows' do exist within our present geographic order" (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 4). The use of the term "Black geographies" can be traced to McKittrick (2006), who issued a call to action, asserting that "Black matters are spatial matters," (p. xii) emphasizing the imperative to recognize the agentic nature of Black life amid a white supremacist society.

The process through which individuals assign meaning and significance to their social environment in the existing sociopolitical order is termed placemaking (Allen et al., 2019). This phenomenon is studied worldwide across diverse professional disciplines and fields (Ellery et al., 2021). Although scholars from different disciplines have provided varying definitions of placemaking, such as in urban design and cultural studies (Ellery et al., 2021), in the scope of this study, placemaking can be best understood as an analytical tool to understand how individuals interact with, shape, and feel connected to the people and places they inhabit for living, working, and recreation.

In a recent systematic literature review of placemaking scholarship, Ellery et al. (2021) identified three foundational principles, or themes, related to the placemaking process. The first principle is that placemaking connects the individual to their geographical and physical place. This connection can be to the people in the space or community, which creates a sense of belonging, or to the physical space itself, which creates a sense of place (Ellery et al., 2021). The second principle states a person's experiences and perceptions of a place can create positive or

negative feelings toward it. Ellery et al. (2021) suggested placemaking efforts and strategies usually aim to create a positive sense of place; however, their review revealed that a negative sense of place can occur due to various factors (e.g., previous experiences, knowledge, perceptions of similar places). This process depends on changes in the individual and their social environment. The third principle states placemaking encompasses a spectrum ranging from externally imposed changes to those driven by individuals or communities (Ellery et al., 2021). In the higher education context, externally imposed change is seen when new students arrive on campus to start their college journey. These students find themselves in a new environment with new people, customs, and rituals and must make sense of this new environment. On the other hand, community-driven change is evidenced when Black students advocate for and demand changes in PWIs.

The history of Black activism on college campuses is well-documented, as students organized through BSUs engaged in marches, protests, and initiatives that fundamentally reshaped higher education (Araiza, 2019; Ellsworth & Burns, 1970; Kendi, 2012). Scholars have also drawn connections between Black campus activism across different time periods, reflecting on the similarities and differences in Black liberation movements (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Rhoads, 2016). Additionally, other scholars have examined the role of social media in advancing social justice on college campuses (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; Davis, 2015; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).

These three principles are the foundation of Ellery et al.'s (2021) placemaking theoretical model. This model demonstrates how individuals interpret sensory information from their surroundings and how they adapt to this information, contributing to the formation of a sense of place or connection. This sense of connection brings about benefits such as "improved social

communication and coherence among community members, community stewardship, and a sense of belonging within the community" (Ellery et al., 2021, p. 69). This theoretical model is helpful for understanding how Black students cultivate a sense of place and belonging in PWI environments.

Understanding Black Places Through Placemaking

To further distinguish the concept of placemaking, scholars have defined it based on professional disciplines, the use of arts in creating spaces, and cultural identity (Ellery et al., 2021). In mainstream and academic media, there is an abundance of narratives and depictions highlighting the challenges faced by Black individuals. Given the current attacks on Black lives more broadly and Black education more specifically, scholarship that names, analyzes, and holds accountable all forms of racism is of the utmost importance. CRT has proven invaluable in dissecting how racism influences the ways in which racism impacts Black students' college experiences (Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2016; Lane, 2022; Patton, 2016; Tichavakunda, 2018). However, given the prevalence of such scholarship, one might forget there is more to Black life than struggle and protest. This issue raises certain questions: How else can we perceive Black campus life? Are we neglecting precious elements of Black existence by narrowly focusing on narratives of resistance? As Quashie (2012) stated, "Sometimes, when the term 'resistance' is named, what is being described is something finer" (p. 4).

Black placemaking, a theory developed by Hunter et al. (2016), seeks to understand Black life beyond the experiences of racial subjugation and oppression or the finer experiences of Black life. Hunter et al. (2016) defined Black placemaking as "the ways that urban Black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance" (p. 2). Hunter et al.'s (2016) framework, illustrated through the examination of various Black spaces in Chicago—including a

little league team, Facebook groups, a Black gay club, and participants on Black Twitter—built upon existing Black theoretical constructs such as Afro-pessimism and BlackCrit. Their framework offered valuable insights into the creation process of these spaces, which serve as sanctuaries for embracing Black cultural identities. Black placemaking also explores the labor required to maintain and protect these spaces (Hunter et al., 2016). A fundamental assumption of Black placemaking is agency. As noted by Tichavakunda (2020), it is the tension between racial struggle and Black agency to which Black placemaking is attuned. Tichavakunda (2020) asserted, "Black placemaking is preoccupied with exploring manifestations of Black social life, wherever, and in whatever fashion it may be" (p. 14).

Applied Black Placemaking

Placemaking has been employed as an analytical tool to understand the relationship between Black people and places in the United States, including urban centers and rural areas. Radney (2019) used Black placemaking as a conceptual framework to theorize on preserving African heritage through Pan-African thought and Garveyism in developing the "Black Metropolis" of Detroit. Radney (2019) illustrated how the influence of Pan-Africanism during the 1920–1970s, represented by symbols like the "red, Black, and green" (p. 332) imagery of the Pan-African flag, addressed psychological and spiritual needs for Black Detroiters, thereby fostering an urban space of refuge through Black placemaking phenomena.

Montgomery's (2016) cross-place ethnography of downtown Detroit highlighted potential adverse outcomes of community development placemaking. Given Detroit's long history of racial violence and capitalism, tensions are inevitable when it comes to determining the use of public space. Montgomery (2016) illustrated how Detroit's downtown area was transformed into a privatized space through a placemaking strategy focused on revitalizing

storefronts and public areas to increase real estate values. This led to the empowerment of Black Detroiters' "spatial agency," defined as "the ability to be in, act on, or exert control over a desired part of the built-and-natural environment" (Montgomery, 2016, p. 777), as they protested the encroachment of corporate interests on Black neighborhoods. This study was significant for understanding the potential negative effects of placemaking in an urban center like Detroit and how similar dynamics can unfold in majority-Black cities such as Oakland or New Orleans (Montgomery, 2016).

Giancarlo (2021) explored how Black rural Louisianans or Creoles engaged in the ritualized practice of food sharing to imbue meaning and foster connections to their surroundings. Highlighting the significance of tradition in Black placemaking, Giancarlo (2021) stated:

> The Creole tradition of holding a boucherie, where family and neighbors gather on a rotating basis to butcher a hog and prepare traditional foods for winter sustenance, represents a tradition passed down through generations, now modernized with open-fire blackpot cooking and Facebook live-streaming. (p. 1)

This research links Black placemaking to Black geographic understandings of community-building practices that bind Black individuals to one another and to specific locales.

Lindemann (2023) examined creative placemaking as a community development strategy in a case study of a 96% Black community on the east side of Cleveland, Ohio. This 2-year, grant-funded project served as a pilot program focused on food culture, the arts, and celebration, involving Black-run organizations, businesses, and nonprofits with the explicit goal of changing perceptions of Black neighborhoods. Through 10 interviews with core partners and 15 listening sessions with the implementation team, Lindemann (2023) discovered a combination of

community-focused placemaking, which prioritized the desires of community members, and local entrepreneurship fostered a deeper sense of pride and connection to the space. As one local resident expressed, “See how we can make space from nothing into something? We create what we want and need in our neighborhoods . . . we can create something beautiful in a place where there wasn’t anything like that” (Lindemann, 2023, p. 11).

Black placemaking has extended to analyzing the intersection of race, place, and sport. In line with theorists aiming to comprehend how Black individuals thrive in racialized social structures, Vadeboncoeur (2023) examined how Black fans of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing navigated and carved out spaces for themselves. Vadeboncoeur (2023) discovered Black fans exhibited agency through survival strategies, such as remaining vigilant to racist behaviors (e.g., the use of racial slurs) or avoiding locations known to be excessively hostile to Black individuals, such as Talladega Speedway. Additionally, Black National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing fans established virtual communities to enjoy the sport together outside of racially charged environments. Participants emphasized the necessity of these Black virtual spaces due to the prevalence of racist rhetoric in mainstream virtual National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing spaces. Vadeboncoeur (2023) reported one participant in the study shared:

> It’s been a good spot to engage in a Black space about a sport that we love. It’s been a great experience, you know? You’re going to get your debates, but Black people aren’t monolithic. We don’t all agree on every little thing, which is what’s beautiful about us as a people, and you find that in that group, too. We all have different opinions about drivers, and we have different opinions about how to handle some of the racial impacts of the sport. You know, we all have different opinions and it’s great to be able to have those

> kind of discussions in a space that's safe for us to be able to do that without having all the other vitriol thrown at us. (p.16)

Vadeboncoeur (2023) demonstrated the active role of Black placemaking, which extends across physical and virtual realms.

Black Placemaking in Higher Education

Black places encompass any spaces where Black individuals gather and engage in fellowship. On college campuses, such spaces may include student clubs and organizations, Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs), cultural residence halls, digital platforms, and off-campus residences and social spots (Tichavakunda, 2020). Tichavakunda (2020) expanded on Hunter et al.'s (2016) Black placemaking theory in higher education by examining the experiences of National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) members at a prestigious PWI. Through comparative analysis employing traditional CRT framing and Black placemaking, Tichavakunda (2020) explored how students established a sense of community in their academic and social worlds. Tichavakunda examined three facets of Black community life in higher education: (a) focusing on on-campus and off-campus Black parties, (b) elections in the BSU and NSBE, and (c) the annual NSBE spring retreat. Through this analysis, Tichavakunda developed five foundational principles for a theory of Black placemaking in higher education. A Black placemaking theoretical framework in higher education:

1. Identifies Black places on campus as dynamic and rich sites of study.
2. Examines the labor of stakeholders to create and sustain Black places on campus.
3. Analyzes how Black students cocreate Black places to meet their needs and desires.
4. Investigates the inner workings, politics, practices, and organizational structures of Black places on campus.

5. Highlights the diversity in Blackness and marginalized identities in Black places. (Tichavakunda, 2020, p. 9)

Scholars have recently applied Black placemaking to study how Black students make place in different higher education contexts. Halkiyo and Hailu (2023) used Black placemaking theory to examine Black women's experiences in undergraduate engineering programs. Through qualitative analysis, which relied on 45 interviews conducted with Black women engineering students at PWIs, the study revealed the necessity of Black spaces, including curriculum challenges, safety concerns, and holistic support needs. Their research also exposed structural conditions demanding dedicated Black spaces due to a lack of physical locations, limited intersectional understanding, and prevailing stereotypes. This research enriched the concept of Black placemaking by advocating for institutional support and policy changes to accommodate the multifaceted needs of Black women in higher education (Halkiyo & Hailu, 2023).

Allen's (2020) ethnography of Florida A&M University's renowned band, The Marching 100, illustrated the usefulness of Black placemaking as an analytical tool for comprehending how Black students collaboratively establish sanctuaries in historically Black college or university (HBCU) settings. Allen (2020) aptly characterized Florida A&M University as a "bubble" separate from mainstream society, where the presence and roles of Black individuals differ from societal norms. For band members, their practice room, known as the Patch, served as a "bubble within a bubble" (Allen, 2020, p. 1572), where they create spaces of relief, recuperation, and affirmative resonance. Allen (2020) introduced the concept of "places of respite" to describe "places that Black peoples flee to for refuge and to exercise self-determination," which are "produced through a Black sense of place and are potential sites of liberative visions, practices, and organizing" (p. 1567). These spaces are established, sustained, and nurtured by the efforts of

Black students and serve as essential locations for exploring Black campus life in a nuanced manner, showcasing Black agency.

How Black Placemaking Informed This Study

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) advocated for inclusive theory that serves people with marginalized identities. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) described theory as a guiding force that “has been there before and can help steer you away from pitfalls and dangers” (p.13) as one navigates through literature to develop questions aimed at addressing complex problems. Theory played a pivotal role in every aspect of this research project, from shaping the research questions to guiding the methodology and analysis. By tracing the genealogy of Black placemaking scholarship, I situated the current study in a broader conversation on how Black folks create, socialize, and live. Dotson (2015) characterized her connection to philosophy and Black feminist scholarship as an inheritance. Inheriting theory is a relational process; “as such, inheritance calls for a relationship to the scholars whose work one is inheriting. Further, inheritance calls for relationships with other scholars doing similar work and relationships to the community one theorizes in service to” (Tichavakunda, 2023, p. 43). Therefore, this work owes its existence to the wealth of literature that formed the basis of this investigation and the community it sought to empower.

By employing Black placemaking as the conceptual framework, my objective was to illuminate the nuanced experiences of Black collegians and offer practical solutions to enhance their academic and social outcomes. Black placemaking acknowledges the agency in Black campus communities by spotlighting Black spaces, labor, diversity, and practices cocreated by Black students (Tichavakunda, 2020). Research Question 1 asserted the significance of Black sites of study. In line with the tradition of Black sociologists who have examined Black life in

urban centers (e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois's [1889], "The Philadelphia Negro" and Elijah Anderson's [2022], "Black in White Space") and Black campus communities (e.g., Antar Tichavakunda's [2021], "Black Campus Life"), this inquiry into Black campus community began with students' own definitions of their community.

Black communities in PWIs do not merely exist. Instead, these communities are created and maintained through the labor of Black students and supporting staff (Tichavakunda, 2018). Research Question 2 examined the efforts of Black students and stakeholders to sustain the Black community. This question also identified the structures, places, organizations, programs, and individuals contributing to the Black campus community. Black communities in PWIs are not passive entities; rather, they are actively created and upheld through the labor of Black students and supporting staff (Tichavakunda, 2018). Research Question 2 took into account the effort of Black students and stakeholders in sustaining the Black community. Additionally, this question identified the structures, places, organizations, programs, and individuals that contribute to the vitality of the Black campus community.

Research Question 3 drew from Black placemaking theory to examine how the BSU contributed to a sense of community at a large, public PWI. I was particularly interested in the labor, rituals, support systems, and processes that enabled BSU to fulfill its mission of supporting the academic and social development of Black students on campus. Research Question 3 also underscored the fact that Black communities are rich in diversity. It took into consideration how BSU strove to represent Black students from various identities and cultures. Through an intimate look at the strategies and activities of this organization, higher education administrators can learn how to support Black students more effectively.

Black placemaking also informed the data analysis of the study. By engaging with Black placemaking in higher education tenets put forth by Tichavakunda (2020), this research acknowledged the resistance to systemic and institutionalized oppression experienced by Black collegians. The findings also emphasized Black student agency, the celebration of cultural identity, and the collaborative and collective efforts to establish and maintain a sense of community on campus. By examining Black campus life through a Black placemaking lens, this dissertation answered the call by Tichavakunda (2020) to study Black campus places and the labor required to sustain them in diverse contexts, traditions, structures, and stakeholders, to take full calculus of the richness of Black campus life.

Review of Literature: Black Experiences on Campus

Barriers to Engagement and Belonging

Student engagement, or the ability for students to integrate into the campus community through academic, cocurricular, athletic, and social programming, is a high-impact practice that is tied to retention and graduation rates (Felten & Lambert, 2020). However, psychological and sociological factors impede Black college students' engagement, including lack of support, low self-esteem, and financial strain (Washington, 2013).

Sense of belonging is a concept closely associated with student engagement with measurable impacts on Black college students' experiences (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn's (2018) research examined the role sense of belonging plays in the lives of college students from various diverse contexts, including: (a) Latino college students, (b) gay male college students, (c) STEM students of color, (d) graduate students, (e) first-year college students, and (f) Black male collegians. Fulfillment of sense of belonging can positively impact happiness, well-being, achievement, and optimal functioning (Strayhorn, 2018). In college settings, sense of belonging

has been found to impact persistence toward graduation, college and career readiness, and academic achievement. Sense of belonging has several definitions but can best be understood as "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4). For college students, Strayhorn (2018) explained sense of belonging:

> Refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

The significance of belonging is influenced by the social environment and the identities of the students. According to Strayhorn, sense of belonging becomes particularly critical in certain social contexts where certain individuals are more susceptible to feelings of being unsupported, unwelcome, or lonely. This is especially true for students of color attending PWIs.

Although many Black students hope to use their college experience as a path to self-discovery, institutional barriers prevent them from being able to fully immerse themselves in the college experience. Certain scholars have started attributing the lack of participation not solely to Black students themselves, but also to the institutions, suggesting they share the responsibility for the students' reluctance to engage (Harper, 2009). Additionally, academics have argued it is incumbent upon the institutions to establish an inclusive atmosphere that fosters a sense of belonging for all students, with a specific emphasis on Black students who often feel hesitant to seek support from faculty or staff (Bush, 2004). Harper (2009) noted no achievements garnered by Black people, either individually or as a collective, are enough to escape the historical legacy of racist tropes that continue to burden the Black community.

Although outside of the scope of this project, it is worth noting that racial identity development, defined as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1990, as cited by Tatum, 1992, p. 9), may also influence to Black students’ engagement in primarily Black spaces. Instead of blaming the victim and pathologizing Black students for failing to succeed in hostile academic environments, institutions of higher education must bear at least as much responsibility for providing equitable access and support for Black college students.

Racial Campus Climate and Microaggressions

Increased national awareness of social justice issues has led to research focused on experiences of racially minoritized groups on college campuses. Although some have considered impacts of student-led activism in response to overt racist acts on college campuses—such as the #ConcernedStudent150 movement at University of Missouri (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019) and #I,Too,Am,Harvard at Harvard University (George Mwangi et al., 2018)—others have analyzed how race-related stressors play a significant role in the lives of Black college students (Griffith et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Leath & Chavous, 2017).

Central to instances of racism experienced by Black college students have been microaggressions, which are defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Although sometimes occurring subconsciously, microaggressions are rooted in a sense of white superiority and/or Black inferiority and carry deleterious effects for Black college students (Solórzano et al., 2000). A quantitative study with Black and white college student participants found microaggressions materialize both in person and online environments in three ways: (a) microinsults, (b) microassaults, and (c) microinvalidation (Tynes et al., 2013).

A qualitative exploration of Black students' experiences with microaggressions found race-related stressors created a heightened sense of awareness for racial stereotypes for Black students (Griffith et al., 2017). Black students expressed various forms of microaggressions including direct and indirect insults by peers and faculty members, and experienced them in classroom, social, and online environments (Griffith et al., 2017). Further research on racial microaggressions and the subsequent impact they have on academic and social experiences revealed Black students experience racial microaggressions in social situations and in academic settings beyond the classroom (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Campus Policing

Incidents of police harassment, abuse, and violence have occurred on campuses across the nation. In 2014, a person was shot by campus police at San Jose State University. No charges were filed against the officer or the victim (Anguiano, 2020). Even the most prestigious universities are rife with incidents of police misconduct, as evidenced by a 2013 incident at Yale University, which saw a Black male undergraduate student be held at gunpoint by campus police for failing to produce his school identification card upon the officers' demand (Dizon, 2021). The perception by Yale campus police that Black folks in general and Black male students, in particular, are threats or, at best, do not belong in the Ivory Tower cannot be disconnected from the larger sociological and historical context. Yale University is located in New Haven, Connecticut, which boasts a 32% Black population (World Population Review, n.d.). It is also the site of the first campus police presence; in 1898, the university hired two municipal officers to patrol its grounds and firmly establish the boundaries between the walls of the Ivy League campus and its expansion into the surrounding urban community (Sloan, 2020).

As campus leaders have had to grapple with the issue of safety and surveillance, they have been pressed by student activists to reconsider the role of campus police on college campuses. Some institutions have made drastic changes to their policies in regard to campus policing, like the University of Minnesota, which terminated its contract with the Minneapolis Police Department 1 week after the murder of a local Black resident, George Floyd (Anguiano, 2020). However, the overall trend at colleges and universities has heavily skewed toward increasing police presence, as evidenced by the projected increase in police budget from an already staggering $138 million by the University of California 10-college system amid budget concerns during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Anguiano, 2020). Dizon's (2021) work on Black undergraduate male students' experiences and perceptions of campus police help scholars to understand how trust building falls short as a marker of equity in maintaining safe campus environments. Dizon described campus policing as a racial project that highlighted the inextricable connection between popular perceptions of race and the structures or institutions (i.e., colleges and universities) in which it operates. Racial boundaries between the community and the university, and between racialized members of the community and the campus police force, have been established and maintained through the constant patrolling, surveillance, and harassment of students and community members of color. The racial boundaries are exhibited by campus crime alerts, which reinforce the notion of a "dangerous" surrounding neighborhood, and routine ID checks of Black male undergraduate students by campus security (Dizon, 2021).

Recognizing the importance of being seen as a campus community member and not a dangerous outsider, Black students navigate these policed racial boundaries by wearing school paraphernalia and building connections in the Black campus community (Dizon, 2021). Recent academic research has characterized the regular identification checks imposed on Black students

in PWIs as a type of surveillance endorsed by the state, reminiscent of the historical legacy of freedom papers during the era of antebellum United States (Jenkins et al., 2021). Due to experiences with racism, microaggressions, and police harassment, it remains that Black students must find ways to navigate academic and social environments at PWIs. The following section explores the historical and contemporary ways of how Black collegians have resisted racialized oppression on college campuses.

Black Resistance on Campus

The Black Campus Movement

> Society has taught us,
>
> to live
>
> to learn,
>
> to fight,
>
> to burn.
>
> —C.W., 1971, United States International University

The time period between the 1960s and mid-1970s represented a significant transformation in higher education as Black college students sat in, marched, and protested for educational equity. Scholars have referred to the actions and wins gained by Black student activists through direct action protests as revolutionary in the sense the movement “reflects the students’ sense of their own agency” and “their sense of their ability to affect the course of history” (Biondi, 2012, p. 12). A revolution or reconstitution of higher education indeed took place across the country as the Black Campus Movement (BCM) sought to transform higher education (Kendi, 2012). Historian Kendi (2012) identified “four entrenched elements that had long undergirded the racial constitution of higher education” (p. 4). These four elements were the

“moralized contraption,” the “standardization of exclusion,” the “normalized mask of whiteness,” and “ladder altruism” (Kendi, 2012, p. 4). These elements affected the educational experiences and outcomes for Black collegians at PWIs and HBCUs alike as student organizations like BSU played a central role in organizing direct-action protests on and off campus (Biondi, 2012; Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Kendi, 2012; Rhoads, 2016).

The sociopolitical context leading up to and during the 1960s and 1970s had a direct impact on the BCM. In the early 1900s. university operating models began to resemble large business centers as the role of college president focused more on fundraising and political influence than academics (Ellsworth & Burns, 1970). Cole (2022) asserted the role of college presidents in the fight for racial equity is often overlooked, citing 1948–1968 as a critical flashpoint for advancement and retrenchment in higher education. Off campus, issues of national and international importance shaped the social consciousness of students across the country. World Wars I and II and the Great Depression, exacerbated and brought attention to rising social inequality (Ellsworth & Burns, 1970). Additionally, increased attention to women’s rights, LGBTIA+ issues, and the South African apartheid divestment movement in the 1960s influenced college students of all ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds to advocate for increased access and opportunities across the nation (Rhoads, 2016).

However, it was the Civil Rights Movement and later the influence of Black Power that played the most significant role in the ideology and approach of the BCM. In what is referred to as the long Black student movement (i.e., 1930s–mid 1960s), Black students trained in nonviolent resistance through organizations such as the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality, organizing sit-ins as a primary means of resistance to the slow progress of desegregation in higher education (Kendi, 2012). Biondi (2012) noted the 1965 Higher

Education Act had a significant impact on desegregation efforts and increased class diversity among Black students at PWIs as more Black students from low-income communities were able to attend college. Despite increases in the number of Black students attending colleges, frustrations in the lack of equality and justice began to mount in the mid-1960s (Araiza, 2019). Black students mostly viewed their presence at PWIs as a form of "token integration," as they had limited access to culturally sustaining teaching and support services while simultaneously serving as de facto ambassadors for the race (Biondi, 2012). Influenced by intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Dubois, Karl Marx, and Malcom X, Black students maintained strong connections to Black communities, viewing their access to the resources in the academy as an opportunity to impact and make substantive changes outside of it as well (Biondi, 2012).

San Francisco State College and the Rise of Black Power

Between 1965–1972, spontaneous student protests were common occurrences on college campuses across the nation. Kendi (2012) estimated the 1967–1968 school year saw 150 campus demonstrations. The 1968–1969 school year is viewed as the pinnacle of the BCM, as there were over 250 demonstrations on college campuses (Kendi, 2012) and approximately 4,000 student arrests (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019). As previously mentioned, during the mid-1960s, PWI campuses began seeing an increase in Black students from diverse backgrounds. Frustrated with the lack of representation on campus, Black students from urban areas (e.g., Oakland and Chicago) and from the heart of the Civil Rights Movement struggle in the South arrived on campus seeking to organize and fundamentally change how higher education operated. These student activists followed less in line of nonviolent resistance methods of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and were more inspired by the message of self-determination by any means necessary, as espoused by Malcolm X, and they echoed through the call for Black Power as advocated by

Stockley Carmichael and the Black Panthers, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale (Rhoads, 2016). Prior to 1968, most campus demonstrations were peaceful, with sit-ins and marches being the most common tactics used to gain the attention of campus administrators (Kendi, 2012). On March 4, 1968, everything changed when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated when standing on his balcony in Memphis, Tennessee where he was preparing to lead a strike for local sanitation workers (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019). King's death, combined with the popular message of Black Power, sparked a new wave of activism in the BCM. Black student activists, who, as Ellsworth and Burns (1970) shared, had "become more conscious of their own power" (p. 35) responded with more militant tactics including building takeovers, taking up arms, and property destruction.

In Fall 1968, with members such as Danny Glover and Clarence Thomas, BSU at San Francisco State College launched what would become the longest student strike on record (Biondi, 2012). BSU leaders presented a list of 10 demands to campus administrators. Priority demands included increasing of Black students and faculty, increased financial aid, and culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum in the form of a Black studies department (Kendi, 2012). After being dismissed, ignored, or railroaded, Black students formed a multiracial coalition including members from the community to essentially shut down the operations of the campus for 5 months into the Spring 1969 (Biondi, 2012). The strike at San Francisco State University resulted in the nations' first Black studies department, a model now replicated at PWIs across the country (Kendi, 2012). Other significant campus uprisings during the BCM include Columbia University (Kendi, 2012), City College of New York, Northwestern University (Biondi, 2012), and Mills College (Araiza, 2019).

Wins, Challenges, and Legacy of the BCM

The BCM led to a fundamental racial reconstitution of higher education (Kendi, 2012). The most notable win during the BCM was the creation of Black studies departments or programs at PWIs such as San Francisco State College, Cornell University (Kendi, 2012), Harvard University (Biondi, 2012), Washington State University, and the University of Washington (Robinson, 2012a, 2012b). However, Black progress in the United States has often been met with significant resistance. Black activists during the BCM often faced consequences such as reduced financial aid, suspension, or even expulsion (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012). Broadhurst and Velez (2019) directly attributed the perception of apathy among later generations of college students and the conservative political movement of the 1980s to the advancements gained during the BCM. However, Rhoads (2016) noted the spirit of activism exhibited during the BCM has been picked up by student activists in the 21st century. Similar to the connections between the BCM and the larger Civil Rights movement and Black Power, Black student activists of 2024 have been ignited by the sociopolitical climate consisting of gross wealth inequality, extrajudicial police killings of Black citizens, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019).

Social Justice in the Digital Age

#Black Twitter

The surge of social media since 2012 has seen the rise and fall of many unique digital platforms. What remains clear is that users will use the unique features of a given social media platform to meet their needs. On no platform is that more evident than on Twitter. Although having substantially fewer active users than fellow social media giant Facebook, several design features, including its minimalist design (Brock, 2012) and its ability to simultaneously provide

access to a myriad of perspectives in real-time (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), have led to Twitter's status as a gatekeeper in the digital media space. Specifically, the "hashtag" feature, which compiles and categorizes themes in ongoing digital discussions, and the "trending topic" algorithm, which centralizes and makes visible the most popular discussions, have led to a form of digital racial identity construction referred to as "Black Twitter" (Sharma, 2013). Hill (2018) defined Black Twitter as "a virtual community of Twitter users engaged in real-time discourses primarily related to Black American culture and politics" (p. 287). The term Black Twitter not only recognizes the racial identity of users, as Brock (2012) noted; it should also be understood as "a user-generated source of culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information" (p. 530). *Signifyin',* or the African American linguistic–cultural tradition of knowledge expression through wordplay (Florini, 2014) is a critical element of Black Twitter. Black Twitter employs humor as a way to resist or cope with difficult situations (Outley et al., 2020). The art of signifyin' via the use of hashtags "allows Black users not only to reject colorblindness by actively performing their racial identities but also to connect with other Black users to create and reify a social space for their Blackness" (Florini, 2014, p. 235). Although some have noted the difficulty in analyzing tweets or hashtags due to the lack of context available in the constraints of a 140-character tweet (Ince et al., 2017), Twitter's interface allows marginalized groups to share instantaneous, unfiltered, firsthand experiences of racist acts that cannot be discounted as a valid site for scholarly inquiry (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Evidence has suggested the phenomenon of Black Twitter is also expressed in campus environments. as researchers have found though most students, regardless of their race, have a social media profile and discuss campus issues via social media, Black students tend to spend more time on social media than their white peers (Tynes et al., 2013). More can be learned

about digital resistance by examining the unique ways that Black students engage with and use social media. These insights can provide critical knowledge on how the Black student experience is shaped by emerging digital technologies.

#BlackLivesMatter

The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) served as a flashpoint for understanding modern social movements which employ new digital organizing tactics. On July 13, 2013, Alicia Garza introduced the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter in a heartfelt Facebook post in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Black teenager, Trayvon Martin. Joined by Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, the three Black feminist organizers created the international chapter-based organization, BLM, “whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, 2013, para.1). However, BLM’s popularity as a saying and relevance as a movement truly began to take shape in August 2014, as demonstrations and protests took place nationwide following the murder of another Black teen (i.e., Michael Brown) in Ferguson, Missouri, at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson. Key to the success of BLM has been its ability to leverage social media to educate people about current social injustices, amplify the voices of marginalized communities, and advocate for structural justice reform (Freelon et al., 2016).

Findings by Wilkins et al. (2019) indicated BLM activists use their social platforms to identify individual and structural perpetrators of injustice, define the communities represented by the movement, and provide counternarratives to mainstream media portrayals of high-profile incidents. Additionally, the scholars noted several related social media campaigns emerged from the events in Ferguson, including #HandsUpDontShoot and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. Each

campaign leveraged user-generated digital pictures with captions to challenge police and mass media narratives (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

Capturing the full impact of #BLM and other social media activism campaigns via quantitative analysis can be difficult, as researchers have indicated high engagement in tweeting does not necessarily correlate to quantifiable impact (Brown et al., 2017). However, researchers have provided empirical evidence relating to social movements and social media power, as activists' commitment to tweeting about police brutality have been found to influence traditional media outlets, celebrities and entertainers, and even conservative lawmakers (Freelon et al. 2018). Such influence has provided evidence to the power of social media to advance narratives and progressive policy on critical social issues. Today's Black students are coming of age in a world where digital resistance is a viable strategy for navigating racially oppressive college environments.

Black Students and Digital Resistance on Campus

An analysis of scholarship on college student activism between 2000–2020 found five specific areas of research, including (a) the history of identity-based student activism, (b) student experiences, (c) the methods and tactics employed by activists, (d) institutional responses and administration, and (e) the role of scholar activism and pedagogy (Quaye et al., 2022).

Recent research has explored how social media has been used as tool for student activists seeking to challenge sexual violence (Linder et al., 2016) and anti-immigration law (Davis, 2015). Similar to BCM of the 1960s and 1970s, recent racialized social events such as the state-sanctioned murderers of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and Trayvon Martin have served as the catalyst for a resurgence for Black student activism (D. C. Turner, 2020). Although some have criticized activism on social media as "slacktivism,"

scholars have argued that using digital tools for social change has the potential to alter campus power dynamics and contribute positively to campus diversity efforts (Cabrera et al., 2017).

The most significant example of mass student organizing leveraging social media took place at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) in Fall 2015. Mobilized by the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, just a year prior, Black students at the state's flagship campus formed #ConcernedStudent1950 (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019). Over the course of 3 months, Black campus activists participated in demonstrations ranging from protests at the Mizzou homecoming parade, a hunger strike, and threats by Black football players to boycott the rest of the season. Participation also included other acts, most of which were communicated via social media and "encouraged various participants on campus to resist through their spheres of influence" in a variety of ways, including "joining a #BLMStudyHall, penning a departmental statement of solidarity, disseminating one's experiences of racism on campus, signing a change.org petition, and occupying university spaces" (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019, p. 109). Researchers identified three crucial phases of the movement: (a) a public call of attention to campus issues via social media; (b) organized resistance tactics on the ground, including protests, sit-ins, and boycotts; and (c) intentionality in connecting racist events on campus to larger struggles for social justice (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019). Students used social media to amplify demands and coordinate campus action, which eventually led to the resignation of embattled system president Timothy Wolfe. Farzad-Phillips' (2021) research also analyzed the actions and outcomes of #ConcernedStudent1950 at Mizzou. Farzad-Phillips (2021) posited new-age resistance acts as racialized counter-memory and serves to redistribute campus resources, construct new sites of memory, and alter the relationship between Black students and

administrators. These findings acknowledged how the emerging presence of online social media activism served to complement offline demonstrations of power by Black campus activists.

Similarly, in 2014, Black students at Harvard and Oxford universities launched a movement via Instagram called #ITooAm. #I,Too,AmHarvard began as a student play and accompanying online photo campaign to "expose everyday campus racism" (George Mwangi et al., 2018, p. 146). The movement soon evolved into a transcontinental movement. Black students at Oxford University (#ITooAmOxford) also used social media to construct positive racial identity by highlighting systemic problems experienced by students of color on these campuses. In this case, traditional acts of activism, such as sharing information, organizing events, and fundraising for social justice causes were augmented through the use of social media. For instance, student organizers updated fellow students on the progress of ongoing discussions with campus administrators, which George Mwangi et al. (2018) described:

> For Harvard, the social media sites highlighted administrators seemingly willing and open to admitting that while there was growing student racial and ethnic diversity on the campus, the institution was without the necessary support and inclusive practices for Black Harvard students. The sites also demonstrated student organizers engaging with these administrators to demand change. (p. 155)

Scholars have found that engagement in social media activism can have positive effects on the student experience by enhancing communication skills, increasing social networks and alliances, and providing in-group anonymity and safety for student activists (Hotchkins, 2017, p. 272). Other scholars have contended that as traditional acts of civic engagement and activism continue to be implemented in online environments, it has allowed for greater amounts of students to participate, increasing student engagement (George Mwangi et al., 2018). However,

an emerging area of concern is the deleterious effects participation in activism can have on Black students.

Scholars have concluded that oftentimes, student activists are negatively portrayed, vilified, and punished by media and campus officials (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019). In a study that explored Black students' experience with a racist incident on campus, Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) found that Black students were sanctioned for participating in sit-ins, whereas their allies were not. Scholars have also noted that Black student leaders experience an emotional strain as individuals who deal with personal and social racism and leaders of Black organizations that serve as protective environments for Black students (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Harper and Hurtado (2007) recommended that if institutions of higher education are serious about improving campus racial climate, thereby relieving external pressure on Black collegians, they must have more transparency, participate in regular racial climate audits, and transform recommendations into sustainable action. Although working harder to disprove negative stereotypes is widely advised by mentors and accepted by students (Griffith et al., 2017), the effort and extra pressure come at a cost, highlighting the limitations of grit as a viable long-term resistance strategy.

Given the long history and contemporary relevance of Black college student activism, the growing body of empirical research on the topic adds rich depth to understanding how Black collegians resist white supremacy on and off campus; however, Blackness cannot slowly be viewed through the narrow lens of racism and oppression. Tichavakunda (2021c) argued "that by endeavoring to view Black life beyond a singular frame of resistance, education stakeholders might better understand, affirm, and thereby support Black students" (p. 2). Tichavakunda (2021c) stressed the importance of centering Black life in research, which entails exploring Black students' lives holistically in and outside of the classroom, and resisting racist structures

and finding joy in the ordinariness of campus life. As such, the following section discusses relevant literature on the spaces Black students have found and created to exist and thrive on college campuses.

Black Spaces on Campus

Inspired by funk musician legend, George Clinton, Hunter and Robinson (2018) coined the term "chocolate cities" to describe the prevalence of Black enclaves in northern and western urban centers as millions of Black folks left the Deep South in search of better opportunities during the great migration. Sociologist Anderson (2022) commented that Black enclaves or communities can be found in almost every city in the United States. Often referred to as the ghetto, Black neighborhoods function in a dialectical fashion to surrounding white communities, as the legacy of de jure and de facto segregation rendered Black communities with the stigma and lived reality of poverty and despair (Anderson, 2022). Black spaces, or third spaces, in communities take many forms, including churches, barber shops, beauty shops, and social clubs (Streets, 2022).

It can be argued that a similar phenomenon exists on PWIs, as the majority of Black college students have been educated in PWI environments (Keels, 2020). Black spaces on PWIs are cocreated through the agency and resilience of Black students and may include physical spaces, Black student organizations, digital spaces, or generally referred to the larger Black community in the campus (Tichavakunda, 2020). Research that examined the strategies and motivations for Black college students to find and create same-race friendships, or homophily, at PWIs found Black students expressed homophilic relationships were more beneficial than cross-race friendships both socially and academically (Gilkes Borr, 2019).

The following section describes how research has conceptualized Black spaces in society and on college campuses. I then explore specific types of Black spaces on college campuses including Black affinity housing, BCCs, Black digital spaces, BGLOs, and BSUs.

Conceptualizing Black Spaces

Black spaces in education have been conceptualized as Black educational fugitive spaces (ross, 2020), as a collegiate Black space (Streets, 2022), as Black educational spaces (Warren & Coles, 2020), and most frequently as counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Black Educational Fugitive Spaces

How do Black students survive and thrive in a system that has outlawed de jure segregation but continues to reek of antiblackness? ross (2020) contemplated this central question as she theorized what Black educational fugitive spaces look like in the afterlife of school segregation. According to ross, the afterlife of school segregation is a direct result of the failure of the United States to address the problem of race in the aftermath of slavery (Hartman, 2007). The afterlife of school segregation speaks to the experiences of Black students in public education in a society where the full promise of integration has yet to be fulfilled. Commenting on the trepidatious nature of existing while Black in U.S. society, ross (2020) stated, "This world as we know it, as we exist in it, as it exists in us, is utterly debilitating in its violence, in its daily discursive and literal assassination of our being." (p. 48).

The afterlife of school segregation manifests in schools today in several ways, including: (a) white-washed curriculum that attempts to absolve the United States for its sins against Black people; (b) diversity initiatives that promote inclusion but fail to meet the needs of Black students; (c) underrepresentation of Black teachers; (d) lack of access to high-quality education via quality resources and rigorous classes; and (e) when access is granted to these educational

spaces, Black students are isolated and made to feel like the "other" (ross, 2020). In response to pervasive anti-Blackness in schools, Black students create Black educational fugitive spaces that, according to ross (2020), "Manifests as both departure and refuge from the gratuitous violence of the afterlife of school segregation, and spawns the possibilities for rebirth and resistance" (p. 48).

Collegiate Black Space

Similar to ross (2020), Streets (2022) posited that collegiate Black spaces are formed as a necessity at PWIs due to the various forms of anti-Blackness experienced by Black collegians. Streets (2022) conceptualized the collegiate Black space as "spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported" (p. 71). According to Streets (2022), collegiate Black space has three main functions: (a) peer support, (b) knowledge production, and (c) activism. Black students at PWIs provide support for one another in the collegiate Black space by providing advice, affirming each other's Blackness, and sharing valuable resources. Black students also produce knowledge through counter-storytelling that counters the deficit narratives often associated with Black collegians (Streets, 2022). Described as authentic and nurturing, collegiate Black spaces can be a vital source of peer support and positively impact Black collegians' experiences at PWIs (Streets, 2022) .

Black Educational Spaces

Warren and Coles (2020) also pointed to anti-Blackness as an enduring legacy of slavery experienced in schools through interpersonal, curricular, and environmental assaults. Analyzing Derek Bell's *The Space Traders* to draw a connection between anti-Blackness and Black liberation, Warren and Coles (2020) contended that Black educational spaces are sites of healing and resistance. Warren and Coles' (2020) concept of Black educational spaces broadened scholars understanding of Black space beyond the physical realm, noting although they can take

the form of physical spaces, Black educational spaces can also consist of cultural practices or traditions, or even be symbolic in nature. Three key criteria for Black educational spaces include (a) self-determination, (b) self-actualization, and (c) self-efficacy (Warren & Coles, 2020). Again, the concept of fugitivity is expressed as a foundational element to Black educational spaces as Warren and Coles (2020) noted:

> Fugitivity shows up, for example, in the myriad ways black people practice seeing one another, loving one another, and granting one another breathing room in a world where antiblack racial violence is normalized and asphyxiating. Fugitive space might be an unabashed nod of acknowledgment to the only other black person in a predominantly white college classroom, the unrepentant commandeering of physical space on a school campus by black students, or other cultural practices that establish solidarity in and among diverse groups of black people. (p. 10)

Black educational spaces also embody the idea of racial counterspaces, which typically tend to be physical spaces that focus on healing and community building (Warren & Coles, 2020). The follow section expands upon the existing literature on counterspaces.

Counterspaces

Black life (Quashie, 2012) and Black students' experiences at PWIs are mostly viewed through a lens of resistance to white supremacy (Tichavakunda, 2020). The common term used to describe the spaces that Black students create to navigate hostile racial campus climates is counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces can be found in both social and academic contexts (Solórzano et al., 2000). In their seminal work that explored how racial microaggressions have been experienced by African American college students and the subsequent impact it had on their perceptions of racial campus climate, Solórzano et al. (2000)

found counterspaces were created and maintained by Black students in response to experiences with microaggressions and overall poor racial campus climate. Counterspaces can best be understood as “ sites of collective resistance and counter to dominant white spaces” (Tichavakunda, 2020, p. 12) and also “serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70).

Drawing on data from the Minority College Cohort Study, Keels (2020) explored the experiences of 500 Black and Latinx college students with the goal of understanding factors that impacted persistence. The study found that counterspaces acted as critical avenues for Black and Latinx students to “counter discrimination, build critical group identity, become culturally affirming while fostering institutional belonging, provide psychological and physical safety, support academic achievement and provide a social community” (Keels, 2020, p. 161). Although the need for counterspaces stems from students’ experiences in a hostile collegiate environment, institutional support and resources are needed to maintain such spaces. An example of a Black faculty supported counterspace can be found in the African American student network, described as a “sanctuary” for Black students coping with racial microaggressions at a PWI (Grier-Reed, 2010). The African American student network is a weekly lunch networking group created by two Black faculty members after seeing a need for Black students to come together to share and understand their experiences more deeply(Grier-Reed, 2010). Attended by Black students, faculty, and staff, the African American student network provided social support for Black students through encouragement and relationships that have led to a greater sense of community, belonging, and connectedness by student attendees (Grier-Reed, 2010).

B. Jackson and Hui's (2017) ethnography of Uplift and Progress, a program designed for Black male students and an example of a counterspace, sought to understand the reasons behind why Black male students sought same race and gender friendships at a large rural PWI. Through interviews with 17 highly involved Uplift and Progress members and observations at weekly organizational meetings, membership recruitment and education, community service, and social events, B. Jackson and Hui (2017) found the reasons these students sought other Black male students for friendship was due to an overall lack of friendship. They wanted to recreate family like relationships, and they also wanted to associate themselves with a positive Black male image. B. Jackson and Hui (2017) argued although Black students may seek homophilic relationships due to instances of racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, these relationships also fulfilled emotional and social needs of students.

To reiterate, counterspaces at PWIs act as safe spaces for Black collegians to navigate a negative racial environment. Examples of counterspaces include institutional supports, such as Black cultural centers. As society continues to shift toward technology that augments in-person interactions, Black students also leverage technology to create digital counterspaces. Finally, Black student organizations such as BGLOs and BSUs continue to function as critical sites of support and collaboration for Black collegians. The following section highlights each of these spaces and how they function as counterspaces in PWI environments.

Black Cultural Centers

Created in the 1960s during a time of social turmoil and unrest, Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) fulfilled a unique gap in the university's services by providing safety, community, and resources to the often maligned Black student population (Williams, 2021). Despite fear that BCCs would lose their significance due to a shift in rhetoric emphasizing multiculturalism over

race-specific remedies, Williams (2021) asserted, “There are many ways BCCs continue to bring a sense of hope and mattering in higher education, both through the staff and professionals who maintain these affirming spaces and the programs produced to promote Black history and excellence within colleges and universities” (para.1). Students have even described BCCs as a “home away from home” (Patton, 2006, p.644) as it is one of the few spaces on campus where they are able to find and interact with peers of the same race (Gilkes Borr, 2019).

A considerable amount of recent literature has documented the impact of BCCs on the Black collegian experience at PWIs (Gilkes Borr, 2019; Hypolite, 2020a, 2020b, 2022b; Patton, 2006). For example, in an examination of Black students’ perceptions of BCCs, Patton (2006) found that BCCs played a critical role in assisting with first-year transition and acting as a site of historical and individual representation of Black culture. Hypotlite’s (2020a, 2020b, 2022a) extensive research on BCCs shed light on the space’s ability to connect Black undergraduates, graduates, faculty and staff. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study on BCCs, Hypolite (2020b) found the BCCs acts as an institutional conduit for campus resources, facilitates connection between Black student organizations, and collaborates with other cultural identity centers to form cross-campus collaborations to leverage limited funding resources and better serve the diversity of Black students. In over 40 hours of observations and 35 interviews with Black undergraduate and graduate students, staff, and student employees of a BCC, Hypolite (2020a) asserted BCCs play a positive role in developing Black students’ personal racial identity development, understanding of the diversity in Blackness on campus, and common experiences that inform a shared racial identity. BCCs also shaped the experiences of Black graduate students. Hypolite (2022a) found these centers played a crucial role in helping students establish, enhance, and broaden their networks. Moreover, BCCs facilitate the discovery and nurturing of

supportive environments and communities in the university, connecting students with fellow peers, professionals, and undergraduates (Hypolite, 2022b).

Currently, there are more than 175 Black or multicultural centers on college campuses across the country whose mission is to develop Black students' sense of "knowledge, understanding, interaction, respect, and dignity" (Williams, 2021, para. 2). Despite the positive impact of BCCs on Black students' experience, lack of institutional financial and staff supports continue to be a major concern (Hypolite, 2022b; Patton, 2006). On some campuses, there is fear the BCC may merge with other campus cultural centers, thus shifting the focus on serving the unique needs of Black students (Patton, 2006). As a physical space and conduit for Black student, faculty, and staff connections, BCCs play a vital role in the Black campus community.

Black Digital Spaces on Campus

Hill (2018) used the term "digital counterpublic" to describe "any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities" (p. 287). For today's college generation, Davis et al. (2014) argued social media plays a central role in their communication, social interactions, information acquisition, and even forms a significant part of their identity and community development. Recent research on social media and college students demonstrated that new digital technologies operate as counterspaces, as they facilitate peer support (Streets, 2022), resist and cope with racism (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Tynes et al., 2013), and discuss critical campus and social issues (Byrd et al., 2017). A quantitative study by Tynes et al. (2013) found though the vast majority of all students engaged in social media in some way, Black students tended to spend more time on social media than white students and had more negative perceptions of the campuses' racial campus climate. Byrd

et al. (2017) argued for the functions of hashtags in social media as a critical tool for Black students and academics to share information directly with the public and collaborate with each other in real time. Through an analysis of an online campaign in response to racialized incidents on campus, George Mwangi et al. (2018) argued for the validity of social media as a virtual counterspace. The authors identified four distinguishing characteristics of a virtual counterspace as locations where stories are crafted and upheld, spaces for healing, sites of proactive defiance, and arenas for direct interpersonal exchanges (George Mwangi et al., 2018).

Streets's (2022) qualitative study on a student-created app nicknamed "Blackspace" shed light on how Black students have leveraged digital technology to facilitate real-time peer support and community. Relying on interview data from six Black undergraduate developers, Streets (2022) found the primary goal of the digital app was to elevate the Black student experience at their PWI. The developers embraced a "for us by us" mindset as they attempted to translate critical resources found in the physical African American student handbook into a digital app (Streets, 2022). Commenting on the power of this tool to positively affect Black students, Streets (2022) noted:

> Blackspace takes the best of what its offline predecessors—the resources offered on a BSU bulletin board and the UNC African American Student Handbook—and marries them with the subversiveness of Instagram or Twitter, where curated information can be shared in a manner that sidesteps existing ineffectual institutional ways of communicating with Black college students. (p. 117)

As Black students leverage the power of digital technology to create digital counterspaces, so too should researchers examine how these spaces are transforming Black community at PWIs (Streets, 2022).

Black Student Organizations

Black Greek Letter Organizations

BGLOs represent a significant role in African American history and culture. For over 100 years, these international organizations have served the Black community in myriad ways, emphasizing activities that enhance the social well-being of both members and nonmembers alike. Despite producing prominent leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Representative John Lewis, perceptions of Black fraternities by academics and the general public have been mixed. Much of the debate and attention has been centered on the primary method in which these organizations indoctrinate new members via the undergraduate intake process. Although some scholars would call for the complete banishment of undergraduate chapters due to the ongoing prevalence of illegal hazing activities (Kimbrough, 2005), the five fraternities that make up the Divine Nine BGLOs still hold significant value in the lives and experiences of Black male undergraduate students.

Originally conceived as a study group for Black students at Cornell University, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. became the first official BGLO on December 4, 1906 (Kimbrough, 2003). Kimbrough (2003) noted a driving force behind the formation of the organization stems from the experiences of a few of the seven founders who witnessed the benefits of fraternal membership working in the white fraternity houses. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc., founded in 1911 at Indiana University, became the second BGLO fraternity founded on a predominantly white campus and has a similar theme to its origin tale as its predecessor. Crump (1991) explained:

> Black men were almost completely ignored by White students. To make matters worse, one Black student might be on campus for weeks without seeing another. Under these circumstances, assimilation into the life of the school was impossible. The administration

> maintained an attitude of indifference as Blacks were slowly matriculated and swiftly forgotten . . . the members [of Kappa Alpha Psi] sought one another's company between classes and dropped by one another's lodging place to discuss a new approach to an old problem. The depressing isolation earlier experience was relieved as new friendships solidified. (p. 3)

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., founded in 1911; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., founded in 1914; and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Inc., founded in 1963, all found their beginnings at HBCUs, Howard University and Morgan State University, respectively. Although each organization offers a unique experience to its members, the common themes of brotherhood, scholarship, and service are found in the values of all five organizations, serving as the foundation for the experiences of Black male collegians (Harper & Harris, 2006).

An extensive body of scholarship explored positive impacts of BGLO membership on Black undergraduates' college experiences. A study conducted by Harper (2007) assessed the effects of BGLO membership on classroom engagement at a large, Midwestern PWI. Harper found membership did in fact positively affect class participation, a factor known to contribute to academic achievement and belonging. A five-theme explanatory model was developed from the research using the categories of underrepresentation, voluntary race representation, collective responsibility, forced representation, and teaching styles. Participants overwhelmingly said that being the only African American in class was a motivating factor for them to engage in the classroom as a means to "debunk myths and clarify misconception in my all-White classes" (Harper, 2007, p. 104). Members also repeatedly expressed the need to be positive role models to other Black students by performing well academically and speaking up in the classroom. Harper (2007) noted engagement is a two-way street, as students professed they were more willing to

participate if the professor taught in an engaging manner and did not spotlight Black students as spokespeople for their race—causing feelings of anger, disgust and tentativeness to engage. Similarly, Harper and Harris (2006) contended development in the areas of racial identity, leadership, cognitive function, and practical competencies were all benefits to Black collegians who are members of BGLOs. Their research indicated that membership in BGLOs is closely tied to increased engagement in other campus extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, organizations, activities). Chambers (2016) acknowledged that although BGLOs draw inspiration from traditional Greek-letter organizations, their traditions more closely resemble those of West African cultures, evidenced by new member initiation rituals, stepping, and reliance on oral history. Chambers asserted these ties build resilience and systems of support in both members and the community. This sentiment was reiterated by Clark et al. (2015), who argued Black fraternities played a crucial role in cultivating sociocultural capital. This is particularly important due to the persistent necessity for Black Americans to organize and resist the progress of oppressive systems. Unfortunately, the significance of BGLO membership in the lives of Black college students has often been overshadowed by more sensationalized narratives.

Hazing and poor commitment to founding principles has shaped literature around the negative aspects of BGLO membership. Kimbrough (1997) posited the root of the current hazing problem stemmed from the ban of pledging by all the BGLOs in 1990. The implementation of the new membership intake process subsequently caused undergraduate chapters to go "underground," exacerbating the issues of violence against potential new members. The issue of membership intake process has not only caused concerns for new recruits, as members who opt to curtail the underground process (i.e., typically referred to as "paper"), but has also often been

ridiculed by “made” brothers and sisters, often causing schisms in chapters (Harper & Harris, 2006).

Lack of commitment to academics has also been viewed as a negative aspect of BGLO membership. In a study conducted by Harper (2000), 92% of the 119 undergraduate chapters had grade point averages below those of other Greek organization members, with a fraternity average of 2.43. The disconnect with values does not end with academics, as scholars suggested that negative stereotypes portrayed and reinforced by the organizations has been correlated with undergraduates choosing not to pursue membership (Patton & Bonner, 2001). These issues, paired with external barriers such as lack of support (both financially and institutionally) and woefully low numbers of Black men enrolled at PWIs (Harper & Harris, 2006), have all been causes for concern for the continued relevance and growth of BGLOs.

Shedding light on the positive experiences of members, along with quantitative research on the effects on academics, well-being, and postgraduation success, may yield significant benefits in reshaping the narrative surrounding BGLOs, internally and externally. According to a student participant in Harper’s (2007) study:

> Achievement is what our fraternity is all about. Black students here really see me and other NUPES [members of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.] as leaders. We lead inside the classroom and outside of it. I would hate for me, or my fraternity brothers, or any other Black Greek to let down the Black students who see us as their leaders. I think the Black Greeks do a real good job of assuming responsibility for showing leadership in our classes. (p. 107)

Contemporary examples such as Colin Kaepernick—member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc., former NFL quarterback, and the catalyst for national anthem protests against the

ongoing injustices toward Black Americans—are proof the spirit of brotherhood and social justice, which led to the formation of these organizations, continues to live today. The benefits of BGLO membership for Black college students can be instrumental to helping create a greater sense of community at PWIs.

Black Student Unions

History of BSUs. The Black population at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) had experienced a significant decline in the number of Black students since 1961 when the college was incorporated into the California State College system and California's Master Plan for Higher education—shifting its student recruitment reach from the top 70% to the top 33% of high school graduates (Robinson, 2012a). In 1963, as enrollment numbers declined and the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum—galvanized by tragic bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, claiming the lives of four young Black girls—Black students formed the Negro Student Association; this association primarily served as a social organization, aiming to foster a sense of community among the Black student body (Kendi, 2012).

In 1966, James "Jimmy" Garret arrived on the campus of San Francisco State College and left behind a legacy that showcased the influential impact of Black student organizing on college campuses nationwide. Garret brought to campus an extensive resume of activist experience, which included being a Freedom Rider, Black Panther, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organizer and leader (Robinson, 2012a). As a seasoned veteran of the struggle for civil rights, Garret created internal education programs focused on educating Black students on important current sociopolitical issues and Black history. He also organized trips to Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia to expose Black students to the horrors of what was

happening in the Deep South (Robinson, 2012a). According to Garret, the internal education programs filled a necessary gap for students seeking a deeper understanding and connection to Black identity and culture. Robinson (2012a) reported in an interview that Garrett noted:

> We would meet at my house or someone else's house and we would talk about ourselves, seeking identity and stuff like that. A lot of folks didn't even know they were black. A lot of people just thought that they were Americans. Didn't feel themselves that they were black people. We discussed that a great deal. (p. 26)

After a suggestion by San Francisco State student leader, Tricia Navara, the name of the organization was changed to "Black Student Union" (BSU) in 1966 to reflect a new philosophy inspired by the Black Power movement (Kendi, 2012). Historian Kendi (2012) noted although most of the attention on BSUs focused on their existence at PWIs, BSUs were also formed at HBCUs during this time, which often led to tensions between the more radical BSU and conservative Black student government associations (SGAs). Kendi (2012) offered eight primary functions during the early formation BSUs, which were adopted and adapted by founding activists at PWIs and HBCUs to fit the particular needs of their campus climate. According to Kendi (2012), BSUs were formed to: (a) emphasize focus on "Black suasion" or Black conscious raising; (b) serve as a means of safety and survival for Black students; (c) solve a growing Black identity crisis; (d) advocate for the interests of Black students; (e) enhance the Black student experience; (f) integrate Black students to the campus structure; (g) enlighten and educate white students, faculty, and staff on Black concerns; and (h) support local Black communities.

The BSU at San Francisco State College served as a model and inspiration for Black student organizers at other campuses across the nation, including the University of Washington

in urban Seattle, Washington; Washington State University in rural Pullman, Washington (Robinson, 2012a, 2012b); and Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida (Palcic,1979).

Similar to the BSU at San Francisco State, the BSU at Florida State University underwent a name change from the Afro-American student union in 1968 after a lecture on campus by the Minister of Information of the Black Panther Party, Eldrige Cleaver (Palcic, 1979). Palcic (1979) explained Black students at Florida State University "felt that black culture was being ignored in the curriculum or being presented as a deviant part of society," (p. 99) and garnered widespread support from Black students across campus communities, including Black graduate students, athletes, and members of BGLOs. At Washington State University, the first Black student organization was founded in 1966 and called the Afro-American alliance. They, too, were racialized and inspired by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on May 4, 1968 (Robinson, 2012a). One student noted how Dr. King's assassination was a catalyst for involvement in the budding organization. Robinson (2012a) reported one student's assertion:

> A lot of the students who hadn't been active in the BSU before that, who hadn't even been interested before that, when he was assassinated, really wanted to get involved so they joined the organization and were very enthusiastic and wanted to get things done. (p. 119)

Additionally, as word spread about protests at San Francisco State, Robinson (2012a) reported students increasingly "felt compelled, that they had responsibility to do something to try to improve conditions for Black people" (p. 119).

BSUs have historically been instrumental in advancing the interests of Black college students through education, organization, and activism. Notably, during the early inception of the organization from approximately 1965–1974, BSUs "led major protest efforts that confronted

institutional racism and resulted in substantial reforms" (Robinson, 2012a, p. 36). BSU leaders were key organizers of the San Francisco State Strike, a multiracial protest that lasted 5 months and the longest protest to take place on a college campus (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). These reforms included the first and only College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State College and Black studies departments across the country (Kendi, 2012). Additionally, BSUs advocated for increased resources to support Black students at PWIs, which have included institutional offices dedicated to serving ethnically marginalized students; Black and ethnic culture centers; and increased recruitment of Black students, faculty, and staff (Palcic, 1979; Robinson, 2012a). BSUs have a legacy of activism that has helped shape the opportunities and outcomes for marginalized college students from all walks of life.

Contemporary BSUs. Despite the historical significance of BSUs and their work to improve educational equity, there has been sparse research that examined BSUs as a focal point of analysis or outside of the early formation of the organization in the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the reason for this could be due to the conservative backlash against progressive protest movements during the 1970s and 1990s. Scholars have noted college students during the time period between the 1980s and 1990s have been described as apathetic, or part of the reason was that many of the student activists of the 1960s were suspended or expelled from school, with some of them being murdered (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019). Researcher and former BSU president of the University of Washington, Marc Robinson, pointed out that Black students entering college in the 1990s and early 2000s lacked the social consciousness of previous generations of Black students due to the decline of youth political, educational organizations such as NAACP youth chapters, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Congress of Racial Equity (Robinson, 2012a).

BSUs as activist centered campus organizations have seen a resurgence of notoriety since 2015 stemming from the #BlackLivesMatter movement. D. C. Turner's (2020) research on Black college student activism in the 21st century noted the central role BSUs have played in the ongoing movement for Black lives on and off campus. D. C. Turner (2020) argued the modern-day Black campus activists are keenly aware of their status and privilege as students and have been able to funnel financial and material resources from their universities to local Black communities and social movements. Led by the BSU, Black student leaders at the University of California Santa Barbara were able to help pay the funeral expenses for a local Black woman murdered by police and organized a trip to Ferguson to connect with activists there during the protests for another murdered teen, Michael Brown (D. C. Turner, 2020).

However, the Black student experience and, subsequently, BSUs do not solely operate out of resistance and opposition to racism on campus or in society. For many Black students, BSUs offer Black students a chance to connect and network with students who look like them (Harper & Quaye, 2007). For many, participating in BSU-sponsored events allowed Black students to let their guard down and feel comfortable without the pressure of having to codeswitch their fashion or slang (Guiffrida, 2003). Hurtado et al. (1998) found BSUs impacted social involvement, interactions with faculty, and access to critical resources positively. Arguing for Marc Anthony Neal's theory of "post-soul," Robinson (2012a) noted BSU continued to serve as a crucial safe haven for Black students who face inhospitable spaces at PWIs. Robinson (2012a) stated, "This forging of Black communal space in integrated environments is one similarity between BSU members of the past and Black students today" (p. 236). BSUs also continued to have a strong link to serving the Black community, providing Black students of today opportunities to give back to the community (Hotchkins, 2017; B. Jackson & Hui, 2017).

BSUs also provided an outlet for positive self-expression and promoted academic excellence among Black students (Cox et al., 2018).

Lane (2022) took a contemporary look at how BSU acted as a bridge or buffer to Black student experiences at historically white institutions. Using a qualitative multisite case study design featuring two BSUs in the California State University system, Lane (2022) explored the role of BSUs in supporting Black students and how they also protected Black students from hostile campus environments. The major findings from this study were that BSUs played a critical role in creating feelings of empowerment and fostering positive racial identity for Black students. Participating in BSU events also helped students combat feelings of isolation through feelings of connectedness with other Black students (Lane, 2022). This study was significant because the unit of analysis focused directly on members of BSUs. Although BSUs have been proven to be highly effective and beneficial for Black students, they can be limited in their impact due to low numbers of Black students on campus and limited funding (Udeh, 2022). As the umbrella organization of Black student organizations (Tichavakunda, 2018), more research on the specific functions and impact of BSUs can provide valuable insights into how to better support Black students and the ecology of Black campus life.

Summary

This literature review represented the exploration of Black college students' feelings of exclusion and experiences with racism, which can result in the need to actively resist racists acts and structures and create safe spaces, or counterspaces, to navigate these hostile environments. Together, these studies introduced a broader context in which this study has been situated and demonstrated a gap in literature regarding the various related aspects that relate to how Black students find, build, and maintain community in a PWI environment.

Strayhorn (2018) noted concepts such as sense of belonging, engagement, involvement, and membership are similar, yet they still act as precursors to the idea of community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) introduced the concept of "sense of community" (p. 9), which encompasses the idea that individuals experience a sense of belonging, recognize the importance of their connections to one another and to the group, and share a collective belief that their needs may be fulfilled through their commitment to stay united (Strayhorn, 2018). Boyer (1990) highlighted the essential elements necessary for fostering a thriving and inclusive campus community: (a) purposeful education, (b) protection of rights, (c) justice, (d) discipline, (e) care for members, and (f) cultural affirmation or celebration.

Recently, scholars have drawn attention to the labor, often unpaid and student-driven, required to create and maintain spaces of sanctuary (Tichavakunda, 2020). Although the aforementioned topics have been individually discussed in the literature, there has not yet been a holistic view of the process of community-making by Black college students at PWIs. There is also scant literature that directly examines the role of BSUs in the Black campus community. The present study helped fill the gap in existing studies by exploring two key areas. First, I sought to understand how community is defined by Black collegians and, subsequently, the supports and challenges faced in trying to maintain such communities. Second, the study presented an opportunity to identify and detail the various actors, spaces, and places that contribute to the Black community at a PWI by taking an in-depth examination of how the BSU operates in contemporary Black student life.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As stated in Chapter 1, this dissertation explored how the Black community has been built and maintained at a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education in the United States. I was specifically interested in the process of community making, including the relationships between actors (i.e., students, staff, and faculty) and spaces (i.e., physical and digital) that shaped the experiences of Black undergraduate students. This study focused on the Black Student Union (BSU) as a central student organization at PWIs, an under-explored area of scholarship in research on Black higher education. In the upcoming chapter, I outline the methodology employed in this study. Firstly, I reintroduce the research questions that guided the research. Subsequently, I detail the research design and methodology used. Following that section, I provide a comprehensive description of the data collection process and the methods employed to ensure reliability and validity. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a statement regarding my positionality.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study operationalized the first tenet of critical race theory (CRT), which asked: How do Black college students build and maintain community in an environment where racism is endemic? (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper et al., 2009; Milner, 2007; Ray, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study also employed a Black placemaking framework, which foregrounded Black spaces as a valuable focus of analysis and recognized the agency and labor exhibited by Black people to create and maintain spaces of their own (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020). Three primary research questions guided this study:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) define the Black community?
2. What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI?
3. In what ways does the Black Student Union contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI?

Research Design

Qualitative Case Study

The study was qualitative in nature and aimed to understand, interrogate, and deconstruct (Bhattacharya, 2017) the process of Black placemaking at a PWI. More specifically, a case study design was implemented; a case study entails an in-depth study of complex social phenomena in a predetermined bounded scope (Bhattacharya, 2017). Case studies are a research method used in various disciplines, especially in evaluation, and involve a thorough examination of a specific case, which could be a program, an event, a process, or even an individual to gather detailed insights and understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A case study can consist of a single case, where there is one unit of analysis, or multiple cases, where comparative analysis yields confirming or contradicting data (Yin, 2012).

Case studies share similarities with another common qualitative research method, ethnography. Case studies and ethnography focus on a particular unit of analysis with in-depth inquiry into current patterns or trends (Merriam, 1998). Both methods also draw on multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, document analysis, and archival data to construct accurate narratives of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The central difference between a case study and ethnographic research is the time spent by the researcher embedded in the field. Ethnographic research is characterized by intense and immersive study of a particular culture over an extended period of time, often extending well beyond a year (Bhattacharya, 2017). Field time for case studies can be much shorter than for ethnographies and can last from a few weeks, months, to up to 1 year (Merriam, 1998). Given their similarities, the following study drew on the foundational concepts of case study design while implementing ethnographic data collection methods to understand the process of Black community-making at a PWI and the role of BSUs in contemporary Black campus life.

This project is a case of Black placemaking at a particular PWI. This case is bound by selecting a single campus location chosen for the robust nature of Black student life. More details on the site are shared in the following sections. The case was also limited to Black student members of BSU. The time frame of the case was also essential, as I sought to further understand how Black college students experienced their environment in a post-COVID 19 global pandemic, politically charged, and technology-dependent society. The following section describes relational sociology as a research method for examining how a community is created and maintained at a PWI. I also describe the qualities of interviews, observations, and social media analysis as the data collection methods to achieve a thick description of the Black campus community.

Research Method

A Relational Sociology Approach

A relational sociological approach to data collection was selected to study the process of Black community making at a PWI. Tierney and Kolluri (2020) posited a framework for applying a relational methodology to the study of higher education. Three tenets guided this framework and study, as a relational approach aims to:

- Investigate dynamic social ties over individual essences as their unit of analysis.
- Emphasize processes that bring about conflict or harmony among social actors.
- Explore fields with amorphous boundaries. (Tierney & Kolluri, 2020, p. 31)

Sociologist Desmond (2014) argued selecting the object of analysis, or the exact phenomena of interest to be studied, is the most crucial element of the research process, yet it is often undervalued and overlooked in sociological qualitative research. Relational sociology breaks from the traditional substantialist approach by rejecting the idea that social worlds can be understood fully by studying groups or places in isolation (Desmond, 2014). Instead, a relational approach prioritizes the relationships between two types of actors in a social context (Desmond, 2014) and recognizes that these entities are interconnected in a constant struggle and renegotiation of the relationship (Tierney & Kolluri, 2020). The debate between individual agency and the influence of social structure then, is a moot point, given no outcome is singularly determined by either (Tierney & Kolluri, 2020).

In the field of higher education, an individualist approach might examine the individual agency exhibited by students as Gilkes Borr (2019) did, highlighting the motivations and strategies undertaken by Black collegians seeking same-race friendships at a PWI. A structuralist approach may consider how the characteristics of a campus entity, such as Black cultural centers (BCCs), are perceived by Black college students, thus impacting their overall feelings about the campus itself (Patton, 2006). However, a relational approach to understanding the Black collegiate experience would not just consider the students themselves or the structures with which they interact, but instead, relational sociology studies “processes, rather than processed people” (Desmond, 2014, p. 565) in an attempt to gain deeper understanding of the interconnections between multiple conflicting entities.

Methods

A key element and common unit of analysis in relational sociology relates to Bourdieu's concept of a "field" or a "network of individuals and institutions governed by particular dynamics and rules of practice" (Tierney & Kolluri, 2020, p. 20). Ferrare (2020) further emphasized the centrality of relationships in the concept, defining fields as "structures spaces of social relations, made up of positions that derive their properties in relation to other positions from which actors make sense of the world" (p. 50). College campuses are a field. In the structures of the Ivory Tower exists a multitude of subsets of fields or social worlds, including the Black campus community (Tichavakunda, 2018). Informed by CRT, the Bourduisean concept of the field may consider campus counterspaces such as BSU as a valuable starting point for understanding the relationship between Black students, advisors, faculty, staff, and structures as they come together to form a sense of community at PWIs (Tichavakunda, 2019, 2018).

Various data collection methods are used in case studies and relational ethnographic research, such as interviews, observations, archival research, statistical analysis, surveys, and photovoice (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Tierney, 1985; Tierney & Kolluri, 2020). In this study, I applied three commonly used data collection tools used by ethnographers: (a) participant interviews, (b) observations, and (c) archival data specifically social media document analysis. Bhattacharya (2017) explained, "Ethnography involves studying people within the context of their culture" (p. 25). By using ethnographic data collection methods and immersing myself in the Black campus community at Sunnyside State University (SSU, a pseudonym) for 6 months, I aimed to obtain a profound understanding of the traditions, tensions, and sentiments prevalent in the community. Through this methodology, the study contributed to the broader body of knowledge that comprehensively examines Black student experiences. In the

following section, I describe these methods in detail and explain how they apply to the study of Black campus communities.

Interviews

The purpose of interviews in any qualitative study was to understand a particular event, phenomenon, or experience through the lens of the participant (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). One advantage of interviews is their ability to provide rich and thick descriptive data (Ellis, 2016). Another advantage of interviews is the ability to highlight the narratives of people who traditionally are pushed to the margins of society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Drawing from critical legal tradition, seminal critical race theorists Solórzano and Yosso (2002) posited the term counter-storytelling "as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 32). Counter-stories can be a useful tool to disrupt majoritarian stories that privilege the perspectives of those from the dominant race, gender, and class (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In alignment with the overarching research purpose and question, a semistructured interview protocol was developed that included a list of questions that acted as a "loose guide" for each participant, allowing for flexibility in the conversation to cover the topics of interest (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). This study drew on the experiential knowledge and perspectives of Black students, faculty, staff, and mentors to provide rich and thick description of the Black campus community at a PWI.

Observations

As a data collection method, observations can be a valuable tool for implementing triangulation and limiting researcher bias (Mertler, 2019). Observation also allows the researcher to perceive details that might not be obtained through an interview (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009;

McCall & Simmons, 1969). In the case of studying the Black community at a PWI, observations were particularly useful in gaining a holistic feel for what it meant to be Black on campus.

Participant observation necessitates substantial interaction, extended duration, and enhanced access to the community of interest (Tichavakunda, 2018). Ethnographers who have studied the experiences of college students have gone as far as living in college dormitories (Nathan, 2006) and participating in extracurricular activities on campus (Silver, 2020) to gain a deeper understanding of how college students experience campus life outside of the classroom. In studying the social worlds of Black science, technology, engineering, and math majors at an elite private university, sociologist of race and higher education, Tichavakunda embedded himself so deeply in the Black science, technology, engineering, and math community by participant shadowing, attending meetings, and social gatherings that he was commonly referred to as the "National Society of Black Engineers dad" by his participants (Tichavakunda, 2018, 2021a).

The current study used a similar approach to understanding Black community making at a PWI primarily through the lens of members of BSU. Methods and sites of observations included shadowing students in class and other campus locations, BSU meetings, social gatherings, and physical spaces of importance, including the Black resource center (BRC).

Archival Data

Archival data can be used to study a wide range of social phenomena (e.g., historical events, social trends, cultural practices, institutional change; Yin, 2018). In sociological research, archival data refers to any data derived from existing records, documents, or other artifacts created in the past and preserved for future use (Yin, 2018). Archival data may consist of a variety of materials in physical and digital forms, including but not limited to advertisements,

business documents (e.g., memos, emails), personal materials (e.g., journals, photographs), and a range of social media content (e.g., tweets, Instagram feeds; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Document analysis, defined as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27) for the purpose of triangulation, was used in the current study to add depth to the participant interviews and observations.

Digital Sources. As technology has rapidly transformed over the past 2 decades, so has society in attempts to understand how to navigate a reality that spans both physical and digital space. The traditional college student of today has come of age in the digital era, one marked by high-speed internet; personal smartphones that have computer-like functions; and social networking sites that allow users to make global connections and share instantaneous pictures, thoughts, and information called social media (A. Turner, 2015). Digital scholars have noted the unique ways in which Black technology users have leveraged social media to share information, organize resources, and build a digital community that reflects African American cultural ideas, practices, and customs (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2024). Further, a growing body of scholarship has analyzed the ways that Black college students have leveraged social media to facilitate social change on college campuses, including the #Concernedstudent1950 movement at the University of Missouri in 2015 (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019) and the #ITooAm movement at Harvard University in 2014 (George Mwangi et al., 2018).

University departments such as admissions, campus centers, and student affairs also use social media to increase student reach; data indicated 100% of college campuses use at least one form of social media to communicate with students (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Social media accounts, including Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and LinkedIn can produce rich data and insights into Black students' experiences. Social media analysis, including

participant social media profiles and relevant campus-related social media content, have added layers of depth to portray a complete portrait of Black student life.

Research Site

The research site selected for the study was SSU, a large, public 4-year university located on the West Coast of the United States. According ro institutional data, SSU boasts an enrollment of over 34,000 students; over 300 student organizations; and, according to the *U.S. News and World Report*, a top 30 ranking in ethnic diversity. Over the past few years, significant progress has been made at SSU in terms of closing equity gaps for its Black campus community. Despite being one of the most highly selective universities in a large state university system, SSU boasts a significantly higher 6-year graduation rate for Black first-time freshman students, 73.6%, compared to 49.2% for the entire university system (California State University, n.d.). SSU has also increased the number of tenure-track faculty between 2016–2022, growing from 25–42 Black faculty members and its numbers of academic advisors and therapists post-COVID-19 global pandemic, aligning with research that has shown more advising for college students can increase graduation rates (Everett-Haynes, 2024).

However, institutional data show the enrollment number for Black students at SSU continues to lag, only accounting for 4% of the undergraduate student population. Low enrollment numbers for Black students have made this student population susceptible to racial attacks, and there have been reports of Black students being called racial slurs in the classroom (Williamson & Corlett, 2022), residence halls (La Jolla Light, 2010), and at a campus community gathering (Bryce, 2022). In 2019, the BRC was vandalized, prompting a rally against racist incidents which drew over 100 Black students, faculty, and staff (Scripps Media, 2021).

Despite these recent controversies and low enrollment numbers for Black undergraduates, SSU has many elements of a thriving and robust Black campus community. SSU has a plethora of Black student organizations, including an Afrikan student union (differing in name only to the BSU), Black Greek letter organization (BGLOs), and a Black dance troupe inspired by majorettes' culture at HBCUs. Another key element of the Black community at SSU is the Department of Africana Studies. Black studies was birthed out of the struggle for culturally relevant curriculum during the Black Campus Movement (BCM) in the 1960s and 1970s (Biondi, 2012; Kendi, 2012; Palcic,1979; Robinson, 2012a). The Department of Africana Studies at SSU recently celebrated its 50th anniversary and boasts both a major and minor, with eight full-time faculty members (San Diego State University, 2021). In 2018, SSU opened its BRC, which was founded through a student-led initiative. According to SSU's website, the mission of the BRC is to "promote Black Excellence and to provide a safe and welcoming environment where students, staff, and faculty of the African diaspora can congregate, collaborate, and cultivate a unified community." The BRC has robust programming promoting academic and social support and a physical space for Black students to host meetings or simply relax.

Interview Sample

The focus of this study was the Black community at a PWI, with a particular interest in the role of the BSU. As such, participant interviews included two main groups: (a) Black undergraduate members of BSU and (b) Black faculty, staff, and administration.

Students

Student perspectives in this study comprised current undergraduate students and recent graduates in the past 2 years. Criteria for student participation included:

- Identify as Black or African American

- Current undergraduate students
- Recently graduated students (no more than 2 years)
- Undergraduate (sophomore standing and above) or recent graduate (i.e., 1–2 years)
- Member of BSU during their collegiate experience

A total of 18 current and recently graduated members of BSU were interviewed for this study. Student participants were required to be at least sophomore standing and could have graduated from the university no earlier than 2 years before the beginning of data collection. To participate in the study, students had to self-identify as Black or African American and as members of BSU.

Purposive and snowball sampling tactics were used to identify and recruit students for this study, as these strategies work in tandem and leverage the researcher's experience to identify the best participants. The goal was for each participant to lead to an additional participant via referral (Leavy, 2017). Recruitment relied heavily on relationships I established in the Black campus community at SSU. As an alum of SSU, I have served as the alumni advisor for one of the historically Black fraternal organizations on campus for the past 3 years. Several fraternity members were also members of BSU, including the recent past BSU president and secretary. Additionally, one member of the fraternity served as the current BSU treasurer. I also developed a relationship with the director of the BRC and faculty members of the African studies department. These relationships were leveraged to gain access to the Black campus community and recruit interview participants using snowball recruitment or recommendations from these close contacts. Traditional marketing methods, including digital and physical flyers shared via social media and physical locations on campus, were also used to recruit student participants.

All participants identified as Black racially, but the sample exhibited notable heterogeneity. Although all students affirmed a Black racial identity, some indicated ethnic origins from African countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe. In contrast, others disclosed a mixed ethnic heritage, including European backgrounds.

Black Faculty, Staff, and Administration

Black faculty, staff, and administrators hold pivotal roles in the Black campus community at SSU. During my interviews, I engaged with two staff members from the BRC, tasked with overseeing its physical space often fondly referred to as a "home away from home" by students. These staff members also discussed their roles in managing the Henrietta Goodwin Scholars (HGS) Program, the BRC's academic arm, and offered their perspectives on the Black campus community. Additionally, I interviewed two faculty members from the Africana studies department, who shared insights into their classroom experiences and perceptions of the Black campus community. Notably, one of these faculty members was the faculty advisor for the BSU.

Data Collection

Access

My role as an advisor to a BGLO and my status as an SSU alum played a pivotal role in gaining access to the Black campus community. Over the past 3 years as an alumni advisor, I forged close relationships with many organization members, including several who served on the BSU executive board. Additionally, I established a connection with the director of the BRC. After pitching my research idea to students and the director and receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I immersed myself in campus culture by attending events like BRC gatherings, classroom settings, Black events, fraternity chapter meetings, and step shows.

Informed Consent

All participants received an informed consent form (see Appendix A) incorporated at the beginning of the demographic survey, which they completed before engaging in the interview after Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix B). Participants were required to electronically sign their names on the Google form to acknowledge that they had read and understood the purpose of the study. Before each interview, I provided a brief overview of the study's purpose and scope, outlining what would transpire during the interview. Participants were informed their involvement was voluntary, with the option to withdraw anytime. I also inquired if they had questions or concerns, sought permission to audio record the interview, and encouraged them to seek clarification during the process. During one interview, a participant raised a question about the study's origin, whether it was an original idea or institution generated. This allowed me to elaborate on the study's inception and my goals for sharing findings and recommendations. The participant expressed appreciation for my passion and dedication, noting a connection between the ground-up perspective of students and an institutional standpoint.

Participant Selection

To capture a range of experiences, participants included current students with sophomore standing and above, along with recent graduates. This approach was particularly beneficial because it enabled the exploration of narratives from students who had experienced campus life before the 2018 opening of the BRC and those who had known campus life only with this formal space. All student participants were actively engaged members of the Black campus community, as evidenced by their participation in the BSU.

Through my role as an advisor to a Black Greek letter fraternity on campus, I employed convenience sampling to recruit participants, including the recent past BSU president and current BSU treasurer. Additionally, I used purposive and snowball sampling by contacting various Black student organizations, such as BSU and Black fraternities and sororities. Recruitment fliers were distributed by BRC staff and Black student organizations, including BSU. Several Black student organizations shared the recruitment flier through their Instagram stories. Following student interviews, I identified key faculty and staff contributors to the Black community and emailed them to gather their perspectives.

Most student participants identified as general body members, meeting the requirement of attending two BSU meetings to be considered members. I interviewed five current or former BSU executive board members, including the former BSU president. By focusing on perspectives from those deeply involved in community-building practices, I examined Black student agency in a PWI environment. Through their narratives, I explored how the Black community was defined, the challenges faced in building and maintaining a sense of community, the diversity in the Black campus community, and the process by which, despite a numerically small Black population, students with the support of Black faculty and staff, created a vibrant and robust Black campus community.

Interviews

Participants were interviewed and audio-recorded using a semistructured protocol. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. The participants, at their request, opted for this virtual platform. After each interview, comprehensive field notes were taken, capturing significant events, comments, or descriptions relevant to the community. Subsequently, extensive memos were compiled to record personal reflections and insights, contributing to the data analysis

process. Additionally, in some instances, audio notes were recorded, transcribed, and integrated into the field notes.

After conducting participant interviews, the audio files from Zoom were downloaded and uploaded to a password-protected drive on my computer. Audio recordings were transcribed using Rev software. Each audio recording was reviewed, and transcripts were edited to ensure accuracy. Listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcripts helped me become acquainted with the data. In this phase, further analysis was conducted by applying additional codes using Black placemaking tenets. Additionally, specific noteworthy quotations from the participants were noted. A list of interview questions for students and recent graduates can be found in Appendix C, and interview questions for faculty and staff can be found in Appendix D.

Observations

During the Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters, I conducted observations in various group settings, including BSU general body meetings, events organized by the BRC, and classroom environments such as Africana studies classes and HGS sessions held at the BRC. Additionally, I attended and observed Black campus events such as the Black Greek step show, homecoming festivities, and BSU's annual high school conference. Throughout these observations, I focused on Black spaces on campus, primarily the BRC. At the BRC, I would typically find an open seat, take notes on my computer, and occasionally engage in conversations with students.

Social Media Analysis

I selected four Instagram accounts to initiate data collection and analysis: (a) BSU, (b) the BRC, (c) the AFRAS department, and (d) an Africana Studies 101 class. Each account was selected due to its significance in the Black campus community. The Instagram posts analyzed

covered information related to the Fall 2023 semester, coinciding with the primary data collection period. Posts dating back to June of the preceding summer were included because they contained relevant details for the upcoming Fall semester. In total, 223 posts were collected and analyzed. I systematically organized all selected Instagram posts in a Google spreadsheet, dedicating a separate sheet to each Instagram account for enhanced organization and categorization. Each sheet included columns for the post's date, category, title, or theme, collaboration partners, preliminary codes, post URL for easy retrieval, and notes.

The Instagram posts were classified into five main categories: (a) information, (b) events, (c) spotlight, (d) social, and (e) announcements. Information posts conveyed essential details about services and resources, such as the BSU Black roommate finder, or shared historical or community-related information, like a post by the BRC celebrating pride month and sharing Black queer films. Events posts promoted upcoming events, such as the weekly BSU general body meeting or the annual Kwanzaa celebration cohosted by the BRC and BSU. Tracking the quantity and frequency of events hosted by BSU and BRC was also a focus. Spotlight posts introduced individuals to the Black community, featuring profiles of the BSU executive board (e-board) or the BRC employee of the month. Social posts recapped recent events with pictures and/or videos, along with a caption about the event. Lastly, announcement posts shared information on specific services or promoted campus events, exemplified by the BRC weekly broadcast video where student workers shared upcoming events in the Black community, resembling a news broadcast. Inductive coding methods were employed to assign preliminary codes to each post.

Methodological Reflections

Using Instagram posts as data had notable strengths, particularly in its easy accessibility and availability as long as the posts remained active. This feature allowed me to extend my research beyond the constraints imposed by interviews and observations, providing insights into the types of events, overall atmosphere, and engagement methods in the Black community without requiring physical presence. A limitation of this method was its exclusive focus on posts, excluding stories or reels from the analysis. Participants highlighted how Instagram stories enhanced engagement by emphasizing the social aspects of events. Due to the ephemeral nature of stories lasting only 24 hours, collecting this type of data posed significant challenges.

Although other Black student organizations (e.g., Black business society, student African American brotherhood, student African American sisterhood, and National Pan-Hellenic Council) were acknowledged as vital elements of the Black community, I opted not to collect and analyze Instagram posts from those accounts. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of every Black student organization's account would have exceeded the study's scope in terms of time and labor. Additionally, participant narratives consistently emphasized BSU as the primary Black student organization, aligning with their characterization of it as the "voice" of Black students at SSU. Therefore, focusing on the BSU Instagram page was consistent with participant perspectives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, employing constant comparative analysis to identify and analyze pertinent themes (Fram, 2013). I analyzed data daily using voice notes, field notes, and memos. For instance, after conducting an interview or on-site observation, I created a brief voice note on my iPhone, capturing my initial reactions to

the interaction. Subsequently, I compiled a memo based on the raw data, which included personal reflections, potential themes and codes, connections to other interviews and observations, additional questions, and a plan for subsequent steps. Following the approach Miles and Huberman (1994) outlined, these memos played a crucial role in data reduction for effective data analysis.

The field notes and memos underwent additional development into analytical memos, aiding the initial phase of data analysis. Following the completion of data collection, all interview transcriptions, field notes, and memos were transferred into NVivo software. Subsequently, I commenced a dual approach of inductive and deductive coding, primarily focusing on addressing the research questions and adhering to the principles of Black placemaking (Tichavakunda, 2020). I engaged in constant comparative analysis to identify and analyze relevant themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Additionally, I used axial coding, a transitional process aimed at reorganizing data to identify the most dominant themes (Saldaña, 2021). Moreover, I provided room for prominent themes to naturally emerge from the data during the coding process.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability or the degree to which a study measures what it intends to measure and can be replicated and generalized to other studies, are concepts closely related to quantitative research design (Bhattacharya, 2017). The topic of rigor, which refers to the extent to which precision and accuracy are used in the design, collection, and analysis of data (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) has continued to be a subject of extensive debate, especially in the context of qualitative research. Although important in qualitative and quantitative research methods, the ways in which rigor is satisfactorily achieved differ. Bhattacharya (2017)

sufficiently surmised the criteria for quantitative methods. Bhattacharya (2017) explained, "For quantitative research, criteria of reliability, validity, and generalizability are used for determining the 'scientific' value of research" (p. 18). The purpose of quantitative research, Bhattacharya (2017) noted, is to "predict a trend across a broad sample of people," (p. 18) as compared to qualitative research, which is to conduct "in-depth inquiries within a small sample of population" (p. 18). Qualitative research methods instead seek to understand the meaning of social phenomena emphasizing behaviors and interactions, interpretations of those behaviors and interactions, and the participants' values, beliefs, and attitudes (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). As such, Bhattacharya (2017) explained, "Certain words used in quantitative research are not used in qualitative research in the same way or at all or used currently even if they were used in the past" (p. 41). Instead of validity, the aim of qualitative research should be trustworthiness.

Tierney and Clemens (2011) presented four criteria for conducting rigorous (validity) and trustworthy qualitative research. *Credibility* can be established if the researcher has effectively communicated the data in a manner that is viewed as trustworthy and reliable by the reader. For example, if the researcher describes a setting as lonely, they must provide a detailed description of the context so the reader can confirm it. Unlike quantitative research, the goal of qualitative research is to generalize the results to a larger population. Instead, *transferability* in qualitative research allows the researcher to offer new insights that can be compared and contrasted with other studies in similar contexts. *Dependability* refers to the rigor employed in the research methods and data collection process. Similar to reliability in quantitative research, the investigator must detail the types of data collected, how long and where was it collected, and the number of interviews collected to satisfy this standard. Tierney and Clemens (2011) explained *confirmability*, noting:

> Asks that the research findings be clearly linked to analysis, data, and the research site. The goal is to enable the reader to see the train of thought of the researcher to determine how he took a piece of data, analyzed it, and then reached a plausible conclusion. (p. 18)

Confirmability ensures that plausible connections between the data collection, the research site, and analysis can be made by the reader.

Techniques to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research include employing detailed explanations, seeking input from participants, and receiving feedback from peers—all of which serve to enhance both the credibility and reduce the potential divergence of interpretation between the author and reader, also known as bias (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). In this section, I discuss the methods employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the current study, including triangulation, reflexivity, thick description, member checking, audit trail, and peer debriefing.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a method for ensuring validity and minimizing biases. It involves employing diverse approaches such as using various data collection methods (e.g., observations, interviews), discussing emerging themes with fellow researchers, and confirming findings through theoretical concepts (Mathison, 1988). To establish triangulation, the current study employed multiple sources of data, including interviews with members of BSU, Black faculty, and staff, observations of Black spaces, and social media analysis.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves examining one's beliefs and biases as they relate to the research (Bhattacharya, 2017). I disclosed all biases, assumptions, values, beliefs, and experiences related to the current project elsewhere in this study. An additional technique for maintaining reflexivity is keeping what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as a reflexive journal. A reflexive journal

contains regular entries captured during the research process that keep track of methodological decisions, logistics, and reflections by the researcher. I maintained a digital reflexive journal using my smartphone for access and convenience.

Thick Description

Thick description has been described as “our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973, p. 313). According to Geertz (1973), thick description goes beyond literal descriptions of occurrences by suggesting meaning. This task requires a level of intimacy by the researcher to be able to identify and articulate the social meanings of participants’ actions and environment. I achieved thick description by developing relationships with participants and diligently recording extensive field notes and memos (Bhattacharya, 2017; Birks et al., 2009; Emerson, 2001; Wolfinger, 2002).

Member Checking and Peer Debriefing

Tierney and Clemens (2011) stated, “Qualitative data requires that the interviewees are involved in some manner in seeing if the findings that have been developed are in sync with their version of reality” (p. 41). The process of allowing participants to confirm depictions of their story is called member checking. The current study took an interactive approach to the research process by viewing participants as collaborators and allowing them to verify or clarify their stories. Patton (2006) discussed the importance of peer debriefing in ensuring the trustworthiness of research. Patton noted that having peers familiar with the subject matter review and comment on analysis during the data collection process can help identify themes, claims, and potential gaps or limitations in the methods. Peer debriefing was employed in the current study through regular check-ins with content and subject matter experts and was a valuable tool for enhancing trustworthiness.

Researcher Positionality

Bhattacharya (2017) described the importance of disclosing one's subjectivity, or the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the topic of study. By articulating the ways in which one relates to and subsequently approaches their project methodologically, qualitative researchers increase the academic rigor and validity of their work. Once upon a time, I was part of the 4% of Black undergraduate students at SSU. After only 3 semesters, I found myself academically disqualified and questioning if higher education was an appropriate place for me. Looking back, I was not the best student in terms of study habits nor understanding how, where, and what kind of assistance I could access. However, I was highly engaged in the campus community by living in the dorms; participating as a student–athlete; and joining several student clubs and organizations, most notably a historically Black fraternity. No amount of engagement could save me from an unfortunate and potentially deadly experience of being racially profiled by a campus police officer. Although I internalized the event and learned from my "mistake" by purposely wearing school paraphernalia, hoping to be viewed as a legitimate member of the campus community, this experience is, unfortunately, all too common for Black college students, as researchers have asserted the importance of a sense of belonging plays in Black student success (Strayhorn, 2018). My own experiences as an undergraduate student on this campus shaped who, what, and why I pursued this particular line of inquiry, and it was my ultimate goal to engage in what Kuntz (2015) referred to as "methodological activism," or praxis-oriented research in service of changing how we understand and positively impact the Black college student experience.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used in this study. It began by reintroducing the research questions, followed by a detailed explanation of the research design and methodology. Subsequently, a thorough description of the data collection process and measures undertaken to ensure reliability and validity were provided. Finally, the chapter concluded with a reflection on my positionality.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

> When we talk about other campuses and other Black communities on other PWI campuses, we have one of the best ones, in my opinion, in Southern California. We're not the biggest Black community on any campus . . . but we are definitely the tightest.
>
> —Lawry, Former Black Student Union President

The goal of this study was to explore how members of a Black Student Union (BSU) who attend a large, predominantly white institution (PWI) build and maintain a sense of community on campus. To achieve this objective, I immersed myself in the Black campus community at Sunnyside State University (SSU, a pseudonym) for a period of 5 months, predominantly during the Fall 2023 semester. Prior to this research, I had spent 3 years as the alumni advisor to the undergraduate chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., a Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) on campus. My identity as an alum of the university and relationships I had built with students, staff, and faculty were key in my ability to gain entry into the Black campus community.

To understand the inner workings of the Black campus community, I conducted semistructured interviews and had informal conversations with 18 currently enrolled or recently graduated from the BSU members. Additionally, I interviewed four Black faculty or staff members, including the BSU advisor. Table 1 displays the demographics of student interview participants. All names used are pseudonyms. The table lists the participants' gender, graduating class standing, graduating year, major, and membership status in BSU.

Table 1

Student Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Graduating class	Race/Ethnicity	Major	BSU status
Drew	Male	Graduate	Black/African American	Psychology w/ minor in Africana studies (AFRAS)	General body member
Lawry	Male	Senior	Black/African American	Marine Biology w/ minor in AFRAS	Former president and treasurer
Quinn	Male	Junior	Black/African American/white	Psychology	Current treasurer
Richard	Male	Sophomore	Black/African American/ Egyptian	Public health & AFRAS w/ minor in leadership	General body member
Darwin	Male	Graduate	Black/African American	Business administration w/ entrepreneurship specialization	General body member
Ty	Male	Graduate	Black/African American	Psychology w/ minor in AFRAS	General body member
Tina	Female	Junior	Black/African American	Finance	General body member
Sasha	Female	Graduate	Black/ African American	Interdisciplinary studies	General body member
Clayton	Male	Junior	Black/ African American	Biology	General body member
Hakeem	Male	Junior	Zimbabwean	Computer engineering	General body member
Ron	Male	Senior	Black/ African American	Statistics	General body member
Kirk	Male	Senior	Black/ African American	Journalism and media studies	General body member
Zee	Female	Sophomore	Nigerian	Public health w/ minor in interdisciplinary studies	Current cultural chair
Faison	Male	Senior	Black/ African American	Marketing	General body member
Nate	Male	Graduate	Black/ African American	Finance	General body member
Silas	Male	Graduate	Black/ African American	Interdisciplinary studies	General body member
Rel	Male	Senior	Black/ African American	Hospitality and tourism	Former at large e-board
Huey	Male	Senior	Black/ African American/ White	Finance w/ minors in AFRAS and Spanish	General body member

Table 2 displays the demographics for faculty and staff interview participants. All names used are pseudonyms. The table lists the participants' gender and role in the university.

Table 2

Faculty and Staff Participants

Name	Gender	Role
Dr. Gracie	Male	BRC director
Dr. Matsemala	Male	AFRAS lecturer
Dr. Taj	Male	AFRAS asst. professor/ASU advisor
Dr. Maxine	Female	BRC faculty scholar

I also conducted observations of students in different aspects of their community, including frequenting spaces they deemed essential, such as the Black resource center (BRC) and BSU general body meetings. Additionally, I visited Black classroom spaces on campus and immersed myself in spaces wherever the Black students were to gain insight into what it is like to be a Black student at SSU in a post-George Floyd and post-affirmative action college environment. Lastly, I analyzed the Instagram accounts of key Black organizations on campus to understand how they used digital tools to communicate with the community. This ethnographic approach allowed me to better understand how Black students experienced their campus environment and the strategies necessary to establish and sustain a thriving Black community.

This chapter addresses the research questions posed in Chapter 3, Methodology, alongside the themes that emerged during the data analysis. This study asked three primary research questions:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) define the Black community?
2. What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI?
3. In what ways does the Black Student Union contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI?

This chapter is organized into three sections, one each to address the three research questions. Each section follows a similar structure. First, I restate the research question and briefly discuss my motivations for asking it. Then, I provide detailed descriptive data organized by themes to answer the research question concretely. I begin the presentation of findings with a brief vignette demonstrating how my interactions with these students fostered trust and laid the groundwork for the study.

Drew's Influence on the Study

As the advisor to the undergraduate chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. (ie., a historically Black fraternity founded at Howard University in 1914 and chartered at SSU in 1979) at the time of the study, I guided organizational structure, program planning, and the membership intake process for a dozen Black male undergraduates. Drawing from my personal experience as a fraternity member and chapter initiate, I am deeply dedicated to nurturing academic, social, and professional development in the chapter. Although my initial focus was on procedures, my role has evolved to prioritize building personal relationships with each member. The inspiration for this study arose during a routine check-in with Drew, the former chapter president. At his request, we met at the BRC in between his classes. During my time as the alumni advisor to the undergraduate chapter, I witnessed Drew's growth at SSU, where he served as the fraternity's chapter president, the second vice president of the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) executive board, and an active member of various Black affinity groups, including the student African American brotherhood (SAAB), BSU, and the Black business society (BBS). Our conversations often centered around Drew's time management and how he handled his responsibilities across multiple organizations and leadership roles. As I elaborate on later, juggling participation in numerous student organizations is a common theme among those

who are highly involved in the Black community. Despite his heavy participation, Drew felt disconnected from the larger campus culture. He noted, “I don’t feel like I fit in with the overall SSU culture.” Although he perceived indifference from other Black students toward issues affecting the Black community, Drew saw this as an additional reason to work toward a stronger Black community on campus. He said:

> I think it’s just knowing how my community has always been down. Some things definitely need to change in our community for it to get better. I don’t think I’d be as passionate about my community if I was white. I just feel as though if you’re part of a community that doesn’t need as much help, I just wouldn’t be as passionate for it. But being a part of the Black community means something to me because I know the Black community and where it stands, and how important it is for the Black community to get better as a whole, so I think that’s where some of my passion comes from, just knowing where we stand as a race, as a community and where we need to go.

Drew was intentional and strategic about surrounding himself with other Black students. His commitment to the Black community included serving in several leadership roles and advocating for the needs and concerns of Black students, even against the Africana studies department, in an incident where the professor asked students to complete a slave narrative assignment, with which Drew disagreed. Students regarded this assignment as unacceptable due to the sensitivity of the topic and potential to evoke trauma. Drew shared the story with his fraternity brother who also served as the BSU president. Eventually, a coalition of Black students, faculty, and staff convened to address the situation and find a resolution. Drew’s principled stance in the Africana studies department incident highlighted his commitment to the Black community and demonstrated the trust and rapport built in an advisor–advisee

relationship. Through this shared experience, I gained unique insights into the challenges and perspectives of Black students, which fostered a more profound connection that proved invaluable in accessing and understanding the broader Black community for this study. Drew's openness and advocacy helped me to navigate sensitivities in the community and establish a foundation of trust that greatly enriched the depth of the research.

Literature on Black student life often maintains a certain level of detachment. This distance is apparent in several aspects. First, research on Black college students has tended to adopt a predominantly quantitative methodology. Although quantitative data can offer valuable insights into trends and patterns, these narratives may inadvertently emphasize stories of pathology or present skewed statistics (Toldson, 2019). Secondly, qualitative studies on Black student life predominantly rely on survey or interview data (Tichavakunda, 2018). Although these narratives can yield rich data, the interpretation of interviews is subjective and influenced by the interviewees' perspectives. Finally, ethnographic studies focusing on Black college students are relatively uncommon, and even rarer are ethnographies on Black student life conducted by Black researchers. Although individuals can undoubtedly acquire knowledge about the customs and cultures of various groups, a deeper understanding, referred to as an emic perspective, is attained by experiencing the culture from within (M. C. Brown, 2003).

My objective with this project was to foster a sense of intimacy between the researcher, reader, and the Black campus community at SSU. I aimed to transcend the mere understanding of Black students and instead create a deeper empathetic connection that would allow the reader to truly feel what Black students experience. This intimacy was cultivated through the relationships I formed with students and my immersive experiences in their cultural

environment. The findings from this dissertation uncovered a profound resilience and strength in the Black community at SSU. My aspiration is that this resilience resonates with you, the reader.

Research Question 1 - Defining the Black Community at SSU

Research Question 1 asked: How do Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) define the Black community? The following sections demonstrate how Black students defined their community by describing community dynamics and identifying membership. First, I detail how participants described the Black campus community as strong and vibrant despite its relative size. Then, I share student stories indicating the community is viewed as welcoming and inclusive, especially to new students looking to find their way on campus. I then demonstrate how students discussed the family-like environment that is a hallmark of the Black campus community. This section ends by highlighting how students' definitions of community hinged on determining criteria for membership.

Theme 1 - Beyond Numbers: The Vibrancy and Strength of the Black Community at SSU

We make the most of that 4%.

—Rel

Black students at SSU describe their community as small yet vibrant. Rel, who hailed from South Central Los Angeles and attended primarily Black schools, initially found the lively and vibrant Black community at SSU surprising. He viewed the environment at SSU as a blessing and appreciated the conscious effort to assist Black students in their transition to college. Despite the small Black student population, Rel noted the supportive community, making it feel like more Black students were present. He remarked, "At Sunnyside State University, we're not predominantly Black. It's a blessing. Even though we have 4% here . . . we make the most of that 4%. So it's definitely a blessing." Participants emphasized that numerical

representation did not accurately reflect the strength of the Black community on campus. Quinn, a 3rd-year psychology major, expressed the importance of the relationships Black students forge on campus despite their small numbers. He said:

> I would say if I were to describe the Black community at Sunnyside State, I would say the Black community is very small, but it's very strong . . . . The relationships that we have with each other mean a lot. And us being surrounded by a lot of non-Black people, I feel like only makes that comfortability way stronger just because we stand out to each other and we enjoy seeing each other.

According to Quinn, the limited Black student population enhanced the value and significance of these connections, making them all the more valuable and meaningful. Dr. Taj, a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Africana Studies, echoed students' sentiments on the community. He said:

> Oh, the campus community, the Black campus community here is very small. It's much smaller than I would hope it to be or that want it to be . . . but although small, very brilliant students, a very caring community, I've seen the Black students here really protect each other, stand up for each other, find ways to help each other . . . so they really do, for the most part. From what I've seen, I'm not a student, so I can't speak that much on it seems to be a pretty strong group of students.

Dr. Taj recognized the resilience of a community that surpasses its numerical representation. Despite being a minority on campus, Black students have developed a close-knit community founded on mutual support and care.

Participants frequently described their community in terms of its resilience. Clayton, a 3rd-year biology major, shared how the size and strength of the community allowed students to quickly become familiar with one another. He stated:

> I would describe it as it's realistically pretty big but also small at the same time. It's small but strong if that makes sense because it's not the most overwhelming amount of people or anything, but the people who do show up, everyone usually knows at least of each other if they don't know each other.

Zee, a 2nd-year public health major and cultural chair of BSU, described the Black community as "very active" and "very together." She added communication was crucial for bringing everyone together, saying, "We talk a lot. So everybody knows everybody. There's always something going on, which can be a lot, but we're very connected." Echoing this sentiment, Darwin, who recently graduated with a degree in business administration, described the Black community as "tight-knit, not as clique-y, steadfast, gritty." He said despite challenges from racial incidents or effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, "I've never seen the community waver, only get stronger." Darwin went on to share about the community's relative size and the BRC's role in bringing students together. He said:

> Given the population size, it's inherent that it'd be real tight-knit . . . with such a low number of people in that group, I believe that many of the Black community were a lot more open-minded than I may have expected. They were a lot more welcoming, and having the BRC, I think, as a safe space, a central hub for all the students we're here to learn and here to grow in their own culture or self-worth, I think it was a massive tool to cultivating that community.

Kirk, a graduating journalism and media studies major, grew up in primarily Black neighborhoods in the Midwest between Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Chicago, Illinois. Kirk described his transition to SSU during his freshman year of high school as a "big culture shock for me." Kirk's collegiate aspirations were mainly focused on playing Division I basketball. When that did not work out, he applied to two schools: Morehouse, a private all-male HBCU, and SSU. Although he ultimately chose SSU for financial reasons, Kirk was pleasantly surprised with the vibrant Black community he found on campus. He said:

> I love the Black community at Sunnyside State. I feel like the black community is really what made my experience here. Not saying it is anything like an HBCU; I have no idea if there's anything like it, but it just feels like there are way more Black people on our campus than there actually are. If you look at the numbers, what is it? 4%? But it feels like 20, 30% because that's how much of an impact we have on the campus, how much we show out, how much we support each other, and all the different events that go on, all the different orgs.

Kirk's experience highlighted the ability of the community to go beyond its numerical representation. Despite being only 4% of the campus, the Black student population at SSU has a deep sense of belonging and camaraderie, creating an environment that feels much larger and more impactful. Kirk's description highlights the community's influence in on-campus events, organizations, and mutual support, emphasizing its welcoming and family-like atmosphere. His narrative aligned with the broader consensus among community members that inclusivity and support play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging and kinship in the Black community at SSU.

Theme 2 - Hospitality and Support in SSU's Black Community

As students shared their perceptions of the Black community, they consistently recounted experiences of being embraced in a close-knit, familial atmosphere. This sense of hospitality held particular significance given the university's size. Many students, including Sasha, who recently graduated from SSU with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a single-subject teaching credential in science, initially described herself as introverted or shy upon arriving on campus. Hailing from a small city in central California, Sasha's decision to attend SSU could be best described as casual, having applied to the university along with three others after encouragement from a counselor. Being a twin, Sasha felt the impact of separation from her sister and family for the first time, which added to her initial feelings of being overwhelmed upon arrival at SSU. Reflecting on her early experiences, Sasha recalled:

> That was definitely my first experience. I know at first I kind of was quieter and shied away, but they would continue to welcome me in, make sure when they saw me on campus, they're going to give me a hug and say, hi, I was that person. Okay, I'm going to act like I didn't see you, but they're going to get your attention and be like, Hey, how's it going? So welcoming is definitely the best word that I can say.

Despite her initial hesitance to engage in larger settings, members of the Black community consistently extended invitations to Sasha for events and gatherings, ensuring she felt valued and accepted regardless of her attendance. Over time, Sasha became deeply involved in the Black campus community, serving as a graduate assistant in the BRC and holding leadership roles in several student organizations, including a Black sorority, the Black students in science organization, and BSU. Her initial reservations were quickly dispelled as she formed meaningful connections with fellow community members. During her time at SSU, including her credential

program, Sasha found a supportive network with mentors, peers, and faculty members who bolstered her throughout her academic journey. She reflected:

> Throughout my 4 years, 5, including my credential program, I always had a community, so I never was overwhelmed going forward. I knew I had people that had my back that I could talk to . . . so I feel like I built a good community that held me down and just kept me going that whole time.

Sasha's story highlighted the significant impact of a welcoming and supportive community in facilitating her transition to college life and fostering her academic and personal growth throughout her time at SSU.

Darwin and Nate, both San Diego natives who attended the same high school, shared similar narratives about feeling shy upon arriving on campus. When asked about his experience of being part of the Black community, Darwin expressed:

> It means a lot, man. Again, I'm very introverted, but having a mother who's in Greek life and well connected, and me having the opposite personality, was actually one of the reasons I didn't want to go to Sunnyside State.

However, Darwin quickly recognized the value of connecting with peers, faculty, and staff, crediting them with helping him mature and develop professionally. He elaborated,

> Once I got there, I understood what kind of position I was in and the benefit of networking and being together, not apart. So it taught me a lot . . . my line brothers, who I still live with right now, yesterday we made a joke about my character development. Whether it was any of the teachers, Dr. Tokumbo, he set me straight my 1st year or Dr. Carol Hart, whenever I would see her, I know her in my personal life, they're making sure I get to the BRC.

Similarly, Nate, who recently graduated with a degree in finance, shared he initially struggled acclimating to the Black community due to his introversion. He explained:

> For me, it was kind of tough for me at first getting, I guess you could say acclimated to that kind of community. It's not necessarily something where I was like, okay, I don't want to be there, but I want to be there. But I just kind of didn't really know how I wanted to navigate that or how I was really trying to get in there. Once again, I was kind of shy my first couple years, so it was hard for me to get into that.

Despite these challenges, Nate gradually found his way into Black spaces on campus. He enrolled in a 2nd-year class called Henrietta Goodwin Scholars (HGS), or HGS 2.0, offered through the BRC during the COVID-19 global pandemic shutdown despite the classes being conducted online. Nate shared:

> Even though I was super nervous in that class, even though it was online, it was just one of those things, I'm like, okay, everybody's got something to say. Everybody's got something going on. But that was my first spot where I'm like, okay, I can get into HGS 2.0 being there. And I met some people during that time, which was good.

As campus activities resumed, Nate eventually attended an event at the BRC hosted by one of the Black fraternities, where he was welcomed with open arms. He recalled:

> Going in at first, I was nervous. I walked in and I'm looking around and I'm just seeing everybody smiling. "Oh, do you want some pizza?" And I was like, "Sure, I'll take it." It was a little bit of breaking the ice. It was my way of getting in there. I felt like, okay, this is a good vibe to be in.

This experience opened doors for Nate to explore various spaces in the Black community, including joining a Black fraternity and serving on the executive board for several Black student

organizations such as SAAB and NSBE. Reflecting on how these experiences shaped his early professional career, Nate shared:

> Learning those things in college helps because I'll say, going into my job now, I was actually a personality hire . . . I went from being a shy person to winning the funniest person at the Black resource center, senior year. So with that I was able to go into my interview with confidence because I'm like, I know about myself and I know what I do, what I've done, and how that could actually contribute.

Participants consistently expressed feeling intimidated by the campus size and described themselves as shy or introverted upon arrival. However, those who had already found a sense of belonging in the Black community tried to assist their peers in transitioning and getting involved. Zee, for example, shared her strategy for helping shy mentees acclimate by accompanying them to events and introducing them to others to initiate connections. She explained:

> I have mentees who grew up where they were the only Black person in the whole entire school or the entire class . . . and it might be intimidating. I've helped bring them out, those people who really struggle with being outgoing . . . so for me personally, I invite people to hang out with me as a person. So they see me, those little elements and I also stick with them too . . . . It kind of lets them see it's possible and then they go and branch out. That's usually how it's worked out for people around me.

Black students at SSU encounter a Black campus community that actively encourages them to step out of their comfort zones. Whether it was through programs organized by the BRC or individuals reaching out to new students, there was a deliberate effort to assist students in adapting to their new surroundings. As I elaborate upon shortly, this mindset was essential for students who perceived the Black campus community as an extension of their family.

Theme 3 - Community as Family

The welcoming and inclusive community fostered by Black students through persistent outreach played a pivotal role in cultivating a family-like atmosphere for students on campus. For some, initial hesitancy swiftly dissipated upon engaging in various Black spaces. Hakeem, a 3rd-year computer engineering student from Kalamazoo, Michigan, grew up in an Adventist household and attended boarding schools after his parents immigrated from Zimbabwe. Although the expectation was for him to attend an Adventist college, Hakeem sought a different experience. Discussing his college options, Hakeem shared, "I just wanted to experience a whole new atmosphere, which obviously Michigan's a lot different from California. And that was really the main thing that made me choose SSU." Initially shy and skeptical about how he would be received in California, Hakeem's perspective shifted after meeting his roommates and other classmates on the Black excellence floor, a section of a dorm reserved for incoming Black 1st-year students, and attending a party hosted by a Black fraternity. Reflecting on his first college party experience, Hakeem recalled:

> I've never been to a college party at this point in my life . . . and so everybody knew about the party and we was like, okay, so we going to go to the party or what? . . . . The party started around nine and we got there at eight. I'm not going to lie to you, it was early. And so we get there and it's like, oh, no one's there, obviously no one's there. It's just us. The people we came with. And it was . . . three people [members of the fraternity] I remember specifically . . . and we in the corner of the house by ourselves, it's our little group and they come up and just start talking to us being really cool. I'm like, okay, cool. They seem pretty cool. And we just started talking. Next thing it seems like 20 minutes

> later, party jumping . . . and I'm like, oh wow! So, this is college? Okay, I'm really in college now what's going on for real? This is crazy.

These initial experiences in the Black community helped Hakeem feel more at ease as he navigated his early days on campus. Subsequently, during his 2nd year, Hakeem became involved in several Black student organizations, including SAAB and NSBE. By his 3rd year, he was even more committed to community engagement. He expressed:

> I feel, for me, I'm stepping up right now. I know the past 2 years obviously I was also in school . . . but I'll be like, at that point I wasn't really giving my all to the black community. Now, I know what I have to do. I'm already a part of all this. I just have to give my best in everything that I have to do and it's a responsibility that I want to give back. And I guess also just something that I feel like I have the conviction to do.

Hakeem highlighted how the BRC and Black student organizations contributed to the close-knit family atmosphere. He said, "I feel like it has helped the Black community become really close and really just feel like more of a family, if that makes sense."

Silas, who had recently graduated with a degree in interdisciplinary studies, shared similar experiences of how the connections he made through Black communal spaces created a family environment. Silas shared, "How I think of the Black community all the time is a high school family in a way . . . . Not everybody is as close as a family per se, but the Black community is very close in that sense." In the Black campus family, connections lead to mentorship and resources that helped students navigate their social and academic life. Silas went on to share:

> Let's say there was a class that I needed to take and I needed to reach out to see which professor was better, which one I should take, which one is more likely to work with my

> learning style. It wouldn't be hard if I go to the BRC and just ask, "Hey, do you know who took this class?" That was an easy resource for me to find out that type of stuff.

Engaging in various Black spaces such as the BRC and BSU fostered connections that enabled students to develop crucial social capital, aiding them in navigating the campus more effectively (Hypolite, 2022b).

The familial aspect of the Black campus community, cocreated by Black students and Black spaces, significantly contributed to Black students' social and academic development. Lawry, a 4th-year marine biology major with a minor in African studies, was a notable example of the profound individual growth facilitated by this positive environment. Standing at about 6'2" with an athletic build and an almond brown complexion, Lawry illustrated vividly how the Black community's welcoming atmosphere impacted his journey. Reflecting on his decision to attend SSU, Lawry emphasized the pivotal role of the BRC in actively recruiting him to campus, noting:

> They actually reached out to me right after I got accepted and was like, "We want you in our Black community. We want you to be here at SSU. We feel like you could be a great leader." All those things, really just selling that point that "our Black community is here for you." And that was the selling point that got me. So that's kind of why I chose SSU, for the Black community.

The BRC, as I detail more comprehensively later, has played a significant role in recruiting Black students to campus. Since his arrival, Lawry had been purposeful in his engagement with the Black campus community, particularly after the events of the George Floyd during Summer 2020. He expressed a deep commitment to contributing to a vibrant Black community in college, contrasting his high school experience in a predominantly white setting, and noting:

> I really wanted to be more involved within a Black community. I was in BSU in high school, president, all that good stuff, but it was a predominantly white school and there was only so many of us, and it wasn't my highest priority where it was after coming out of 2020 with George Floyd and all that, it really became my new purpose.

Describing the community dynamics, Lawry emphasized its cohesive and supportive nature:

> It's a very tight-knit family. That's honestly the best way to put it. Everyone is there to see each other win, see each other be successful, see each other graduate, and do what they need to do to get to where they want to be in life. So I think that as a community, we are very driven.

Lawry's extensive involvement in various leadership roles, including treasurer and president of BSU, mentor through the BRC, and fraternity secretary, underscored his commitment to serving and uplifting the Black community. He credited these engagements for his professional and leadership development, highlighting the confidence and skills gained through these experiences:

> I've been able to grow a lot more professionally . . . the fraternity has been able to help me grow professionally in the professional landscape as well as being a leader on campus within that organization . . . anytime I go into an interview, I know I can get it, you know what I mean? I know I can do what I need to do in that interview.

Lawry's journey exemplified the transformative impact of the supportive and empowering environment fostered by the Black campus community at SSU. As intimidated students arrived on campus, they found solace and connection in the Black community, facilitated by spaces like the BRC and Black student organizations. This supportive ethos encourages personal growth and fosters a sense of belonging for Black students at SSU.

Participants in this study demonstrated a genuine commitment to fostering a positive environment and reciprocating the support they received from the community. However, not all Black students actively seek or can connect with the Black campus community. Among those who were deeply involved, there was a discussion about defining who qualifies as a member of the Black community.

Theme 4 - Engagement and Participation In the Black Community

> Whoever's going to events and actively participating in community building activities, I count as Black community people.
>
> —Huey

Student participants in the study provided insights into the definition of membership in the Black community, highlighting varying levels of engagement. This ranged from active participation in events and organizations to more passive involvement, reflecting the diverse ways individuals connect and contribute to the community. Quinn, a 3rd-year psychology student from the Bay area, held the position of treasurer for BSU at the time of the study. Quinn underscored the significance of the BRC as the central hub for Black activities on campus:

> When I think of the Black community, I think of the Black students that I see at all the BRC stuff, and it's like you see, you could see 'em across campus, and it's a familiar face. You're comfortable with 'em, you say what's up to 'em and all that.

Membership in the Black community revolved around participation in spaces and activities tailored to Black students' interests. Quinn delineated two categories of community members: (a) active and (b) inactive. Active members engaged in Black student organizations and attended related events. She said, "I feel like there's active members and there's inactive members. Active members are people that the way I envision is that go to stuff that people recognize because they

go to stuff, not just who they are." Richard, a 2nd-year public health major with a minor in Africana studies, shared Quinn's perspective on the inclusivity of all Black students in the community, while distinguishing between active and passive participation. He shared:

> I don't think there's anything that excludes someone as being a member. It's more the categorization of active and passive members of the community. For me, except, I mean there are some people that are outliers, but it doesn't exclude them as being part of the community, even if I never see them, it's just more so like what do they do?

Richard elaborated on his distinction between active and passive members, noting:

> Community people show up to different events or make their own events. Those are people I consider to be active participants and leaders in the community. And for me, passive might be like you show up to a party or something every once in a while.

According to Richard and Quinn, active members are those engaged in Black student organizations and the BRC and attend Black events. Passive members are welcomed and encouraged to participate but are not highly involved in the community. Richard described the community as welcoming, yet he acknowledged for large organizations such as BSU that are highly social; he understood why those who were more introverted may not get involved and can seem daunting to some, explaining:

> I feel like the Black community as a whole, every Black student is in the community, but say every Black student was in an area at the same time, I would say the majority of them would group together just because they know each other. And that part that is grouped together is the part that is at the BRC stuff. So all those people that aren't grouped together or they're still part of the Black community, it's just people don't know so they're less inclined or it is less likely for them to feel the support and love that the

> people in that group feel. So I'm not going to say they're not in the Black community, but they're for sure just they don't have the same connection or relationship with the other people within the Black community.

Those who do not engage in the Black community may have different perceptions of the campus climate and experiences. Various factors may contribute to a Black student's lack of connection to Black spaces. One reason may be the marketing and recruitment of potential Black students rely heavily on outreach efforts by the BRC staff and Black student organizations.

Huey, a 4th-year finance major with minors in Africana studies and Spanish, expressed his perspective on the criteria for membership in the Black campus community, noting:

> What I consider the Black community are the people that come to whatever events we have. Because, within all the organizations, there are events every week. So whoever's pulling up to the events, whether, say, no one pulls up to our fraternity events, but someone goes to Black business society events, that's the Black community still. Whoever's going to events and actively participating in community building activities, I count as Black community people . . . . So I think whoever just hangs around the Black spaces on campus counts as the Black community in my opinion.

Huey explained a Black community member is actively involved in community-building activities and attends events in the Black community. This definition encompasses students who frequent Black spaces on campus and engage with the Black community. Zee echoed Huey's sentiment that attending events, a lot of which take place at the BRC, determines membership in the Black community, stating:

> Our community, I can say that if you're more involved, that's who people really consider the community. So you have to be in the BRC lot, you have to come to some of the events . . . . That's our community.

Building a strong community at a large institution with a small Black population can be difficult. The Black community at SSU relied on consistent student engagement to maintain its vibrancy. Rel, who previously served on the BSU executive board, pointed out this community's dynamic nature depended on active participation from various stakeholders, noting:

> It is really just the main people that's active. It's a lot of people that are active that come and go. It is main characters and then people that just come in and out as they please or when they can.

Rel emphasized the importance of community outreach and ensuring students are aware of available offerings, adding:

> I feel like we do a good job of recruiting Black people into the space or just talking to people . . . when I hear people say, "I didn't know about this, [event]," I feel like you didn't want to know because its literally out in the open. We have a BRC house; it's close to campus, we shared it on the IG [Instagram] page. We do a lot of things to where it's like, you could definitely see us here and there. So to say you don't know about it in general. It's kind of like, I don't know. But definitely, when I see Black people, I don't know, I'm just like, "Bro, why don't I know you? Who are you? What's up?"

Rel's narrative brought to the forefront challenges associated with getting students to engage in the Black community. As he explained, active members of the Black community go create and promote various events happening on campus. However, as Clayton suggested, there are still

Black students who were not aware of the Black spaces available to them on campus. These issues will be discussed in greater detail later. Clayton shared:

> I for sure met a lot of people who are Black students here, but they don't know about the BRC, and a lot of stuff happening on campus. So a lot of times from them I hear 'I don't have nothing to do, nothing's happening, campus doesn't have anything,' and stuff like that. I feel like if they came out to more events then they would have a way better time.

Ty, who recently graduated from SSU with a degree in psychology and a minor in Africana studies, was since pursuing a graduate degree in the school counseling master's program. Originally from the suburbs of Fresno, Ty was actively involved in BSU, SAAB, the BRC, and his fraternity during his undergraduate years. In our interview, Ty spoke at length and extensively about his understanding of what it truly means to be a member of the Black campus community. According to Ty:

> Especially at a predominantly white institution, I feel like how much someone feels like they're a part of the Black community depends on how involved they actually get into the community. And how involved they get into the community is how people see themselves as part of the Black community as well.

For Ty, being around other Black people in Black spaces was critical for feeling connected to the Black community. He shared:

> Not everyone feels like they're a part of the Black community when you're there. And sometimes I don't feel part of the Black community. It's all about how involved you are and how you feel and how who you talk to. . . . People that go to the BRC really feel part of the Black community because they're around Black people, talk to Black people, see Black people, they hear from Black people and hear different people's experiences and

> they're all different, but they're all similar too. So they feel really part of the Black community.

However, the size of the campus and the students' nervousness level affected their sense of connection to the community. Ty shared his initial experience on campus and how it impacted his feelings, stating:

> Well, my freshman year, it took me a second to get the nerves up, start to get myself out there. So I just hung out with the people that I was around already. So I didn't feel part of the Black community that much until I would go around a [student] club every once in a while and then I start to get that experience where I see other people, I hear other people and we start to actually build connections. And so in those spaces I feel like I'm part of the Black community and then I leave and I don't ever see us sometimes because I'm still at a white institution. And so I don't feel a part of the Black community again until I see one of my brothers and sisters walking across the hall and I see them, and I'm like "oh snap," I feel part of Black community a little bit.

Ty's statements reflected the dialectical relationship between engaging in Black spaces and feeling a sense of belonging in the community. Although some students may initially have found SSU to be an overwhelming environment, leading to hesitancy in participating in social activities or spaces, Ty's observations suggested increased engagement in activities and spaces designed for Black students fostered a stronger connection to both the people and the environments. Through active involvement in these spaces, students not only perceived themselves as part of a larger, more cohesive community but were also perceived as such by others.

Black undergraduate students at SSU defined their campus community by describing its dynamics and outlining criteria for membership. Although it is a small community, it was

characterized by its self-sufficiency and goal to provide a welcoming environment to all Black students. Those actively engaging in activities uplifting the Black community were considered members; however, the environment that had been cultivated was supportive and welcoming to all who wish to participate.

Research Question 2 - Mapping the Black Campus Community at SSU

This project's primary objective was to comprehensively depict the Black campus community in a specific PWI. Research Question 2 of this study asked: What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI? Answering this question involved identifying essential stakeholders, organizations, and places that underpin the support structure for the Black community while also scrutinizing the challenges in nurturing a cohesive sense of community. The following section details three primary spaces that serve as the structure for the Black community at SSU: intellectual spaces, physical spaces, and communal spaces. I describe each space comprehensively, emphasizing its distinctive features and how it contributes to the research question concerning the fundamental structures and processes that support and sustain the Black campus community.

Intellectual Black Spaces

Intellectual Black spaces encompass courses in the Africana studies department (AFRAS) and the HGS program provided by the BRC. In the subsequent section, I outline crucial features of each intellectual environment and reflect on insights gained from participant interviews and my observations in these spaces.

Significance and Support of Africana Studies

The AFRAS department at SSU has played an integral role in grounding the Black campus community in a deep understanding of and commitment to the study and liberation of

Black people across the African diaspora. Since its inception over 50 years ago, the department, which offers a major and two minors, has aimed to strengthen links between Black students and the community while fostering frameworks for social change.

Dr. Gracie, Director of the BRC, emphasized the importance and impact of a strong AFRAS program for the Black community. He noted a long line of notable scholars and political activists who had chaired the department, stating their leadership had created “a very strong Black community that is supportive of the students,” which “allows [students] to have a really strong foundation to move forward with.”

According to Dr. Taj, an assistant professor in the AFRAS department:

> I mean, historically, it’s [the AFRAS department] been a center for Black students to come and not only voice their concerns or to try to figure out how to rally around particular issues, but to find safe space for themselves.

Dr. Taj’s statement underscored the importance of the AFRAS department in serving as a backbone of the Black campus community.

Fostering Academic Involvement and Peer Relationships. Throughout my interviews, students highlighted shared reasons for taking AFRAS classes or adding them as a major or minor. One reason was engaging with Black peers in an intellectual pace designed for Black education and exploration. Drew, who recently graduated from SSU with a psychology degree and AFRAS minor, stated, “I took the Africana studies classes because I knew there would be other people who want to learn more about themselves in those classes with me.” In AFRAS classes, Drew sought an intellectual space to connect with other Black students and learn more about his culture.

Huey's response to why he chose the AFRAS minor mirrored Drew's. Huey shared, "I chose the minor because I liked taking Africana studies classes." Huey took advantage of the ability to take AFRAS classes to fulfill general education requirements, adding, "So instead of RWS, I took AFRAS. Instead of oral communication, I took AFRAS. By the time I even chose my minor, I was already 75% done." For Huey, a 4th-year finance major who identified as biracial, learning more about his culture was crucial for developing a Black-centric identity. Growing up in a primarily white environment, Huey said he suffered from "identity issues'' during high school.

However, in his AFRAS classes, Huey described his relationship to the course content and other Black students, stating, "The Black kids in AFRAS classes either sit together, talk together or if we're not, we'll look at each other whenever someone says something interesting like 'You heard what he said?'" Building on the foundation gained from his Black father, who was sure to read him books and teach him about Black history, culture, and social ills, according to Huey, taking AFRAS classes helped to develop a sense of radical Black '"consciousness' for [himself] and Black classmates."

Lawry, a 4th-year biology major with a minor in AFRAS, discussed the stark differences between his AFRAS classes and his science, technology, engineering, and math classes. During his 2nd semester on campus, which was impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic, Lawry opted to take AFRAS classes to get a different perspective. He explained:

> Until I started taking more AFRAS classes that 1st year, that's when I started to really get that different type of experience. I really got to start learning from a Black educator. Being in a class with other Black students.

That experience allowed him to connect with classmates more easily; as he stated:

> It was easier to connect with everyone in my Black classes compared to my other classes. I didn't feel as comfortable trying to connect with them or truly reach out and make those study groups. Whereas in my Black classes, it was much easier. We were like, all right, this is what we got to do. It was just easier to move forward and really help each other academically.

Through AFRAS classes, students like Lawry were able to cultivate a sense of community in an environment that stimulated cultural discovery and connections.

Support and Impact of Faculty and Staff in Black Academic Spaces. Several students shared their experiences and the impact of receiving a Black-centric education taught by Black faculty. Huey had positive experiences with his AFRAS professors. When asked to describe the difference between his AFRAS and other classes, he said, "I would say the biggest difference is the professors for sure." Huey mentioned a specific professor he was able to develop a relationship with. He shared:

> I know one teacher, I walk in the class and I give her knuckles every class, boom. "Hey Dr. Perry," boom, knuckles. Good vibes. For my finance classes, I walk in, go straight to my seat, sit down, pull my stuff out, and that's it.

Because of this relationship, Huey felt more comfortable to ask questions and seek help in class, explaining:

> In AFRAS, I can ask for help because like I said, the comfortability is there. Not like she's my friend, she's still my teacher. But it's just more like, "Hey professor, what do you think about this? What do you think about that?" But when it's my other teachers, I'm actually scared to go ask for help.

The positive environment created by Black professors in the AFRAS classes has made students more vulnerable to seeking assistance when they might not be inclined to otherwise. Earlier in our conversation, Lawry shared his concerns about the lack of visibility for Black students and faculty on campus. When I asked him how the lack of representation impacted the Black student experience, Lawry stated, “I think it makes the comfortability level go down completely. I feel like students don’t feel like they have anyone in our corner necessarily to advocate for us.” For Lawry, having the support of Black faculty is a critical element of success for Black students. He said:

> I think it can make or break a lot of students’ academic careers where certain Black faculty and staff will be making sure that they’re not dropping out, they’re not failing classes, they’re on top of their stuff. They’re making sure they have the right resources to take the right classes at the right time to make sure everything’s set up to be successful.

In this way, Black faculty act as a layer of academic support, nurturing the development of Black students and ensuring their continued success at the institution. Students also shared Black faculty’s impact outside of the AFRAS department. Black faculty also played a central role in supporting Black students and building community through service to organizations.

Sasha, whose degree in interdisciplinary studies prepared her for her job as a 10th-grade science teacher, expressed gratitude for the role her advisor played in the BSSO. She shared:

> I would say with Dr. Martin, she was our advisor for Black students in science organization. She made sure to tell us, “Hey, you guys, I have your back in STEM, so if you need anything, talk to me here.” Sometimes it’s a long wait to talk to advisors, but she’s like, “just talk to me.”

Sasha shared how Dr. Martin would host potlucks for students at her home. According to Sasha, these potluck dinners "gave it a more homey feeling and allowed [them] to bond in a different way that didn't just involve strictly academics or service in the organization." Through this intentional cultivation of community outside the confines of the classroom, this faculty advisor was able to support Black students in an academic discipline with few Black students.

The impact of Black faculty on the Black campus community cannot be understated. Another recent grad, Ty, who earned his degree in psychology with a minor in AFRAS, emphasized the role Black faculty and Black-centered pedagogical practices played for the Black community. As Ty shared, Black faculty may not even be aware of the impact they have on Black students. He explained:

> I truly don't think the professors realize that they're part of the Black community. . . . I was an Africana Studies minor, so I took a lot of Africana Studies classes and the professors added to my experience so much.

Ty gave a specific example from an experience in class that shifted his perspective, noting:

> What added to my experience is my [Black] critical theories class where we read a book, and I hate reading books, but I read this one cover to cover. We talked about all the different complexities of it and we talk about how you could use it to hate, but we're using it to love and how you can use it to love and what you can notice, what you could understand just so you can protect yourself and be safe and still love, but be safe. I learned how to be Black in my classes from my professors because they were just teaching about our experience and what it means being Black.

Like other students, Ty expressed how being in a Black intellectual space helped strengthen his Black identity. As the next narrative indicates, I, too, for the first time,

experienced the impact of what it meant to be in a Black intellectual space on a PWI. I arrived early to the upper division Black Urban Experience course and found a seat in the back corner of the room near three Black women, two of them with medium-length braids and brown skin, one with strong and rich East African cheeks, eyes, and lips. They appeared to be engaged in friendly conversation, which continued in some fashion throughout the duration of the class. I noted the lack of Black faces in the classroom. Out of approximately 29 students, only 13 of them appeared to be Black. The atmosphere, however, was more than just a numerical representation; it pulsated with the rhythms of Black culture.

Dr. Matsemala strode into the classroom wearing a black Lakers fitted cap with a long-sleeve black shirt featuring bold white font reading “Black Power Matters.” His signature Jordan sneakers, yellow and black, reflected his enduring love for Black culture, evident despite the graying beard on his rich chocolate skin. Standing 6’2” and weighing 275 pounds, the former college football lineman commanded an immediate presence in the classroom, unlike I had experienced previously.

I have known Dr. Matsemala since I was 18 through our fraternity. During that day’s lecture on the emergence of cold jazz, aka “West Coast sound,” the proud Long Beach native seamlessly blended old-school and contemporary Black media, music, and film, drawing from his research to explore the role of Black music in the Watts rebellion and the antiapartheid movement of the 1960s. Dr. Matsemala used humor, hip-hip references, and personal anecdotes to bring the subject matter alive and navigate interactions with students. At the front of the class, two older Black women students, including Patrice, engaged actively. Patrice, aged 52, humorously explained her use of a large, ornate fan due to hot flashes when playfully questioned by Dr. Matsemala. Throughout the class, she took on a vocal leadership role, posing questions

about the final project and reminding a late-arriving white male student who had not attended classes regularly of essential information.

In the middle of the class, a Latinx male student demonstrated active engagement, comfortably attired in a blue and black, long-sleeve, flannel tee. He laughed at Dr. Matsemala's cultural references and even contributed gossip to a conversation, speculating on the sexual preferences of hip-hop stars Drake and Lil Baby. Considering the course's focus on general education in cultural diversity, I pondered the genuine interest of non-Black students, such as the Latinx male student, in the discussed topics. Additionally, I questioned the interests of the Black students in the class. I also noticed the Black male students remained silent throughout the class, and the three Black women in the back row engaged in quiet conversations and phone use during the lecture. I also overheard one young Black woman in the back of the class express feeling "constantly lost" when Dr. Matsemala was discussing "Menace 2 Society" and "Boyz n the Hood."

Despite my previous observations, I was struck when Dr. Matsemala started discussing the topic of Black spatial imaginaries and the contrasts between Black and white spaces. At that moment, I could not help but imagine what impact it would have had on me as an undergraduate if I had been exposed to these concepts by a professor who looked like Dr. Matsemala, someone whose image reflected my own. In this snapshot of a single lecture, the classroom emerged as a dynamic space in terms of demographics and the interplay between the professor, students, and their engagement with the course material. It provided an example of how the classroom space, through intentional pedagogical practices, could be transformed into a site of cultural exploration for Black students.

HGS Class Historical Background and Program Development

The HGS program is the academic arm of the BRC and supports Black students in their transition through degree completion at SSU. Initially known as Harambe, HGS was established in 2019 and has since evolved into a comprehensive program to support Black students' academic and professional development. Named after the first Black graduate of SSU, the HGS program includes academic classes through the HGS 1.0 and HGS 2.0 (designated for 1st- and 2nd-year students, respectively) classes. HGS also includes an extensive peer mentoring program where Black students who have been through the program assist 1st- and 2nd-year students in their transition to college.

Rel, a 4th-year hospitality and tourism major who has served as a mentor in HGS, described the focus of HGS programming:

> HGS is focused on student and professional development. You're assigned mentors who check in with you throughout the school year and make sure you're on top of your schoolwork or if you need assistance. They are the people who connect you with these resources, getting you that assistance that you need . . . and just nurturing you through your freshman year.

Rel added in HGS 2.0, students "start to really hone in on career and professional development," and HGS 1.0 is focused on "making sure you're on top of your academic responsibilities and being involved in the community, knowing about all the stuff that's going on." HGS is led by faculty scholar, Dr. Maxine, who had worked in several roles and earned her doctoral degree from SSU.

Under the leadership of Dr. Maxine, the curriculum built on its strong foundation of peer mentorship and evolved to incorporate more academic rigor and intentionality. In her 2nd full

year as the faculty scholar, Dr. Maxine said she felt more comfortable in her role. Dr. Maxine leveraged her course design and curriculum development background to incorporate more academic rigor and intentionality over time. The semester this study was conducted, the class allowed students to research and present at the annual BRC research symposium. I visited the HGS class on a Friday, where students were working on their abstracts for the research symposium. Students worked in groups with support from their mentors to hone their research topics, which ranged from experiences with racism and oppression in predominantly white settings such as college or the entertainment industry to the historiography of the term "Black excellence" into 300-word abstracts. Dr. Gracie, Director of the BRC, explained how HGS was modeled after similar programs at HBCUs. She shared:

> I was pleasantly surprised as I looked into the Black Resource Center that they were endeavoring to do the same thing, provide career advising and support, but also, and most importantly, that degree pathway, but really thinking long-term career support. So it parallels what many of the HBCUs are doing.

Initially, HGS was only available for residents of the Black excellence floor, a 1st-year dorm reserved for incoming Black students. Dr. Maxine shared:

> The Black excellence floor only has 60 spots. So, at the time I came on, it was around 60, maybe a little bit under 60. And immediately, I went into planning. I was like, okay, first of all, we need a bigger reach. We need more students involved with HGS.

With the goal of increasing the program's reach and impact, efforts to recruit students into the HGS program have been successful, with record-breaking enrollment numbers. As Dr. Maxine explained, her proactive and intentional recruiting strategies have made a difference:

> I was able to connect directly with specialized recruitment and admissions. They tend to have the data set for all incoming Black and Latinx students. So, I was able to connect with someone from specialized recruitment. Between January and February, students have to commit and complete their intent to enroll in the university after they've been admitted. I immediately started reaching out to the students, "Hey, I'm Dr. Maxine. This is the HGS program; this is what it's about. We want you here."

Through a personalized approach, the program quickly expanded to 130 students, over half of the incoming Black freshman class. On a campus where it is difficult to find a critical mass of Black students in any space outside of the BRC, the HGS class acts as a transformative educational Black space, or as Dr. Maxine noted, "an all-Black class and all-Black experience."

Community Building and Sense of Belonging

HGS serves as a vital space for building community among Black students on campus. Students described the HGS classroom as a vibrant and supportive environment where they feel a sense of belonging and connection with their peers. The program fosters a strong community spirit through activities, mentorship, and cultural celebrations, contributing to a positive academic experience. As Dr. Maxine explained, the HGS class, through the BRC, allows students to connect with peers. She shared, "Having an actual program that allows students from different backgrounds and personalities, we have introverts and extroverts in the class. We can put all of them together and see them build community in HGS while also not feeling alone."

Students' perspectives on the HGS class were overwhelmingly positive. For example, Hakeem, a 3rd-year computer engineering student, expressed the HGS class was his entry point to the Black campus community, noting:

> I didn't really start getting involved with the Black community until the end of the 1st week because I was also in HGS, which was a Black freshman class. So I went to class seeing everybody, seeing some of the people from the party [the previous weekend], and I was surprised, "Oh shoot, they are in this class too?" We got to choose who we wanted our mentors to be. There was this guy named Isaiah, who was an engineering major, and he was the only engineering mentor. So I was like, oh, I'm going to pick him because he's kind of like me for real. I feel like he would know the most about how to help me or anyone else. So, he ended up becoming my mentor, and he really helped me a lot through freshman year.

Clayton, a 3rd-year biology student, shared a similar perspective about how the HGS class facilitates connections and community for Black students. When I asked him what advice he would give incoming students, Clayton said:

> I'd encourage them to actually go into HGS if they can . . . . You talk to people you may not talk to all week, and it's kind of just a good thing to really introduce you to the Black community as a whole.

These accounts underscored the significance of intentional programming and initiatives to foster connections and community among Black students. Programs such as HGS play a crucial role in supporting Black students' social and academic integration and enhancing their overall college experience by providing spaces for interaction, mentorship opportunities, and cultural affirmation.

HGS Classroom Experience and Vibe

The HGS classroom is characterized by its lively atmosphere, with music playing and engaging activities that blend academic learning with social interaction. As I stepped through the

door on that Friday, I was met with a sea of young, vibrant, Black faces, each with distinct color and hue. The room buzzed with lively conversations, creating an energy I had never felt before in an academic setting. Drake's music resonated through the stereo system as Dr. Maxine settled in. The class started with everyone rising and reciting the HGS affirmation, creating a sense of unity and shared purpose. What followed was an HGS Yes! session, reminiscent of the testimonies in Black churches, where students celebrated positive aspects of their lives encouraged by staff and peers.

Dr. Maxine blended academic and social elements in the class seamlessly. The students, organized into tribes, were working on abstracts for a university-wide research symposium in the spring. Dr. Maxine explained this tribal structure aimed to incorporate African culture and history into the classroom, fostering peer connections along the way. The engagement between the professors and Black students was evident, with the full-time BRC staff attending the class, emphasizing their investment in the course. Dr. Maxine's instruction style, infused with humor, charm, and cultural references, contributed to the positive atmosphere. The staff and mentors moved around the room, assisting, and conversing with the tribes.

As the class progressed, it was clear that the HGS space was not just about academics; it was a community. Students felt at ease, expressing themselves freely and embracing their cultural identities. The contrast with other spaces on campus was notable. HGS radiated a robust Black identity, not only in the number of Black faces but in the overall vibe, from the music to the emphasis on cultural elements.

I marveled at the profound significance of what spaces like the HGS class could mean for Black students on campus. HGS represented a transformative Black educational space beyond a conventional academic setting—a sanctuary where learning and liberation coexist. Here, cultural

identity was not merely acknowledged; it was fervently celebrated. The Black energy that filled the room was not a mere product of individual presence but a collective force, shaping a distinctive and empowering academic experience. In essence, HGS emerged as a transformational space where the pursuit of knowledge walked hand in hand with the journey toward liberation.

Summary of Intellectual Black Spaces

The HGS program at SSU graduated its first cohort of students in Spring 2023, achieving an impressive 95% graduation rate for its participants, as reported by Dr. Maxine. The AFRAS classes were crucial spaces for Black students to engage with their culture, history, and identity. These classes were highly appreciated by the students because of the quality of the curriculum, connection with faculty, and the sense of community they fostered. AFRAS courses provided a unique opportunity for Black students to learn from Black educators and connect with peers who shared similar experiences. In summary, the HGS program was a vital support system in nurturing the Black community in SSU's PWI context, offering academic support, mentorship, and a sense of belonging to Black students. This program's evolution and impact underscored the importance of creating Black-centered spaces on campus to facilitate student success and retention.

Physical Black Spaces

> The BRC focuses on and tries to improve the Black community as a whole outside of just school, by basically instilling things in us that we can take to other places, which I think is really important for us as a community
>
> —Kirk

The BRC emerged as the "central hub" for Black student life at the SSU through ethnographic data collection. The following section details the significance of physical spaces on campus, illustrating how they function as safe havens and centers for social and cultural activities in the Black campus community. The BRC is distinguished for its unique ability to provide a sense of safety, belonging, and community not replicated elsewhere on campus. Kirk, a 4th-year journalism and media studies major originally from the Midwest, underscored the scarcity of spaces that offer the same level. He shared:

> On a regular day-to-day basis, you can obviously just go to the library or other little hangout spots, but a real safe space where Black people feel 100% comfortable all the time? I don't think there's really anywhere else on campus that can give you that feeling, which I don't think is a bad thing either because I feel like we need that space that's by us for us, which the BRC is.

Kirk's statement emphasized two crucial points. First, on campus, there are limited physical spaces where Black students can socialize and feel comfortable without the white gaze. Second, due to this shortage of physical space, the BRC is the physical manifestation of the Black community on campus.

I asked each student participant a version of the following question: "Where do Black students feel comfortable hanging out on campus?" Repeatedly, the BRC came to the forefront as the only place on campus where Black students congregated in any significant number. In the following text, I discuss the BRC and its role in cultivating a sense of community for Black students on campus. Before that, I highlight two other physical spaces created for Black students: the Black excellence floor and the AFRAS collection in the library. The BRC, Black excellence floor, and AFRAS library collection were examples of institutional support for Black campus

spaces. Each space existed due to the university's financial support. However, I argue the BRC's success is due to the advocacy and maintenance of Black students. Historically, Black people have found ways to create communities that nurture their whole selves in less-than-hospitable environments by shaping their surroundings, physical spaces, and people (Hunter et al., 2016). In this tradition, turning spaces into places requires a deep love for Black culture and a desire to harness that love into a community. Black placemaking at SSU existed before the institutionalization of Black spaces. This Black space was known as Little Africa.

Embracing Informal Spaces: The Role of "Little Africa"

"Back in my day, we had 'Little Africa,'" I told Drew after he told me that the BRC was the only campus space where one could find Black students congregating in mass. Drew replied, "Yeah, I heard about that . . . . Back in the day, but that was before the BRC, though." I described the place Black students called home in my days on campus. Although "Little Africa" consisted of just two tables outside of the East Commons dining area, I explained:

> Everybody knew it was the spot. "Little Africa" wasn't just some made-up place. It was a physical space, and everybody knew where Little Africa was, and that was where Black folks congregated. So it's cool to see how it's evolved into an actual physical space.

Black spaces on PWIs do not merely exist. Instead, Black students intentionally make formal and informal spaces with the support of Black faculty and staff (Tichavakunda, 2021c). Some students recalled a time when Black student life at SSU revolved around "Little Africa." Sasha recalled her experience with "Little Africa" as a new student on campus, noting:

> I was so shy. That was the area. I'd be like, "Okay, do I want to go over here? I don't know if I want to." But it always drew you in because you could see them—Black people

> just talking, laughing, and having a good time—and, like I said, they were just kind of inviting you in and wanting to talk to you.

Even without a sanctioned physical space, Black students found ways to shape inviting community spaces for themselves on campus. When I asked Ty about “Little Africa,” he knew exactly what I was referring to. He said some students attempted to recreate it but were unsuccessful. When I asked him why they wanted a “Little Africa” when they already had a BRC, he explained “Little Africa” provided a place where Black individuals could express their identity in public, whereas the BRC was a place that facilitated accepted Blackness. He shared:

> That’s what I saw that was so beautiful about “Little Africa” that I didn’t get in my experience. I remember hearing about how, on Wednesdays, everyone would intentionally not schedule class at a certain period of time so that every single time during a certain period of time, everybody knows it. You’re Black, you get outside, you get in that area, and you kick it, you have a good time, you just talk. You can just be Black, and you don’t have to be Black in a little space. You don’t have to just be Black in an area that’s allotted to you. You could be Black outside. You could be Black for the world to see it. And you could be proudly Black there. You could be Black as hell.

For Ty, being Black in public spaces on campus was highly sanctioned and surveilled. Although the BRC provided a space for Black students to come together, Ty’s experience highlighted the importance of expressing oneself throughout the campus and not just in a particular space. East Commons, a casual dining venue for students and former home to “Little Africa,” has since been renamed Charles Bell Jr. Pavilion in honor of the esteemed mathematician and second Black professor at SSU. Dr. Maxine, who was a staff member and doctoral student when “Little Africa” was still present, recalled it as the place where Black

students used to hang out. However, since the opening of BRC, it had become the unifying force for the Black community. Dr. Maxine noted:

> Yes, we had "Little Africa," but now having an actual physical space really makes a difference . . . . The Black Resource Center really has provided a space for students to come together as a community but also find subcommunities within the communities.

Connections to the community and access to resources are important functions of the BRC. Ron, who earned his degree in statistics in Fall 2022, spoke about the significant impact his community connections had on him. During his time at SSU, Ron was actively involved in a Black fraternity, served as the treasurer for the SAAB, and mentored high school students as part of the BSU. He shared:

> My class was one of the last classes to know what "Little Africa" was . . . before the BRC, there was "Little Africa" and then with the transition to the BRC, it gives everyone, all the Black students more space to go and feel more welcome just seeing everyone. The BRC also has a lot of resources to help Black students and make them feel like they're at home. And that's the new "Little Africa," the new and improved "Little Africa" is the BRC.

Ron's story illustrated how establishing the BRC solidified the connections and resources that Black students had developed in informal settings before its opening. Ron later revealed the relationships he formed through his involvement with the BRC were invaluable when his father passed away suddenly in his 3rd year on campus. Describing the overwhelming support he received during this challenging time, Ron remarked:

> That's the reason why I feel so strongly about the SSU Black community. I know that as long as you put yourself in the community and put your effort out there and put yourself out there, you're going to find a real family on campus.

As I discussed previously and describe in more detail later, the family environment in the Black campus community at SSU is created collaboratively by Black students and supported by the efforts of Black faculty and staff. This supportive environment is fostered through physical spaces like the BRC, which is vital in providing a safe and inclusive space for the Black community on campus.

Africana Studies Library Collection and Black Excellence Floor

Students mentioned the Black excellence floor and AFRAS library collection as vital spaces in the Black community. Although serving specific purposes like housing and academic study, these spaces contributed to the broader ecosystem of Black spaces in the campus as they highlight a nuanced layer of accessibility and visibility.

The AFRAS collection is located on the library's third floor and occupies a corner, creating a distinct and inviting space. Three short book stacks, painted in vibrant red, stand tall, and though they are not yet half-full, they offer a carefully curated selection of literature. The area boasts around 20 student seating spaces, each conducive to focused, independent work. In addition, there are also more ornate seats in small groups adorned with African symbols etched into the wood, adding a unique touch to the ambiance. The center of the space is dominated by three long, high tables, each accommodating six seats. These tables feature depictions of Africa and are adorned with red, green, and black African symbols, providing an aesthetically pleasing and culturally rich environment. To complement the academic setting, three glass cases exhibit African art and artifacts, showcasing the cultural depth of the Africana studies collection. The

atmosphere is further enriched by a yellow wall adorned with various Black pictures and artifacts, creating a vibrant backdrop. Abundant natural light floods through the windows, illuminating the space and creating an inviting environment for study and reflection. The area seems purposefully designed for individual work, providing a serene atmosphere for concentration. The deliberate infusion of African symbols; the use of red, green, and black colors; and the prominent display of Black pictures and artifacts on the yellow wall collectively create an environment that resonates with Black identity. These design choices were not merely aesthetic; they represent a commitment to acknowledging and celebrating the diverse cultural heritage of the Black community.

Brothers separated by only 1 year, Quinn and Huey shared their thoughts on how the AFRAS studies collection was used by students. Quinn stated, “Our Sigma study jam is biweekly at the Africana studies section of the library.” Huey added, “We go there for study events as a chapter, even for the public ones.” Despite using the space for study sessions, both students question its vitality. Quinn shared:

> It’s not only for Black students, because it’s the library. You can’t really close that off. But it’s for sure a good-sized portion of the library . . . . I feel like not everyone knows about it, but the people that do know about it do hang out there. Not necessarily hang out, but go there to do homework and you just chill.

Huey echoed Quinn’s thoughts:

> It’s not like a safe space for Black people. It’s right in the open and right next to the public section. So even then, it’s not like a safe space. So the BRC is the only real space we have.

The AFRAS studies collection, as detailed by Quinn and Huey, is not entirely secluded for Black students, pointing to a balance between open educational resources and the need for safe, culturally specific spaces.

The Black excellence floor is located in south campus plaza, a new building development that includes a Trader Joe's and a short walk from the BRC. Faison, a 4th-year marketing major specializing in integrated communications from Sacramento, California, shared his reasons for choosing to live in the dorm reserved for 1st-year Black students:

> The name in itself intrigued me. The "Black excellence floor," they didn't just call it a "regular Black floor" or "African floor building." They named it Black excellence. That made me feel like they really care about Black people and look at us in that way. And on top of that is actually, I would say is one of the better housing options on campus.

Faison's perspective highlighted how affirming Black students by using positive descriptive language can affect their sense of belonging. Residing on a floor designated for "Black excellence" could inspire academic achievement. Rel, also a 4th-year student who attended primarily Black schools in South Los Angeles, stated he found comfort on the Black excellence floor, sharing:

> Yeah, that was a cool experience. That's where I met most of my fraternity brothers now. My line brothers, we all stayed on the same floor. There weren't a lot of guys, so we all meshed together. I'm still friends with the other guys that were on the floor too, and some of the women. We were all just out and about trying to figure out what college was about. So it was a good bond, a good vibe.

As Rel's experience indicated, the Black excellence floor provided students with a space to connect and form friend groups immediately with other Black students. These bonds were

essential considering campus shutdowns and social distancing measures due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

As I spoke to several students about their experiences on the Black excellence floor, some of them mentioned how excited Huey was on move-in day. Huey shared a room with Faison, and eventually, the two of them, along with Lawry and Faison, joined the same Black fraternity. Huey described the Black excellence floor as a "good transition" from his high school experience. For him, it was an opportunity to make immediate friendships with other Black students. Huey shared:

> Especially coming from a private high school with a lot of white people, being able to live on a Black floor surrounded by people that look like you and can share the same sort of cultural tendencies as you, and then being able to spend time with them and grow with them without having to be so extremely focused on school and still being able to explore the little fun parts of San Diego. I think that's why me, Rel, Faison, and Lawry are so close because we were able to hang out every day for an entire year. So it was cool.

Huey's experience highlighted the importance of the Black excellence floor as a space that helped students with similar cultural backgrounds to form lasting friendships and a sense of community. Having come from a predominantly white private high school, the floor provided him and others with a warm and welcoming environment where they could connect on a deeper level, share experiences, and explore their new surroundings.

The Black excellence floor represented a critical initiative in fostering an inclusive, supportive, and affirming environment for Black students. It not only aided students in their academic journey by providing a space where they felt valued and understood but also played a significant role in building solid and lasting friendships and community ties. This initiative

highlighted the importance of positive representation and the impact of dedicated spaces in enhancing students' college experience, contributing to their overall success and well-being.

The Black Resource Center

The BRC at SSU is a small, nondescript house just two blocks from the main campus's southern part. Nearby is the student health center, spanning nearly a whole campus block and various dining options, such as a Trader Joe's grocery store, and the fraternity row. The BRC is adjacent to other cultural centers like the women's resource center and pride center. As I entered the building, a student worker sitting at a large desk in the living room greeted me instantly. On that day, a few students lounged on sofas; two others chatted in the kitchen about upcoming homecoming events while heating pizza in the microwave. Around a dozen students studied or talked in pairs or groups outside on the nicely furnished outdoor patio furniture. The center gave off a distinct Black cultural feel when I walked in. The walls have affirmations from Black scholars painted on them, pictures of historical events and notable Black alumni from SSU, and a collection of books written by Black authors, ranging from Zora Neale Hurston to Manning Marble.

Sasha's face lit up as she talked about the BRC. The BRC was established during the 2nd semester of her sophomore year. She mentioned getting students to visit the BRC was initially difficult because of its location on the outskirts of campus. However, by the time she graduated, the BRC had become the center of everything related to Black culture and activities at SSU. She shared:

> It just gives us a space to just exist, which I feel like we were definitely lacking before that. We created our spaces a lot, "Little Africa," just all over in the cultural center, which was great, but this actually gave us a space that was really ours. We didn't have to create

> that. It was created for us, and now people just enter these spaces instead of having to create them. So I think it's great that now Black students can just enter this Black space instead of having to create it in different corners of SSU.

Sasha's perspective highlighted the significance of the BRC as a physical manifestation of institutionalized support for Black students. Before establishing the BRC, students had to engage in placemaking practices to socialize, share information, gather resources, and simply exist. But with the BRC in place, Black students could now focus on using the space's resources instead of having to create it themselves, thanks to the available support staff.

The BRC was established in 2018 following Black students, faculty, and staff advocacy efforts in response to the absence of safe gathering spaces for Black students. Some recently graduated students recalled the origins of the demand for the BRC's creation, stemming from an incident on campus where police officers physically mistreated a nonstudent Black man on campus premises. After its opening, the space quickly became vandalized with graffiti and broken windows, leading to student protests. As Ty recounted:

> We met at the BRC and made posters and signs. We gathered the whole community. We paraded down Campanile walkway, we chanted, we yelled, we screamed, we were heard. We went down to the most iconic spot on the end of Campanile walkway. And I had my brothers and my sisters who were up there talking about how much pain they feel. How they felt unseen, unheard, and unprotected they feel at a school that wants to take all money, every single chance they can get.

These statements indicated that Black students on campus still felt unsupported by the university despite the opening of the BRC. Even though the BRC was established to create a

supportive community, it would require continuous effort and care from Black students and staff to maintain it.

In its 5th year, Dr. Gracie, Director of the BRC, estimated the center receives approximately 400 visitors per week and around 8,000 annually, providing extensive programming and events for approximately 1,500 unique Black students. Dr. Gracie had served as Director of the BRC for the past 2 years and joined SSU as the faculty scholar for the BRC 4 years ago. With a diverse educational background, Dr. Gracie had attended, worked, and taught at various universities, including HBCUs and SSU, where he graduated with his master's degree. Trained as a school psychologist, Dr. Gracie shard he approaches his work holistically, serving the whole student. Viewing his position at SSU as a benefit due to the strong emphasis on academics in the BRC, Dr. Gracie described service as a faculty member as draining. Now, as an administrator at the BRC, he gets to "do Black stuff 24/7," and the university supports it. Dr. Gracie noted the BRC holds different meanings or purposes for each individual, including students and administrators. He emphasized, "What they think of the BRC depends on their experience; it means something different to everyone." Dr. Gracie pointed to the varying interests and interpretations of the BRC's purpose among students, administrators, donors, and other stakeholders, which can sometimes lead to conflicting views. Through data collection, my research showed the BRC serves three primary functions in the Black campus community:

- The BRC is more than a gathering space; it's a comforting sanctuary for self-expression and community support.
- The BRC supports Black students' academic success, primarily through the HGS program that I previously discussed and by providing educational support (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, resources).

- Through its physical space and academic programming, the BRC is a connector for Black students to find and build relationships with other students, organizations, faculty, and staff.

Home Away From Home. Black students repeatedly referred to the BRC using terms of endearment to describe its purpose and how it made them feel. Darwin described the BRC as the "central hub" for Black life on campus. He described the physical space as small, hot, with loud voices. Given his reserved nature, I joked that it did not seem like a space he would be comfortable in, and he laughed and agreed. Darwin shared:

> Well, it's a beacon, right? Whether you're religious or not, we have our history within the church and how we are as a community and tribe, and that was recreated after years of displacement at Sunnyside State within the Black community.

The displacement Darwin is referring to is the lack of formal gathering spaces for Black students. As previously discussed, Black students at SSU have a history of creating informal spaces for gathering and building community. This need for gathering exists for two primary reasons: (a) the low numbers of Black students compared to the large campus size and (b) Black students are targets of racial discrimination and microaggressions from white students and faculty.

Previously, I briefly mentioned the racialized events that led students to demand the creation of the BRC. Additionally, I explained how the BRC was vandalized shortly after it opened. Although the focus of this study does not center on racial discrimination, students emphasized the importance of BRC's existence and their involvement in the Black community, primarily due to the regular occurrences of racial assaults. Dr. Taj recalled incidents of racial discrimination on campus:

> The first was that I recall there were students at a football game who were shouting racist slurs at Black students, calling them niggers and some other things. And I can't remember the full context of it, but I know that that became an issue. And I think it got drowned out by, there was a faculty member in philosophy who used the N word, I think like 40 something times in the classroom.

Ty shared a similar story of verbal attacks on campus, noting:

> I remember outside the BRC in the parking lot. One of the girls got yelled at. Some white dude was driving past her and yelled "nigger" out of the window. She got her reaction on video. Her reaction literally broke every single one of us.

Dr. Gracie talked about how, despite increased security measures, including video cameras, the BRC continues to be a target of racialized violence. He shared:

> Every once in a while, I'll see eggs thrown at our place, trash thrown over the fence, and I even caught somebody urinating nearby the place. But it's a constant thing where you're visually aware, but it's also kind of, at least for me internally, it's part and parcel of being a Black person in a space that's not necessarily meant for me. And our students feel it and other folks feel it, but we are all very appreciative of any efforts to help make sure students are safe. And that's one of the primary things that our parents talk about when they're thinking about sending a student here.

The narratives provided underscore the prevalence and persistence of racialized attacks on the Black campus community. Black students' experiences with common occurrences of subtle or overt forms of discrimination and their response to create a counter or safe spaces have been well documented in the literature (Solórzano et al., 2000). I included these incidents to illustrate the importance of the BRC and its role in protecting and sustaining the community for

Black students. As such, the staff takes intentional measures to ensure students feel comfortable there. As previously mentioned, the BRC is a refashioned home. As Dr. Maxine described:

> The fact that it's a house. Okay. It's like, "Meet me at the crib." It's so cute. I love that. You may even have heard this in your data collection, but a lot of students call the BRC a "home away from home."

Students commonly referred to the BRC as a "home away from home." They described it as the main space for Black students on SSU's campus and the headquarters of the Black community. The BRC was also known as a safe space for Black students, providing comfort and inclusivity that may be lacking in other areas on campus. In Huey's words:

> It's like a home away from home. I'll say that. Especially with my schedule since I crossed [his fraternity] . . . my schedule has always been busy, and I couldn't go home in between classes. I would have class, meeting, meeting, meeting, class, job shift, class, homework, whatever. So going home, it just took away time. So I was able to go to the BRC and spend my whole day. I would leave campus, I would get to campus at 10 in the morning, and I wouldn't leave campus until 10 at night, and I'd be able to go to the BRC, print things, eat things, drink, do my homework there, whatever I needed, the BRC was able to offer me. So it's like a home away from home.

Huey expressed gratitude for the BRC, citing it as a place to settle, relax, handle business, and foster a sense of community. For Huey, the BRC was more than just a facility; it was an essential part of his daily life, especially after joining his fraternity, which made his schedule busier. The BRC offered him a place to stay from morning until night, where he could print documents, eat, drink, complete homework, and more. This made the BRC an invaluable

resource for him, allowing him to manage his hectic schedule without sacrificing his need for a supportive community environment. Drew shared similar ideas about the BRC, noting:

> The BRC, like I said, is a home away from home. It's a place you could go for good vibes, to get work done, to find out resources on campus, to get help with certain stuff, and to meet with other friends and be in a safe space.

Drew further explained:

> Not having as many Black faces on campus, I like to be somewhere where I'm most comfortable, where I could be fully myself, not have to worry about people looking at me crazy, weird. So I felt like that made the black resource center home for me.

This characterization of the BRC illustrated its importance as a physical space, community, and support network that enables Black students to thrive in an academic setting. Furthermore, Drew's narrative touched on the significance of the BRC in providing a sense of belonging and comfort amid a campus environment where Black students might otherwise feel outnumbered or out of place. He valued the BRC as a sanctuary where he can fully express himself without fearing judgment or misunderstanding. This highlighted the importance of having spaces that affirm and celebrate Black identity. Much like Huey's, Drew's account speaks to the broader issue of representation and inclusivity in the university. It emphasized the BRC's essential role in fostering a sense of community, belonging, and safety for Black students, allowing them to navigate the academic landscape while staying true to their identity.

Tina, a 3rd-year transfer student studying finance and a native of San Diego, chose SSU because of its esteemed business school and affordability over attending a HBCU. I first met Tina at the "Brother-to-Brother" and "Sister-to-Sister" events cohosted by the BRC, SAAB, and SAAS. We sat at the same table and spent a reasonable amount of time discussing our

educational experience and shared hometown identity. Tina, new to the campus, has already become very active. She had joined several academic and social organizations and was quickly becoming a part of the community. Before coming to SSU, Tina sought ways to connect with students and found the BRC. Before arriving on campus, she Googled "Black SSU" and discovered the BRC. Tina's own words highlighted the essential support provided by the BRC to Black students:

> So having the Black Resource Center honestly gives a lot of Black students, if they aren't in the sense of wanting to go home at a particular time or if they had something happen recently, they don't have anywhere to turn to. They have the staff within the BRC that they're able to just sit down and actually talk with; they have advisors. They've had so many opportunities that I didn't even know about because when I first went in there, I didn't even know where their living room was until I actually walked in and saw it. I was like, oh. I was like, this is nice. And then they had a media room, they had a backyard. I was like, this is something I've never seen before. So just knowing that black students at SSU had that safe space within the Black Resource Center, it was just something very beautiful to see.

This insight aligned with previous narratives about the BRC's impact, which goes beyond providing a physical space. It also served as a source of emotional and academic support, making it a "home away from home." Tina's account emphasized the BRC's role in providing a sense of security and belonging, particularly for those who may feel isolated or need support. Her story added a layer of appreciation for the physical and structural aspects of the BRC that facilitate community building and personal growth, thereby enriching the student experience at SSU.

BRCs' Active Engagement in Student Recruitment. The BRC plays a crucial role in recruiting Black students to SSU, creating a supportive community that begins before students set foot on campus. Through a combination of outreach initiatives, engagement in social platforms, and personalized invitations to join the Black community at SSU, the BRC and its affiliated students and staff actively work to ensure that incoming Black students feel welcomed and valued. Huey shared his experience of being recruited through social media and group chats designed explicitly for Black freshmen, highlighting the personal touch in outreach efforts:

> So SSU had a thing where when you got accepted into the school, there's an Instagram profile that was for Black freshmen. So I got posted on that page and then Joy, who's a Delta, and she graduated, reached out to me and said, "We have a Black group chat with freshmen, come join the GroupMe."

This direct engagement fostered a sense of belonging from the outset, connecting new students with peers and mentors who can guide them through their initial college experience. The significance of this early connection is further emphasized through events like the Harambe weekend, an overnight experience that introduces prospective students to the vibrant Black community at SSU. As Dr. Maxine shared:

> Harambe weekend . . . they stay overnight. Housing has a select area where, I mean, now it is blowup beds, but it's a whole slumber party. They love it . . . . Then the next morning it's breakfast. We have little programming, and then they go.

Through these immersive experiences, students gain a firsthand look at the supportive environment that awaits them, often serving as a decisive factor in their choice to attend SSU. Zee was sold on SSU during her visit during the Harambe weekend. She said she was attracted to

the Black community, seeing members of Black Greek and other organizations so active and welcoming. She shared:

> I felt the difference to me was the Black community. So I went to a event called Harambe Weekend. It was like a whole weekend. They have events planned out first. The BRC had hosted. I remember just seeing how friendly everybody was and how active the community was. The NPHC was really active. All of the programs they have, all the Black clubs and campus were really active. So I was like, okay, I can see myself here because I want to be involved anyway.

The outreach efforts extended beyond social gatherings to academic and cultural integration, as Zee noted upon discovering the HGS program through the BRC's digital platforms: "I found out on the BRC Instagram. They said they were opening up, had more open spots, and then I signed up over the Summer before I came." Zee's quote highlighted the BRC's effective use of digital platforms to promote its programs, illustrating a commitment to passive outreach and active recruitment and inclusion of Black students into its fold. Through such efforts, the BRC fostered a welcoming environment that encourages early engagement and participation, setting the stage for a supportive and inclusive college experience.

Enhancing Student Success Through Mentorship and Community Engagement. Operational data revealed the BRC's significant impact on the student community. The center's programs, particularly the HGS program, serve many incoming and second-year students, with a considerable portion residing on the Black Excellence floor. This programming supports approximately 100–150 entering and 50 second-year students annually, illustrating the BRC's vital role in Black students' academic and social integration into university life. As previously mentioned, students who completed the HGS program had a graduation rate of 95%.

A key element of HGS is the mentoring portion, which pairs upperclassmen with 1st- and 2nd-year students. Participants in this study spoke about their experiences as mentees and mentors in the program. Students' stories highlighted how HGS mentors are committed to supporting their mentees through community engagement, academic pursuits, and personal development.

As she settled on campus, Sasha's impact on the Black community through her involvement in various clubs and organizations highlighted the strength of the mentor program. Sasha served as a mentor for 2 years for the HGS program. Her goal as a mentor was to outdo her mentors and provide guidance for students she did not have when she began. Reflecting on the experience, Sasha shared a fondness for working with the younger cohort. She said, "I particularly loved my 2nd year because I did get to work with the students that were right out of high school, which eventually I'd go into being a high school teacher." The direct work with students fresh out of high school provided Sasha with practical teaching experience and reinforced their passion for guiding young people during pivotal transitions. Sasha elaborated on the broader impact of their role, noting:

> So I got to share my experience more and be more involved in constructing how the class went. And then I didn't just have my mentees, I was kind of the mentor to the whole class, so we would know what's going on with all the different mentors. We'd be in charge of the mentors and their mentees.

Sasha's role expanded beyond individual mentorship to influence the program's overall direction and the educational content delivered to students. This involvement in class construction and oversight of other mentor–mentee relationships illustrated the comprehensive nature of Sasha's contribution to the HGS program, highlighting the mentor's instrumental role

in shaping a supportive and enriching educational environment. Sasha concluded by reflecting on the significance of her role as a mentor, "I think that was awesome to be someone who really cares about our community and just be super intentional about what's going on all of their lives."

Sasha's concluding remark encapsulated the essence of mentorship in the HGS program—a deep-seated commitment to the community and a thoughtful, intentional approach to supporting students' academic and personal growth. Through Sasha's narrative, I gained insight into the multifaceted impact of mentorship, characterized by personal connection, adaptability, and a broad-reaching influence on the program and its participants.

Discussing how the mentorship from Sasha helped him overcome his shyness and become a significant part of the community, Quinn shared his transformative journey:

> The two biggest things I would credit to me becoming more comfortable on campus were my brother's involvement on campus and him kind of setting me up or kind of forcing me to go to stuff and be social. And then also my mentor that I got through the Henrietta Goodwin Scholar program, HGS, and her name was Sasha, she was a graduate assistant at the time, and she pretty much the same as my brother, very tapped in with the community.

Quinn attributed a significant part of his acclimation to campus life to the proactive approach taken by his mentor, Sasha, who, like his brother, encouraged active participation in community events. This nudging to engage socially, despite initially staying silent at gatherings, gradually led to increased visibility and comfort in the campus community.

Clayton echoed a similar sentiment regarding the personal impact of the mentorship experience:

> Actually pretty much just how I felt being a mentee and how it for sure made me a lot more comfortable about asking questions about what's happening and how stuff usually goes. And then kind of just really give me a comfortable person to talk to coming into the school and having all these questions about school in general and I know just how comfortable I felt.

Clayton's experience highlighted the mentor's role as a source of comfort and guidance, which was crucial for navigating the complexities of university life. This relationship fostered an environment where asking questions and seeking advice were encouraged, contributing to his overall comfort and adjustment to the school. Further exploring the mentor–mentee dynamic, Quinn shared his philosophy as a mentor:

> Honestly, I'm not really trying to come as an older type of thing. Well slightly, but I want to be more of their friend first. I know that's how mine was and just be someone they could ask questions to or talk about something random, listen to what music they listen to randomly or recently and all that.

Quinn's approach to mentorship, influenced by his own experiences, focused on establishing a friendly, relatable connection with mentees, emphasizing the importance of building trust and fostering open communication. This perspective was pivotal for creating a supportive atmosphere that extended beyond academic concerns to include personal interests and well-being. Clayton also discussed his method of maintaining communication with mentees:

> At first, I didn't want to be pushy or nothing. I was just texting 'em, telling 'em like, "Hey, if possible, when's the second time we could meet up because I want to have a quick little chit chat with you", but not pressing too hard because I know people are busy, they're trying to do stuff.

His initial hesitation to embrace the mentorship role reflected a common apprehension among new mentors. However, Clayton's adaptive communication strategy—using text messages, FaceTime, and voice memos—demonstrated a flexible approach to mentorship that respects mentees' busy schedules and diverse needs. Together, Quinn and Clayton's experiences shed light on the multifaceted nature of mentorship in the HGS program. The mentors' stories revealed a shared commitment to enhancing the university experience for their mentees, guided by principles of friendship, approachability, and active engagement in the community. This blend of social integration, personal support, and academic guidance exemplified the program's holistic approach to fostering success and well-being among its participants.

Sasha's views on the HGS program highlighted a strategic approach to bridging the high school-to-college transition and underscored the importance of retention efforts for Black students in the university. Reflecting on her tenure as the HGS grad assistant, Sasha stated:

> I do like that high school to college gap and retention for Black students in college is super important to me. So making sure now that you're here, you're going to stay here. So that was something that was super important to me when I was the HGS grad assistant.

This perspective aligned with the mentorship experiences shared by Quinn and Clayton, where the emphasis on community engagement, personal and academic guidance, and the creation of a supportive environment are seen as critical factors in ensuring that once students arrive on campus, they are equipped to thrive and persist through their college years. Sasha's commitment to retention underscored the HGS program's role in the initial adaptation of Black students to university life and in fostering a sustained, successful academic and social experience that encouraged students to stay and succeed in their college journey.

Summary of Physical Black Spaces

With the invaluable support of Black faculty and staff, Black students have transformed physical spaces such as the BRC into the backbone of the Black campus community at SSU, a PWI. These spaces were not merely venues for social and cultural activities; they were vital structures that underpin Black students' academic success and social integration. The BRC championed initiatives like the HGS program, providing a nurturing environment that bolstered the academic journey of Black students and cultivated a sense of belonging and community. A supportive and inclusive atmosphere was created and maintained through collaboration among students, faculty, and staff, actively celebrating and nurturing the Black community on campus.

Communal Black Spaces

This section explored the idea of Black communal spaces in the Black campus community. These spaces can be physical or digital places where Black students gathered and create connections. Black communal spaces referred to different types of meetings and events that bring together members of the Black community. These may include gatherings of Black student organizations and cultural events. The BRC supported these spaces by hosting meetings and events at its location. Black communal spaces can also exist online through social media groups and chat applications like GroupMe. Black communal spaces served as crucial sites for cultural expression, social support, academic collaboration, and professional development, offering Black students a sense of belonging and identity affirmation in the broader university context.

Black Student Organizations: Pillars of the Campus Community

Black student organizations were repeatedly cited as pillars of the Black campus community. These organizations served multiple purposes: (a) spaces for cultural expression and

community support, (b) professional development platforms, and (c) social and academic engagement engines. These organizations range from the BBS, which hosts swap meets as a platform for Black students and local Black-owned businesses to sell products, to the Black prelaw association, SAAB, SAAS, Black women's healing circle, Black men's warrior collective, and the East African student association, catering to specific segments of the community with tailored support and engagement activities.

Although these organizations play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and community among Black students, the BSU stood out as the signature organization in this ecosystem. BSU's specific role and impact as the cornerstone of the Black student community is discussed further in the next section, highlighting its overarching significance and unique contributions to campus life.

Reflecting on the key elements that sustained and enhanced the Black campus community, Kirk offered insights into the foundational role played by student organizations. He stated, "The biggest elements probably are the organizations. They hold the community together just with the events that they host." Kirk's observation emphasized the importance of these organizations in fostering a sense of unity and belonging among students and highlighted how the various events they organize served as essential gatherings that strengthened communal bonds. Through these activities, student organizations became central pillars supporting the fabric of the community, providing spaces for connection, celebration, and mutual support.

Hakeem noted the significance of the BBS in professional development:

> BBS, Black Business Society has been doing a lot of events, doing a lot of things that have been helping Black students just get into things like finding about internships, building your resume, putting your resume together, things like that.

This quote underscored the organization's commitment to aiding students in crucial professional areas, directly impacting their career readiness and development.

The Diamonds, the first collegiate majorette team on the West Coast, was founded in 2012. They represented a critical aspect of the Black campus community by bringing the distinctive Southern flare and HBCU style dance to a PWI. Their performances at home football games, basketball games, and various campus and community events contributed to the school's spirit and cultural diversity and served as a vibrant showcase of the art of majorette dance.

The NPHC, or BGLOs generally, have been instrumental in supporting and enriching the Black campus community, serving as another key pillar alongside the student organizations previously mentioned. These organizations contributed through a multifaceted approach that included educational workshops, community upliftment events, and study sessions, highlighting their commitment to the holistic development of their members and the wider community. The NPHC's focus on hosting events like sex education workshops, Economic Crisis Response Team (basic needs and resources) workshops, and study sessions indicated a strategic approach to addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the Black community. By offering incentives to attend and positioning these events in accessible venues like the BRC, they aimed to maximize engagement and impact. Lawry offered insight into the significance of the NPHC in the Black campus community, emphasizing its extensive involvement and foundational status. He stated, "We're the ones that are filtered within the community doing everything. So I think as a whole, the NPHC is the other, what's the word, pillar of the community." This statement underscored the pervasive influence and integral role of the NPHC, not only as participants but also as leaders of a wide range of community activities and initiatives. Lawry's reflection highlighted the

council's position as a central support structure, vital for its community's cohesion, strength, and vitality.

The fact that the last two presidents of the BSU were members of NPHC organizations is a testament to the depth of NPHC's involvement. This detail underscored the leadership roles that NPHC members often hold beyond their immediate Greek life affiliations, extending their influence and commitment to broader community support and advocacy. By holding significant positions in the BSU and contributing to the BRC as mentors in the HGS program, NPHC members exemplified a model of integrated community leadership. This involvement ensured the values, initiatives, and programs championed by the NPHC have been echoed throughout the campus, reinforcing their role as a "pillar of the community," as Lawry described. The interconnectedness between NPHC, the BSU, and the BRC amplified the reach and impact of Black student organizations and created a cohesive network of support that addresses the diverse needs and interests of the Black student body. Through such dynamic participation and leadership, NPHC members played a crucial role in shaping an inclusive, empowering, and vibrant campus culture.

Signature Events in the Black Campus Community

The significance of Black events on campus, particularly those organized or cohosted by Black student organizations and the BRC, underscored a vibrant aspect of community engagement and cultural affirmation in the Black community at SSU. Signature events such as homecoming and Harambe weekend demonstrated how these gatherings serve not just as celebratory occasions but as crucial components of community building, cultural expression, and prospective student engagement. Quinn highlighted the inclusive nature of homecoming, stating, "Homecoming is one of 'em that's coming up, and the BRC is actually hosting a whole week

schedule of events for not only the students but also for alumni coming back." This quote underscored the BRC's pivotal role in orchestrating a series of events that bridge past and present members of the community, fostering a continuum of engagement and belonging. Lawry further elaborated on homecoming's significance, noting, "Homecoming. Homecoming, for sure. That whole week. So the yard show, homecoming tailgate, the Black fraternity parties, and the events leading up to homecoming are the staples." His mention of specific activities like the yard show, a step performance showcasing the NPHC organizations, and tailgate emphasized the event's role as a cultural cornerstone, providing spaces for celebration, reunion, and the expression of collective identity. Sasha provided a personal perspective on homecoming, saying, "So I know every year I knew we could look forward to it, it was a whole weekend of things that kept bringing the community together." Her reflection captured the essence of homecoming as a time of unity and celebration, where various events serve as catalysts for strengthening community bonds and creating lasting memories.

Lawry also mentioned the importance of Harambe weekend for prospective students. He explained:

> The ASU hosts Harambe weekend in the spring, which is the Black prospective students' weekend. So the BRC and everyone in the community who is a leader come out for the weekend to give our spiel on why we want Black students to come into our campus.

This initiative showcased the community's proactive approach to welcoming new members. It underscored the collaborative effort between ASU, BRC, and community leaders in portraying the campus as a nurturing environment for Black students.

In analyzing the significance of Black events hosted or supported by Black student organizations and the BRC, these activities played a central role in cultivating a vibrant,

inclusive, and supportive campus environment. These events were not just celebrations but also critical moments for building community, affirming culture, and engaging prospective students that highlighted the dynamic and interconnected nature of the Black campus community. Through these events, students found a platform for expression, connection, and reinforcing their cultural identity, contributing to a richer, more diverse university experience for everyone involved.

Digital Dimensions of the Black Campus Community

Social media, particularly platforms like Instagram and GroupMe, played a critical role in shaping the experiences of Black students on campus, serving as a vital nexus for communication, community building, and information sharing. Student narratives offered a comprehensive view, illustrating digital platforms such as social media, GroupMe, and group chats have been indispensable conduits for engagement, organization, and information.

Lawry emphasized the primary role of social media in the community, noting, “So obviously social media, that’s Number 1. Our generation just, we all live on social media, so that’s really the primary way.” This statement reflected the ubiquitous nature of social media among today’s college students, highlighting its centrality in communication and engagement in the Black campus community. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not just about sharing information; they are about creating a vibrant, interactive space that mirrors the dynamic nature of the community itself.

Kirk explained how social media played a crucial role in fostering community growth at SSU, stating, “I feel like social media is one of the biggest things that is helping grow the BRC or the Black community SSU in general.” He further elaborated on how social media engagement on Instagram works, noting:

> People will see us, the students reposting things from the BRC, BSU, everyone from the [fraternity] chapter reposts things from their own page and things from other NPHC organizations, and then people will see these who don't normally go out to these events.

This insight revealed how social media extends the visibility of event promotions, thereby attracting a wider audience in the community, including individuals who may not typically participate in physical campus events.

Instagram posts were collected and analyzed from four key accounts: (a) BSU, (b) the BRC, (c) the Africana studies department, and (d) an Africana Studies 101 class; posts revealed a vibrant and engaged community, with Instagram serving as a vital platform for sharing information about events, spotlighting community members, and fostering social connections. For instance, every Monday, the BRC's weekly broadcast video provided students with a comprehensive summary of events hosted by Black student organizations, effectively serving as a central hub for community activities.

The GroupMe application and similar social messaging platforms have been pivotal in fostering community and communication among the Black community. Specifically, the creation and sustained use of the Black SSU GroupMe chat, initiated by the BSU, underscored the importance of these digital spaces in enhancing connectivity, support, and information sharing in the Black community on campus. As highlighted by Lawry, the group chat was established as a direct response to the need for a "central way to communicate fast in as a student body for our community." The decision to create this group chat has evidently paid off, with the platform now boasting roughly 400 members. This substantial number reflected not just the size of the community but also the level of engagement and the need for such a digital space where students

can freely exchange information, ask questions, and support one another on various topics, from financial aid to class advice and organizational activities.

Furthermore, Ron reflected on GroupMe's role in event coordination and social connectivity:

> And basically that's where another platform where all the Black students can know about what things are going on. Everyone drops their events in the GroupMe chat. Events, parties, if they're looking for something they get into for the weekend, that's the spot.

This quote revealed how GroupMe serves as a critical tool for academic and organizational communication and fostering social interactions and community engagement among Black students.

Communal Spaces Summary

The Black community at SSU has been sustained and maintained by a complex ecosystem comprising Black student organizations, signature events, and digital platforms. These elements have collectively fostered a profound sense of belonging, underpinning academic and professional growth and facilitating active engagement across physical and digital realms. The essence of Black communal spaces lies in their role as nurturing environments that foster unity, empowerment, and resilience among Black students. Whether through in-person gatherings that celebrate cultural heritage and collective achievements or digital platforms that enable students to connect and share information, these communal spaces have been vital in supporting the holistic development of Black students at predominantly white institutions. This research demonstrated that Black student organizations and their strategic use of digital spaces have played a fundamental role in maintaining a cohesive, vibrant, and supportive Black community on campus.

Research Question 3 - The Role of BSU in the Black Community at SSU

This study's third research question asked: How does the Black Student Union contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI? Since Black students were admitted to PWIs, they have created and joined organizations to enhance their academic, cultural, and social needs. These organizations have included Black fraternal organizations, the earliest of which were founded at the turn of the 20th century (Ross, 2001). The 1960s were marked by social upheaval in society and on college campuses. Black college students, radicalized by the ongoing Civil Rights and Black Power movements, founded student organizations at PWIs and HBCUs to educate themselves on Black history, support the social and political needs of surrounding Black communities, and advocate for the needs of Black students (Kendi, 2012). The history and influence of BSUs have been widely studied and documented (Palcic, 1979; Robinson, 2012a). However, there is a need for further research on the contemporary impact of BSUs. Scholars must also examine the role of the BSU in the Black campus community beyond their involvement in activism (Hotchkins, 2017).

I conducted semiformal interviews with 18 BSU members at SSU in this study. Most current or recently graduated students who participated in the study identified themselves as general body members. To be considered a member, students were required to attend at least two general body meetings. I interviewed several current or former executive board members, including the treasurer and the president. These individuals were elected by their peers to serve a term of 1 school year and require a significant amount of time coordinating and implementing events. To better understand the organization's inner workings, I attended a general body meeting and observed BSU members at various events. As shared by participants in this study, social media was a vital tool for communication and promotion. As part of my data collection, I

followed and analyzed data from the BSU Instagram account. Finally, I interviewed the advisor for BSU, Dr. Taj, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Africana Studies. Through these multiple data collection methods, I gained a deep understanding of BSU's role in the Black campus community at SSU.

The following section begins with a description of a BSU general body meeting. Every week, Black students meet for 1 hour to discuss important community topics and share information about upcoming events in an environment where they feel free to express themselves. Then I discuss how BSU serves as the voice for the Black community and provides a safe space for Black students to express their authentic selves. Then, I describe how the diversity of Black culture is celebrated in the BSU. I also discuss the processes involved in running the BSU and the valuable skills that members develop.

A Typical BSU General Body Meeting

As previously discussed in the findings, one must participate in Black events to be considered a member of the Black campus community. Participants found that general body meetings were the best way to learn about upcoming events and resources and to connect with other Black students in a relaxed environment. I had never attended a BSU meeting before. Being an extremely shy young adult, I always felt the BSU crowd was geared toward more outgoing individuals. However, I craved connection and was able to build intimate relationships through my Black fraternity. I always held the BSU crowd in high regard because of their confidence and swag.

I arrived a few minutes early to the BSU meeting, which took place in one of the rooms at the student center—the campus's meeting and conference hub. The center includes a bowling alley, several fast-food restaurants, and large and small organization meeting spaces. I expected

the meeting to start late, as several members had told me that meetings usually begin 5–10 minutes after the scheduled time, which they call “colored people’s time.” I was the first person to arrive, and Willow, a third-year urban planning major with a minor in Africana Studies, greeted me with a warm smile. I introduced myself, and she mentioned that she was expecting me. We talked briefly about the differences between campus life and her hometown in North Carolina and how she built a sense of community through her involvement with BSU and the BRC.

Around 3:05 P.M., groups of students started trickling into the meeting room. They were chatting about topics like test results, upcoming rainstorms, and dorm gossip. Around 30 students were in attendance at the meeting. The vice president of BSU shared announcements about upcoming events. These included a local Black Panthers and Brown Berets chapter meeting, a Black women’s healing circle cohosted by the BRC, and the BSU Black Cultural Art and Soul Night, and annual high school conference. Representatives from Black campus ministries shared that they were rechartering as a student organization, and the Diamonds, the majorette dance troupe, promoted their upcoming performance.

BSU meetings cover various weekly topics, from academic preparedness to pop culture and mental health. The topic for the meeting I attended was “Community Conversations: Our Experience at SSU and what we can do better for each other.” During the meeting, members gathered in a large circle, and two executive board members moderated the conversation. The moderators asked members about their experiences at BSU and what improvements they wanted to see from the university and in the Black community. Students discussed experiencing racial discrimination on campus, changes they would like to see, their feelings about the current level of engagement in the Black community, problems they see in the Black community, the advice

they would share with incoming Black 1st-year students, and ways to connect with other Black students on campus for support and community.

To stimulate the discussion, moderators asked a question, and members broke off into pairs to discuss it before sharing it with the leading group. Each question generated lively discussions in small groups and with the entire group. The members shared a range of experiences and viewpoints on each issue. A Black woman with long curly hair and a red SSU hoodie observed, “There are a lot of Black events, but not as many people going to the events.” Her observation was echoed by several others, leading to a discussion on how the responsibility of organizing events seems to fall on the shoulders of a handful of student leaders. The group discussed how younger students needed to step up to get involved.

BSU members also talked about the necessity of seeing more Black-centered events hosted by the campus. This sentiment was shared by several participants, who believed the university could support the Black community more. They believed the university lacked acknowledgment or promotion of Black student organizations or events. Even events like the BSU high school conference, which brings hundreds of local students to campus, were not featured or promoted on university social media channels. Lawry said it felt like “they don’t even know we’re here” when speaking about the university’s level of support to the Black community. Several students shared similar feelings of isolation and neglect by the university. When asked about what the university could do to better support the Black community, the responses centered on more promotion and funding. The students were willing to put in the work to build their community, but they needed resources and awareness to increase their impact and reach.

One female student recounted an incident where she was walking from her dorms to class, and a white female student in a passing car hurled racial slurs at her, including the “hard ‘r’

n-word," and asked, "How did they let you all [Black students] into school?" Another female student shared an experience where when practicing for powderpuff football, a white male student passed by and used derogatory racial language. These incidents extended even into supposedly safe spaces, as another student recalled being in the backyard of the BRC when members of a nearby fraternity hurled racial slurs at them through the window. Participants commonly shared stories of experiencing racial verbal assaults. Despite these challenges, BSU members remained focused on their community's needs, identifying areas for improvement and strategizing ways to achieve them.

During a tense conversation about problems in the community, students shaded differing perspectives. A young Black woman opened the discussion by talking about the "cliquiness" she said was rampant on the Black excellence floor. A tall mocha-skinned upperclassman who has been on campus since "way back in 2019" gave her thoughts on intrapersonal conflicts commenting, "we're messy" when describing her perspective on the various female friend groups she has seen and the gossip she has heard about individuals' private lives. A Black male transfer student from Los Angeles talked about how he felt Black people on campus and in San Diego did not give similar welcoming acknowledgments or vibes as he was used to at home. A few other students seconded this statement, even referring to feeling out of place at the BRC when they walked in and were not acknowledged by anyone.

Although students had their criticisms of the Black community, when discussing ways to improve these feelings, they overwhelmingly shared the need to connect more with each other through the critical Black spaces of the BRC, BSU, and Black student organizations. Willow advocated for younger students to "just try to get out" and get involved however they could. She talked passionately about how BSU helped her build her community. She could break out of her

bubble and connect with other students through her participation in the HGS program and her mentor's help. Other students agreed that participating in the second-year HGS program might be even more valuable than the first-year program due to how busy things get and the need to be anchored to the community.

At the meeting, each student shared their ideas on how to improve the community. They suggested various things like being vocal in class, not being intimidated, talking to people more, being more welcoming, smiling and speaking, attending community events, branching out and talking to people they do not usually talk to, volunteering more, and being relatable. As the meeting ended, a new student named Zach from Detroit exclaimed with a smile, "This is the most Black people I've seen in one place since I came to San Diego." There was a murmur of laughs through the room when an executive board member asked for his name and repeated loudly: "Community, this is Zach, Zach, this is the Community. Take care of him y'all."

The general body meeting was characterized by the executive board member's call for the community to care for the new Black student. Despite the challenges and tensions from outside and in the community, students engaged in complex conversations with grace and vulnerability. They discussed issues affecting their ability to connect authentically, which Deckman (2022) called a "curriculum of care." In her ethnography on the integrated Black space of the Kuumba Singers organization at Harvard, Deckman showed that Black students' ability to cultivate safe spaces that center the needs of Black students depends on practices that demonstrate care for one another. Members of the BSU demonstrated this level of care during the meeting by sharing themselves and listening to each other. They also showed care by engaging in challenging conversations, accepting accountability, and offering tangible ways to improve. As sociologist Corey J. Miles (2024) stated via X (formerly known as Twitter):

> Something can make you feel seen, good, & bring joy and still be problematic. Rather than denying the problematic pieces to salvage your relationship to the thing, a more interesting and fulfilling conversation takes up the messiness of a thing and what that reveals about yourself. (March 20, 2024)

For Black students, the BSU is the only space on campus that offers them the chance to gather and share this level of intimacy with many people. This intimacy created a sacred space where students have been willing to engage in critical conversations on the community's challenges to foster the community's growth. The weekly general body meetings have been a crucial aspect of the Black community and have provided Black students with a reprieve from the pressures of being Black in a school that largely ignores or marginalizes them. As the rest of this section demonstrates, Black students create the student-led portion of the Black campus community through the BSU. With the support of Black faculty and collaboration with other Black spaces, such as the BRC, the BSU helped to maintain the Black community by being a safe space representing the community for all Black students.

BSU is the Voice

BSU is the heart of the Black campus community at BSU. Participants frequently shared that BSU was the central organization that connects Black students, demonstrating its priori status in the Black community. When comparing the importance of BSU and the BRC in the Black campus community, Drew described BSU as "the family" and the BRC as "the home." He also referred to BSU as "the voice" or "megaphone" that advocated for the interests of Black students. Dr. Gracie, Director of the BRC, agreed with this sentiment and discussed BSU's role on campus, noting:

> They're a group that's very open to discussing mental health, very open to discussing wealth creation, having they really like to talk amongst themselves and not necessarily have faculty come in and kind of dictate the terms of the conversation. But they're open to faculty making recommendations or sharing things that they may not be aware of, but really like to structure their own conversation. And in that sense, they really are the student voice of the Black community.

As the voice of the Black community, BSU is responsible for listening to, understanding, and advocating for the needs of Black students. The bulk of this responsibility falls on the BSU president. Lawry, who had participated in BSU during high school, became involved as a general body member during his 1st year in college. Despite limitations due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, Lawry increased his involvement in his 2nd year and was elected treasurer. In his 3rd year, Lawry took on the role of president to restore BSU to its prepandemic levels of engagement and activity. However, he was shocked to discover that his leadership would involve much more than overseeing the organization. As BSU president, he would also lead the Black student body. Drew, a close friend and fraternity brother of Lawry, recalled the immense responsibility that came with being the BSU president:

> I didn't realize how big BSU was. The BSU president is automatically involved in some campus crisis response team that my [fraternity] brother was part of as BSU president . . . . It's a big job because it represents the Black community. . . . If there's something going on in the Black community, BSU is the voice. It's like the megaphone to tell the rest of the school about it.

Students recalled several instances in which BSU was instrumental in representing the interests of Black students. In particular, two incidents where BSU played a crucial role stood

out. In one case, a white professor was caught on video repeatedly saying "nigger" in the classroom. In another case, an Africana studies professor gave an assignment to narrate life as a slave. In both situations, the BSU president met with various stakeholders across campus to express Black students' concerns and demand change. The BSU also used Instagram to communicate with the wider Black student community. BSU's role goes beyond representing students during times of duress. Its importance has been demonstrated through its consistent care and nurturing of Black students to create an inclusive and safe environment for everyone.

BSU as a Safe Space

In 1968, Dr. Arthur Graham and Judge Napoleon Jones founded the first student organization dedicated to Black students at SSU. Since its inception, the organization, which the institution's website notes began as the Black Student Council before being renamed the Black Student Union (BSU), has focused on uplifting the academic, financial, social, educational, and cultural needs of the Black student body. Participants discussed the organization's vital role in enhancing the Black student experience. Whether through informational sessions during general body meetings discussing critical issues or larger events like the powderpuff football game to bring the community together for friendly competition, BSU aimed to provide a safe space for Black students to connect with one another and feel comfortable on campus.

BSU's mission is to ensure Black students have a positive college experience. They have aimed to provide academic and educational resources and recreational activities for Black students. Additionally, BSU seeks to promote learning about Black history and culture and encourage interaction in the Black community. On a campus of over 30,000, getting lost in the crowd is easy. For Black students, falling through the cracks is even more likely, considering there are only roughly 1,300 Black students on campus according to institutional data on campus.

Quinn, a 3rd-year student and current BSU treasurer, shared how important it was for Black students to find community early. As the most prominent Black student organization, BSU connected students to the community by consistently hosting events. According to Ron, BSU gave students "the opportunity to put your foot in the door in the Black community." Through BSU, Black students seeking connections with same-race peers have been introduced to people, organizations, and resources to help make their transition to college smoother.

In these gatherings, students expressed their ability to be themselves without fear of judgment. Richard described BSU meetings as "a break from majority white spaces," where he felt more connected to other students by socializing and learning about events from other Black organizations. Silas noted during the weekly BSU meetings, "for that hour, you are not going to be stressed." During these meetings, Black students can momentarily set aside concerns about schoolwork, organizational planning, social issues, and more, finding comfort and belonging among their peers. According to Ty, because students feel comfortable in their own skin, BSU is a space that "calls to all Black students."

BSU was frequently described as a "safe space" for Black students to gather. As discussed earlier, SSU lacks spaces where Black students feel comfortable studying, socializing, or relaxing. As such, BSU meetings and events play a crucial role in creating a sense of safety and belonging. Zee, BSU's cultural chair, said, "I feel like BSU is the one safe space for students that look like me to feel they can be themselves and to have conversations that might be tough and still feel understood and heard." Her focus on self-expression and the ability to discuss critical issues that concern her highlights the significance of BSU as a student-created space for critical thinking and dialogue. Zee further discussed how a conversation about childhood traumas during a general body meeting, although challenging, was a transformative experience for her.

By engaging in this discussion, Zee gained a deeper understanding of issues affecting her and her peers, fostering greater empathy and a stronger connection between them. This continuous cycle of support motivated BSU members to participate in more events and increase their involvement in the organization.

Tina, a transfer student, discovered BSU through a friend. She appreciated that it allowed Black students to discuss social, popular, and current events. She expressed that being a part of the community made her feel connected and gave her a sense of belonging, a relief from the ultracompetitive environment she experienced as a Black woman in the business school. Before she joined BSU, Tina felt like a “fly in the buttermilk,” but being surrounded by Black peers during BSU meetings made the numbers feel even more significant, “from 50 to 100.” These feelings empowered students to confidently navigate the rest of their college experience outside of the Black space.

Diversity of Blackness

Black students are not a monolithic group. The sample population of this study represented a well-rounded diversity of majors, professional interests, backgrounds, family economic status, and social interests. Even in fields with a low representation of Black professionals, such as engineering and science, eight student participants majored in science, technology, engineering, and math fields. All student participants identified as Black or African American. Several students identified as first- or second-generation immigrants from the African continent and expressed a deep connection to their African culture. Kirk talked about the diverse nature of BSU weekly meetings, stating:

> Seeing Black people from different backgrounds, I think, just helps build camaraderie and understanding with each other by hearing the different perspectives. Even though

> we're all Black, we still have different experiences and backgrounds. . . . Within our community alone, there's so much difference, and it was eye-opening for me to see.

Dr. Gracie discussed the BRC hosted regular events targeting students from West Africa, East Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. These events aim to raise awareness about the diversity of Black culture and ensure that students with diverse Black identities feel represented. Participants shared there was a concentrated effort to ensure that students from across the African diaspora feel represented by and connected to the Black campus community. The BSU's role in ensuring cultural representation and openness was evident throughout the study.

Zee was a 2nd-year student majoring in public health with a minor in interdisciplinary studies at the time of the study. She grew up in the Inland Empire, about 1 hour north of San Diego, and wanted to attend school near the beach. Although she did not get into her first-choice school, University of California San Diego, she was sold on SSU after she visited campus during the BRC's Harambe weekend. She was impressed by the active presence of BGLO members and other Black organizations, which created a welcoming vibe. Before arriving on campus, Zee built a relationship with her Black roommates via Instagram during the summer, which made her feel more connected and comfortable with her new surroundings on campus. Zee was active in her high school community as the BSU president and founder of the step team. When she arrived at SSU, she sought the opportunity to connect with her Black peers and found that space through BSU.

At the time of the study, Zee served as the cultural chair for BSU. As a Nigerian American, she recognized that diversity needed to be improved during her 1st year in BSU. This motivated her to increase her participation in a leadership role. As cultural chair, Zee's

responsibilities include cultivating awareness and support for the diverse backgrounds of students representing the African diaspora. Zee shared:

> To prove that BSU is the umbrella organization, we're trying to make an effort to ensure people know it's what we're meant to do. So that's as the cultural chair, I'm trying to really make sure that I'm the one pushing that the most.

To increase awareness, Zee coordinated African diaspora discussions during general body meetings and traditional Thursdays on Instagram, where different aspects of the Black diaspora are celebrated. Afrofest is a signature event that celebrates cultures from the African Diaspora. The year this study was conducted, BSU hoped to host a fashion show, musical performances, and vendors selling merchandise and food. This event is a collaboration between the Africana studies department, the BRC, and other student organizations. The rebranding of BSU includes a focus on diverse Black cultures, with this year's theme being "Black Excellence is Worldwide." I asked Zee what it meant to her to be able to focus on and share the cultural aspect of her identity. She shared:

> Honestly, it means so much, I've never felt like my culture is something that people were interested in or were really trying to know more about besides what food we have or what dances are popular. That's all people are really generally interested in. There are other students on campus who are African and feel unheard sometimes. . . . So, having my position means a lot. People will come up to me after a discussion and say things like, "I'm so happy you brought that up, I'm so happy we're having these conversations." This means a lot to me.

As the umbrella Black student organization, BSU strives to foster a welcoming and engaging environment for everyone, including students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In

doing so, BSU connects students and enhances their sense of belonging. This effort is vital for supporting the Black campus community.

BSU is a student-led organization. Though it may appear obvious, it remains necessary to reiterate this point, given the organization has the responsibility as the heartbeat and pulse of the Black campus community. The collective efforts of BSU are planned and coordinated by a 10-person executive board. These positions are elected by their peers, with the president serving as the de facto leader of the entire Black student body. The executive board is responsible for planning, funding, and implementing weekly general body meetings, signature events like the powderpuff football game, Afrofest, and the annual high school conference, a full-day campus immersion program to expose local Black high school students to college life. The executive board conducts at least 2 multiday retreats to set priorities, plan the year's events, and participate in team bonding activities. Weekly general body meetings attract 40–50 students and take place each Wednesday afternoon, lasting an hour. General body meetings are followed by a 1-hour executive board meeting where the group can recap the positives and negatives from the previous meeting and discuss what is needed for the next meeting and upcoming events. Dr. Taj, the BSU advisor, attends each executive board meeting to offer support and guidance. However, topics for discussion, development of materials, ideas for fundraising or events, and labor dedicated toward running these events fall on the students.

Social media was the primary way BSU communicates with the student body. Weekly Instagram posts promoted upcoming general body meetings and events. Instagram posts also highlighted BSU members for their roles and contributions and recap events that previously happened. Instagram stories, an ephemeral form of digital content that lasts 24 hours and allows

users to share fleeting moments in video or picture form (Bainotti et al., 2021), keep students engaged as BSU posts stories or live streams events in progress.

Coordinating this number of activities alongside handling academic responsibilities develops professional skills such as leadership, communication, and critical thinking that students can leverage in their future careers. Dr. Taj discussed how the BSU students he advises and interacts with differ from other students he teaches. According to Dr. Taj, BSU students show a level of initiative and self-sufficiency that is not evident among other students. Dr. Taj provided an example of this behavior with students supporting each other academically:

> Even their approach to academics is different. They will sit there and talk about their different classes and they're very frank with each other. It's like, "You're failing that class, aren't you? What can we do? Did you talk to your professor? Did you do this? Did you do that? Okay, well then, you need to do X, Y, and Z. You can get back on track." And they're very supportive of each other in that way.

Through BSU, students have developed the requisite skills and camaraderie to support each other toward achieving their academic goals. As Lawry stated, BSU is "a space for people to get their first little taste of leadership." In addition to the 10 executive board positions, BSU offers plenty of opportunities for students to volunteer and participate in their events. Lawry continued:

> So everyone in the community can sign up, help, plan, and delegate with what needs to be done. And I think that's one of the biggest ways people get their little inch of service and how they can help the community grow and really help push us forward.

Developing these skills and being acquainted with the idea of service helps build a mindset of giving back and supporting future generations of Black students.

Participants shared how their involvement in BSU or other student organizations like Black fraternities and sororities increased their confidence in public speaking, managing their schedules, and communicating with people from various backgrounds. Recent graduates also discussed how these college experiences helped make the transition to their current careers much easier. Lawry has spent most of his college career on the BSU executive board. At the time of the study, he also is a member of a Black fraternity and played on the men's volleyball team. Lawry acknowledged the amount of growth he has seen in himself. He shared, "I've probably grown the most ever professionally and just being a leader. Identifying what type of leader I am, my leadership style, and how I like to support the people following me." Through this self-discovery, Lawry said:

> I feel like I'm well equipped to do anything I need to do and also ask and demand for what I need as a student. It's extremely easy. I think that has been my biggest takeaway so far from being at SSU. I'm able to advocate for myself better than I would've ever been if I went to a different school or not been involved within BSU.

Participating in BSU as a leader is a transformational experience, allowing students to build connections and develop the skill sets necessary to thrive in a PWI. Huey, the former treasurer of BSU and current president of his Black fraternity, had this to share about how he feels about the community-building effort he sees from his peers:

> I would say I just want to commend the Black students that make up the community because I feel like oftentimes we try and do so many things that we forget we're students at the time. We're running student organizations, and I feel like we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to act like we're working and getting paid for the stuff we're doing. When at the end of the day, we're here to do school and not these organizational responsibilities

> that we do. And I feel like we spend a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of blood, sweat, not blood, but sweat and tears put into student orgs, and when it's all stuff we don't actually have to do. So I think the community, in general, is filled with good people who are doing things for the betterment of the community.

As Huey described, the Black campus community requires the collective and concentrated effort of concerned students. The Black campus community is a thriving community that allows students to connect, learn, grow, and celebrate is vital for academic success and a sense of belonging. However, the costs incurred, mainly the time required to put on these events, must also be considered.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of a qualitative case study analyzing Black community building at a PWI. By combining student participant narratives with my observations and social media analysis, I aimed to offer a thorough portrait of the Black campus community at SSU. Moving forward, the next chapter summarizes the study's significant findings and contextualizes them in the existing literature, using a Black placemaking framework. Additionally, I address the study's limitations and significance and provide recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examined how Black college students built and maintained a sense of community at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Informed by relational sociological methodology (Tierney & Kolluri, 2020) and Black placemaking conceptual framework (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020), this study foregrounded the nuanced process of community building, focusing on the interplay between Black students and the spaces—physical and digital—they collectively cocreated. Three research questions guided this study, asking:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) define the Black community?
2. What are the key processes and structures involved in maintaining and sustaining the Black community within a PWI?
3. In what ways does the Black Student Union (BSU) contribute to and facilitate the process of building a sense of community within a PWI?

This study had four primary objectives:

- To present a comprehensive depiction of the Black campus community in a specific PWI.
- To identify and assess the structures, stakeholders, and institutional resources that support the Black community in a PWI.
- To assess the impact of physical and digital spaces on shaping the Black campus community.

- To provide a comprehensive analysis of how Black student labor sustains the community through a focused examination of the umbrella Black student organization known as the Black Student Union (BSU).

In Chapter 1, the study's focus was introduced, outlining the problem, presenting essential background information, and articulating the purpose of the research along with the guiding research questions. Chapter 2 explored the conceptual underpinnings of Black placemaking and offered an in-depth examination of relevant literature concerning the experiences of Black college students in PWIs. Chapter 3 provided a detailed overview of the methodology employed in the study, including data collection methods and procedures.

Summary of the Study

To study the Black community, I employed a qualitative case study approach. The case was bound by the site—a large, public, 4-year university located in southern California—and by the population, primarily consisting of 18 members affiliated with the BSU. This study employed a dual unit of analysis: (a) people and (b) places. Interviews were conducted with 18 members of the BSU, and four Black faculty and staff. Additionally, observations were carried out in various Black spaces such as the Black Resource Center (BRC), classrooms, and events specifically catering to the Black community. To ensure data triangulation, social media accounts affiliated with the BSU, BRC, and Africana studies department were also analyzed. Interviews lasted no longer than 90 minutes, and all were conducted via Zoom at the participants' requests. Participants were asked questions on various aspects of their college journey, including their perceptions of the Black campus community, frequented locations on campus, and their involvement with the BSU. Detailed field notes were taken during each interview and observation, capturing significant events, remarks, or descriptions pertinent to the community.

Subsequently, after each session, extensive memos were composed to document personal reflections and insights. In some instances, audio notes were recorded, later transcribed, and integrated into the field notes. These field notes and memos were further developed into analytical memos, facilitating the initial stage of data analysis for the study. After concluding data collection, all interview transcriptions, field notes, and memos were imported into NVivo software. Thereafter, I initiated a dual process of inductive and deductive coding, primarily focusing on addressing the research questions and aligning with the tenets of Black placemaking (Tichavakunda, 2020). Additionally, I allowed space for significant themes to emerge organically from the data during the coding process.

In Chapter 4, I explored the key themes that emerged in response to the research questions. In this chapter, I elaborate on the key findings, and I further analyze these findings, contextualizing them in the existing literature and examining them through the lens of Black placemaking. Following that, I highlight the significance of these findings and propose avenues for future research. Subsequently, I address the limitations of this study and provide insights into the implications for policy and practice. Lastly, this chapter concludes with reflections on my research journey investigating the Black campus community at Sunnyside State University (SSU, a pseudonym).

Integrating Findings With Literature via Black Placemaking Analysis

The themes that were presented in Chapter 4 expanded on existing literature that comprehensively explores Black campus life. The following section discusses the primary findings and their relationship with the existing body of literature. Additionally, I employed a Black placemaking analysis to contextualize and interpret the findings.

Finding 1 - Community Defined by Resilience

Participants' narratives regarding their definitions of the Black community played a central role in comprehending the Black campus community. These narratives represent counter-stories, challenging traditional, deficit-based representations of how Black students at PWIs experience their campus climate. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explained counter-stories have the potential to "disrupt complacency, contest the dominant discourse on race, and advance the fight for racial reform" (p. 32). A Black placemaking analysis of SSU's Black campus community allowed scholars to recognize the agency in Black students' ability to cocreate spaces for themselves. This analysis demonstrated that though Black collegians' experiences have been influenced by racism and discrimination, they are not solely defined by them (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020).

Despite its relatively small numerical size, participants' narratives revealed a strong attachment to the Black campus community. Research has suggested that structural barriers, such as low enrollment numbers and social exclusion, can hinder Black students' ability to form relationships with their peers at PWI campuses (Gilkes Borr, 2019). However, the findings of this study suggested that despite the small Black population on campus, members of the Black community felt a profound sense of pride in what they had cultivated. Several participants specifically cited the 4% Black student population as indicative of the community's resilience. The ability of students, supported by Black faculty, staff, and institutional resources, to nurture such a vibrant community speaks volumes about the strength of collective effort and commitment to creating safe spaces in an otherwise challenging environment.

SSU boasts a 6-year graduation rate for Black students at 73.6%, surpassing the average Black graduation rate for the large state university system by 16 points (Ristine, 2023). I contend

the vibrant Black campus community significantly contributes to the academic success of Black students. However, despite receiving recognition for narrowing equity gaps, SSU still faces challenges in ensuring equitable outcomes, as Black and Latinx students continue to graduate at lower rates than their white peers (Ristine, 2023). Harper and Simmons' (2019) report card findings for public institutions suggested SSU could enhance its Black faculty-to-student ratio.

As indicated by this research, Black faculty play a central role in supporting the needs of Black students in the classroom and in other vital roles, such as advising Black student organizations. This aligned with existing research emphasizing how Black faculty provide guidance and motivation for Black students (Cox et al., 2018). Black placemaking acknowledges the significance of these intangible interactions in bolstering Black student success (Halkiyo & Hailu, 2023). Despite the decline in enrollment of Black students at 4-year universities over the past 40 years, which has been viewed as a regression in access and equity (Harper et al., 2009), more efforts are needed to support Black students who choose to pursue their education at PWIs.

Higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring academic and social equity. Too often, gaps in education are misrepresented. As Battey (2013) stated, "When referring to students of color, gaps are framed as deficits, pathologizing the intelligence of students of color based on test scores, intelligence, and ability; the same is not done when White students have lower test scores" (p. 33). Toldson (2019) advocated for in-group analysis comparisons among Black populations, highlighting the much-maligned achievement gap as an example of how in-group comparisons can lead to faulty conclusions and assumptions of Black inferiority. As demonstrated in this study, significant progress can be made even with a small population of students. Therefore, the university is ultimately responsible to ensure that Black students are adequately supported through graduation.

Finding 2 - Community Defined by Active Engagement

Acknowledgment of membership or belonging in the Black campus community at SSU necessitated active engagement with Black places and interaction with Black individuals. Although all Black students have the opportunity to support the community, membership is attributed only to those who actively contribute to its maintenance by participating in events, joining Black student organizations, and regularly visiting the BRC.

Black placemaking emphasizes that active engagement and participation can foster a deeper connection to people and a sense of place (Ellery et al., 2021; Hunter et al., 2016). Research on Black student engagement corroborates this notion, showing that involvement in cultural activities leads to a stronger sense of community, belonging, and connectedness (Grier-Reed, 2010; Strayhorn, 2018). The findings from this study supported the idea that Black students who engaged with Black campus spaces perceived their community as akin to a family, which enhanced their social and academic development.

In response to the final question in the student participant interview protocol about advice for incoming Black freshmen, every response emphasized the importance of getting involved in the Black community as soon as possible. This finding aligned with the research of Halkiyo and Hailu (2023), who explored Black placemaking among Black women engineering students at a PWI. They found that these social interactions fostered care and hope, leading to strong connections with peers and their environment. Later, I discuss the challenges associated with engagement as a primary strategy for navigating PWI environments. However, membership in the Black community at SSU allowed Black students to establish a supportive network that assisted them in college and beyond. As demonstrated in Hypolite's (2022b) research, the relationships formed through engagement have been crucial for students to develop the social

capital needed to identify professional opportunities and access essential resources such as food and emotional support to navigate their college environment. Black students must be informed about how they can connect with the Black community, as these connections can significantly impact graduation rates and their overall university experience. This involves expanding communication beyond the existing channels of Black community spaces such as the BRC, BSU, and social media platforms. It entails using the university's official communication channels and involving main student organizations like the associated student government to increase awareness of the Black campus community through traditional and social media platforms.

Finding 3 - Black Liberatory Spaces Are the Foundation of the Black Campus Community

A Black placemaking analysis of Black campus communities considers the calculus of Black students' agency in shaping spaces to meet their needs and desires (Tichavakunda, 2020). Black placemaking considers both the role of individuals and structures and how each contributes to producing a collective social experience which is the essence of community (Ellery et al., 2021; Hunter et al., 2016). This study sought to identify and analyze the structures, stakeholders, and institutional supports that contributed to the makeup of the Black campus community. I also aimed to assess the role of physical and digital spaces in the Black campus community.

Black cultural or resource centers (BCCs, BRCs) and BSUs are fundamental components of the Black campus community (Gilkes Borr, 2019; Hypolite, 2020b; Patton, 2006). Black digital spaces have increasingly become natural parts of how Black students communicate, connect, find critical resources (Streets, 2022), and organize for activist intentions (Davis, 2015). In addition to these critical spaces, the current study demonstrated how Black students have collectively cultivated a vibrant and robust Black community despite their small numbers.

During my research, I identified three primary spaces that make up the Black campus community at SSU: (a) intellectual spaces, (b) physical spaces, and (c) communal spaces, referred to as Black liberatory spaces**.**

As depicted in Figure 1, intellectual spaces included classroom settings that enrich Black students' understanding of Black history and culture. At SSU, these spaces included the Africana studies department and educational classes provided through the BRC. Additionally, physical spaces (e.g., BRC, the Black excellence floor) offered students opportunities for connection, socialization, and relationship-building with fellow Black peers. Communal spaces included Black student organizations, Black events, and Black digital spaces where Black students convened for academic, social, and cultural growth and support. BSU is the hub of Black student life, a gateway for students to engage with the broader Black community. The BRC and BSU introduced Black students to other critical organizations, such as Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) and Black academic and social groups, fostering educational, professional, and cultural development opportunities. Social media has been a pivotal aspect of the Black student experience, facilitating seamless navigation between physical and digital realms for connection, information sharing, and networking.

Figure 1

Liberatory Black Spaces

Black students navigate parallel and overlapping communities or social worlds (Tichavakunda, 2020). As this study has indicated, Black community members are connected and anchored by their engagement and participation in multiple Black liberatory spaces. The concept of Black liberatory spaces draws from bell hooks' perspective on education as the practice of freedom. In her work, hooks reflected on the joyful experience of attending segregated all-Black schools in the South, attributing these positive experiences to the focus of Black teachers on nurturing students' intellect (hooks, 1994). For hooks, Black educators represented a political endeavor rooted in antiracist struggle (hooks, 1994). The phrase "the personal is political," often invoked by Black feminists, underscores the interconnectedness of personal experiences and political realities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for empowerment. However, a Black placemaking lens reminds scholars and practitioners that Black life

encompasses more than just struggle. For Black college students, campus life offers opportunities for joy, celebration, and recreation alongside experiences of microaggressions and protests (Tichavakunda, 2021a).

In PWI environments, Black liberatory spaces prioritize the needs and interests of Black students through various means. This includes classroom spaces that offer enriching experiences, such as deepening the understanding of Black history and culture. Additionally, these spaces facilitate social gatherings where Black students can freely discuss and debate issues pertinent to their community. Moreover, Black liberatory spaces serve as connectors, linking Black students to essential resources and networks. This may occur through physical locations like the BRC or through meetings and events organized by the BSU, highlighting available student resources. Importantly, these spaces foster a sense of belonging and care among Black students. Staff and faculty in Black liberatory spaces have created environments where students feel supported and can authentically express themselves. As a result, Black students can thrive in these spaces, even in the face of a toxic, racially charged environment in the broader institution. As demonstrated by the students at SSU Black liberatory spaces have the potential to increase Black students' sense of belonging and academic success.

Finding 4 - Hidden Labor Costs in Sustaining the Black Community

A Black placemaking analysis of the Black campus community at SSU acknowledges students' significant labor and time commitment to actively participate in community activities (Tichavakunda, 2020). Research on Black students' use of digital technology to facilitate peer support, knowledge acquisition, and advocacy for their needs asserts that Black students who are involved in such activities are not afforded the luxury of just being students (Streets, 2022). A recurring theme I observed in students' stories about their participation across the Black

community was the amount of time they spent on these activities. When I asked directly, most students found it difficult to estimate how much time they spent on activities related to the Black community. As Drew aptly described:

> It's tough to say because it's one of those jobs where it's like, imagine you worked an 8-hour shift at your job, but then you come home, and then all you're thinking about is your job still. Did you really ever get off work?

As a reminder, my relationship and conversations with Drew were the primary impetus for the study's focus. As president of his Black fraternity, executive board member of the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), and contributing member of BSU and several other Black student organizations, I was amazed at his dedication to uplifting the Black campus community. I was also concerned with his ability to manage all these responsibilities while keeping up with his schoolwork. Drew mentioned that he was aware of the time all these activities consumed. "They've taken up a lot of my time," he expressed, "time I could be spending on myself either doing homework or sleeping or just catching up on personal time."

Students' dedication to uplifting their community required constant attentiveness and a significant amount of time. Students' estimations of their time spent working on their respective organizations ranged from 10–15 hours per week. These estimates do not include their work as mentors through the BRC, a role which they are paid for. Leaders of Black student organizations do not receive any monetary compensation for their efforts. Despite this, no student expressed regret for participating in multiple student organizations. However, researchers have noted how although these safe or counter spaces are viewed as communal environments for Black students, Black student leaders have experienced emotional strain as a result of their over-involvement in these organizations (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Other researchers have identified racial battle

fatigue, defined as the state of exhaustion that occurs through the physical, mental, and emotional effects of dealing with racism, in student activists (Linder et al., 2016) and Black higher education professionals (Quaye et al., 2022). Effects of racial battle fatigue can include frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, and psychological or emotional withdrawal (Quaye et al., 2022). Despite efforts of Black students to engage in their campus communities to gain a greater sense of belonging, there is an additional cost or "tax" that Black college students incur to survive and thrive in their campus environments. Viewing Black students' experiences through a Black placemaking lens allows scholars and practitioners to gain a comprehensive understanding of these costs, recognizing the effort and labor involved in establishing and sustaining safe Black spaces on campus.

Finding 5 - BSU Is the Cornerstone of the Black Community

In a Black placemaking analysis, the focus on the BSU and its role in contemporary Black campus life comes to the forefront. Originating from the activism of Black students in the 1960s, the BSU reflects the ethos of Black Power brought from communities, as noted by Kendi (2012). Tichavakunda (2020) underscored Black placemaking often emerges as a response to structural racism, highlighting the importance of studying Black social worlds.

A Black placemaking analysis prominently highlights the BSU's self-determination, as evidenced by its organization of weekly meetings, signature events, and multiday planning retreats. Supported by their faculty advisor and resources from the BRC, students facilitated opportunities for Black students to gather in large numbers, fostering academic, social, professional, and personal development.

The role of cultural chair on the executive board, tasked with spotlighting the African diaspora and ensuring representation of diverse identities in Black culture, along with organizing

signature events like Afro Fest, exemplifies an intention to acknowledge and embrace the diversity of Black culture in the community. Black placemaking acknowledges the distinct needs of Black students from various identities (Tichavakunda, 2020). Through representation, students can cultivate authentic relationships that foster a deeper connection to each other and the community as a whole. BSU's role as the political voice of Black students acknowledges the significance of agency, advocating for the community and ensuring that Black students feel empowered to voice their concerns on a campus that lacks adequate Black representation. Cox et al. (2018) supported the notion that BSU is a community hub where students feel supported and can establish meaningful connections with their peers. Additionally, studies have highlighted the pivotal role that BSUs play in fostering a robust sense of cultural identity (Lane, 2022). This study's findings aligned with such research, as BSU at SSU exhibited similar characteristics and functions.

The examination of a BSU general body meeting offered by this study highlighted the inner workings of the Black campus community and the process through which community is performed. Analogous to Tichavakunda's (2018) depiction of a National Society of Black Engineers election, an inside view of BSU's operations provided crucial insights into the leadership prowess exhibited by its members and the willingness of participants to engage in discussions about sensitive topics. Through the lens of Black placemaking, one can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role of the BSU in the Black campus community. This included facilitating connections among students and opportunities, fostering leadership growth, advocating for Black students' interests on campus, and creating a secure meeting environment where students from various backgrounds can freely express themselves without the pressure to conform to external expectations.

Significance of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

In 1982, novelist, activist, and social critic James Baldwin published his final book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (Baldwin, 1995), which chronicled his investigation and analysis into the murders of 12 Black children in Atlanta, a city considered to be the bastion of integration. Baldwin, who left the United States during the 1950s to escape the pervasive and enduring grip of racism settling in Paris, France, felt compelled to return to a familiar land with a familiar story of Black despair and death. In his biography of Baldwin's later years, *Begin Again*, Glaude (2020) depicted the elder Baldwin as nearly having lost faith in the idea of racial unity in the U.S. project. Baldwin, who had been deeply involved in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and had witnessed the assassinations of his friends and contemporaries Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., was disheartened by the realization that despite over 2 decades of perceived racial advancement, Black children remained vulnerable to violent deaths with little justice achieved. Baldwin referred to the era marked by a regression in civil rights legislation and a resurgence of violence against Black citizens, following years of apparent social progress, as the "aftertimes" (Glaude, 2020). In 2008, the United States made history by electing its first Black President, Barack Obama. However, after 8 years under the leadership of a Black man, Coates (2018) contended that in 2016, the country chose to elect its first openly racist, misogynistic, and, by some measures, incompetent white president. The rise of movements like Black Lives Matter in 2015 and the subsequent protests during the summer of 2020, fueled by the dual crises of the COVID-19 global pandemic and ongoing violence against Black lives (Hill, 2020), served as evidence that we are again living in the after times of racial progress.

Black education is under attack. With recent legislation dismantling the remnants of affirmative action (Totenberg, 2023); book bans and restrictions on literature critical of the U.S.'s legacy of racism and white supremacy in schools and libraries (Italie, 2023); the proliferation of bad-faith critiques of critical race theory (CRT; Tichavakunda, 2021b); and alongside the restriction of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at universities nationwide (Friedersdorf, 2024), it is crucial for scholars to move beyond traditional measures of success in academia. Instead, they should focus on scholarship that actively advocates for Black access, equity, and justice in higher education (Cole & Burris-Greene, 2023). This study contributed to the ongoing efforts of scholars aiming to promote equity for Black college students (Harper & Simmons, 2019; Lane, 2022; Streets, 2022; Tichavakunda, 2021a). Through a qualitative exploration of the Black campus community at a PWI, this study offered insights that expand scholars and practitioners' understanding of Black student experiences. Moreover, this research laid the groundwork for future studies examining various aspects of Black campus life.

Methodological Intervention

Research on the experiences of Black college students has often relied on interviews, surveys, and quantitative data. However, this study adopted a broader approach by incorporating observations of Black spaces and analyzing social media to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the Black student experience at a PWI. Ethnography is a valuable methodological tool for gaining deep insights into a specific culture (Desmond, 2014; Postill & Pink, 2012; Sonkar, 2019). Additionally, future researchers employing ethnographic methods should explore immersion in additional Black campus spaces at PWIs, such as Black majorette dance teams. This approach could provide invaluable insights into the experiences and motivations of Black students in these environments.

Theoretical Intervention

Black placemaking theory offers a pertinent lens for examining Black campus life due to its nuanced exploration of the dynamics between oppression and agency (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020). Through a Black placemaking analysis, attention is directed toward the structural factors influencing Black campus experiences, encompassing stakeholders, policies, processes, and physical spaces shaped by and shaping Black students (Tichavakunda, 2020). This study contributed to the expanding literature employing a Black placemaking framework in higher education, emphasizing the significance of Black student agency in the midst of campuses that are anti-Black (Halkiyo & Hailu, 2023; Tichavakunda, 2020). By foregrounding Black agency, researchers can propose interventions to enhance outcomes for Black students. Moreover, future research should incorporate social justice considerations in Black placemaking analyses, moving beyond an understanding of Black student labor to advocate for institutional accountability in supporting Black student success. A Black placemaking analysis holds institutions accountable for serving Black students by emphasizing the importance of creating and maintaining spaces that foster their sense of belonging, well-being, and academic success.

Black Student Subcommunity Intervention

BSUs have played crucial roles historically (Palcic, 1979; Robinson, 2012a) and continue to do so today (Cox et al., 2018; Hotchkins, 2017; Lane, 2022) by fostering social engagement, community involvement, and activism. By focusing on the BSU as the primary Black student organization, this study contributed to the limited existing literature highlighting the pivotal role of BSUs in contemporary society. During their inception in the 1960s and 1970s, BSUs relied heavily on collaboration across campuses for success, growth, and activist endeavors (Robinson,

2012a). Future research should explore how present-day BSUs communicate and collaborate across campuses to advance their mission of enhancing the Black student experience.

Those who engage in the study of Black communities and their environments cannot afford to remain indifferent or distant observers. Our history and present circumstances make it evident that preserving Black spaces, histories, ideas, and livelihoods is increasingly threatened. Those who hold the privilege to influence research agendas, bolster their resumes, and lead comfortable lives by scrutinizing Black communities must recognize their moral obligation and, to some extent, their self-serving interest in advocating for the resources necessary to uphold and safeguard these fundamental aspects of Black existence.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Studying how Black collegians cocreate Black spaces and a sense of community at a large, public PWI offered valuable insights that can enhance their experiences and outcomes. In 1933, educator and historian Carter G. Woodson published his reflections on the state of African American education in *The Mis-education of the Negro*. His critique of the quality of higher education for Black individuals in the midcentury still resonates today. Woodson (1990) wrote, "Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to begin with life as they find it and make it better. However, the instruction provided to Negroes in colleges and universities has often had the opposite effect" (p. 19).

A critical examination of the history of Black education in the United States exposes a significant gap between societal ideals and lived realities. There is a pressing need for institutions to address educational equity comprehensively. This requires thoroughly reckoning with U.S. history, focusing on restitution and rectification. Despite facing numerous societal, institutional, and personal challenges throughout my academic journey as a Black male doctoral

student, I have persevered and succeeded. As someone who has overcome these obstacles, I aspire to generate scholarship that serves those who come after me. College is often heralded as a pathway to upward social mobility and increased social capital. However, for this to ring true for Black students, the academic and social environments they inhabit must be free from racialized oppression, and they must have equitable access to quality education and support. Therefore, I offer implications for policy, practice, and supporting Black students in their educational journey.

Implications for Policy

The present study underscored the critical importance of Black spaces in meeting Black students' academic and social needs and fostering a sense of belonging in PWI environments (Cox et al., 2018; Deckman, 2022; Silberstein & LePeau, 2023). However, as this study illuminated, Black students have primarily been responsible for creating and sustaining these safe spaces without compensation for their efforts. This additional unpaid labor can lead to exhaustion and burnout, as noted by scholars (Linder et al., 2016). To the universities entrusted with the well-being of Black students, I urge you to financially support Black students, organizations, and spaces and amplify their voices through communication channels such as social media. Expanding the physical spaces like the BRC and the Black excellent floor would enhance their impact on Black students. Promoting Black events like the BSU Annual High School Conference and Black Greek yard show on platforms like Instagram would broaden their reach and exposure. As one participant aptly noted, "Investing in Black students could yield dividends in terms of Black student recruitment, retention, and overall sense of belonging. I would want the school to constantly remind us that they're thinking about us."

Implications for Black Faculty and Staff

Black faculty and staff have played a pivotal role in nurturing Black students at PWIs, whether in the classroom, BRC, or other administrative roles. Developing relationships with Black faculty and staff have yielded substantial benefits for Black students during and after college. Research suggested that BRC staff, for example, play a crucial role in fostering Black students' racial identity development (Hypolite, 2020a). Similarly, Black faculty, especially in Africana studies departments, offer guidance and motivation through culturally relevant pedagogy and active engagement in the Black campus community (Cox et al., 2018). Despite facing microaggressions and bearing additional labor as mentors to Black students (Smith, 2004), the efforts of Black faculty and staff are deeply appreciated by Black students. Many participants in this study expressed gratitude for the contributions of Black faculty and staff to their personal and academic growth. As one of only a few Black faculty and professional staff members at a PWI, I recognize the challenges of added responsibilities. However, our commitment to nurturing the next generation remains paramount for building a better society. To Black faculty and staff, I urge you to engage with Black students in and outside of Black spaces on campus whenever possible. Your mentorship and support are invaluable in empowering Black students to thrive academically and socially.

Implications for Black Students and Families

As a father to a Black high school senior, the question of who will care for and support my child weighs heavily on my mind. Recent data suggested a decline in Black student enrollment at 4-year institutions (C. Brown, 2023), with racial discrimination being a significant factor in students' decisions to enroll or leave (C. Brown, 2023). I urge Black families and students to carefully consider how universities support and graduate Black students, drawing

insights from recent reports on racial equity (Harper & Simmons, 2019). Black students at PWIs have taken proactive steps, such as creating guides for new Black students, to assisting in navigating their educational journey (Harvard Black Student Association, 2002).

Moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic has forced prospective students to rely more on online platforms for college information. Social media, in particular, has emerged as a valuable tool for assessing the racial climate of campuses and finding supportive communities. For example, several students who were limited in their online research due to the pandemic restrictions discovered the vibrant Black community at SSU through social media. Practices like this promise to improve experiences and outcomes for Black students (C. Brown, 2023). In deciding where to send our children for higher education, we must be discerning, choosing institutions where our children will not only be wanted but also nurtured and supported in their academic and personal growth.

Student participants in the study shared advice for incoming Black freshmen, urging them to get involved in Black spaces as soon as possible. Streets (2022) emphasized the significance of peer advice in helping Black students navigate PWI environments, particularly in digital spaces. Reflecting on my own experience as a shy freshman in a sea of faces, I recall not having a BRC or Black excellence floor during my undergraduate years. To connect with other Black students meant going to BSU meetings or events held by Black fraternities and sororities. Despite my initial hesitation about engaging in large and unfamiliar spaces, I ultimately found my community through my fraternity, a decision made at 18 that has forged a bond extending over 2 decades and provided support beyond measure. To Black students embarking on their educational journey at PWIs, I encourage you to seek out your community as soon as possible. Whether through an Africana studies class, the BRC, or joining a Black student organization,

engaging in these spaces has the potential to enrich your journey and shape the trajectory of your life beyond college.

Limitations

Although this study was conducted with meticulous attention to detail, rigor, and ethical considerations, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This research focused on the process of Black community building at a PWI, primarily exploring participants' perceptions and definitions of the Black campus community. It analyzed the intricacies of the places, people, and rituals that contributed to this community, and the pivotal role played by the BSU as a safe space and advocate for Black students on campus.

The first limitation of this study was the disproportionate representation of Black male participants compared to Black women. Out of the 18 interviews conducted with student participants, only three were women. Participant recruitment primarily involved posting fliers in the BRC and sharing them with BSU, along with distributing fliers via Instagram to Black student organizations. Upon recognizing the overrepresentation of Black men, efforts were made to strategically reach out to Black sororities and other student organizations to involve more women. Additionally, snowball sampling methods were employed by asking male participants to recommend female peers for study participation. Although the narratives provided by participants offered valuable insights and addressed gaps in the literature on the experiences of Black collegians, the study would benefit from increased representation of Black women's voices. Researchers have highlighted the unique experiences of Black women engineering majors (Halkiyo & Hailu, 2023) and identified factors contributing to Black women's persistence at PWIs (Stewart, 2020). Incorporating more perspectives from Black women would enhance the richness and comprehensiveness of the study findings.

Another limitation of this study was the absence of Black student–athletes in the sampling pool. The overrepresentation of Black male student–athletes in revenue-generating sports at PWIs has been extensively documented in scholarship (Harper, 2016, 2018; Harper et al., 2013). Other researchers have explored how Black women athletes build community at PWIs through relationships with coaches, teammates, and advisors (Ofoegbu, 2023). One participant in this study noted the strained relationship between the Black community and Black student–athletes. They observed that though there is no animosity between the groups, in recent years, athletes have become more visible at social events, particularly Black fraternity parties. The deliberate segregation of Black student–athletes from the Black campus community is referred to as the "sports industrial complex" (Brooks, 2016). However, throughout history, Black athletes have used their visibility and fame for social change, as demonstrated by athlete activists like Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Colin Kaepernick, and Naomi Osaka. For instance, in 2015, at the University of Missouri, Black football players played a pivotal role in the #ConcernedStudent1950 movement, threatening to cancel the season, which ultimately led to the dismissal of the university system president (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019; Brooks, 2016). Narratives from Black student–athletes about their experiences navigating the PWI environment and their sense of connection or belonging to the Black community would have provided valuable insights for this study.

A final limitation of this study acknowledged that not all Black students who attend PWIs engage in Black spaces. One reason for not engaging with the Black community could be the social atmosphere. As discussed in this study, participants indicated they themselves were shy or introverted and hesitant to put themselves in highly social situations. I have also acknowledged

my own experiences and not feeling like BSU was the space for me due to its highly social atmosphere.

Another possible explanation for students not engaging could involve racial identity development. Tatum (1992) outlined Cross's (1971, 1978) model of Black racial identity development, which progresses through five stages: (a) preencounter, (b) encounter, (c) immersion/emersion, (d) internalization, and (e) internalization-commitment. Tatum's research indicated that Black students may not progress through these stages in a linear fashion. During the preencounter stage, Black students may have internalized negative stereotypes about Black people and might hesitate to participate in predominantly Black spaces due to a lack of identification with Blackness or a fear of not being perceived as authentically Black. The Black campus community demonstrated a willingness to meet students where they are and offer various opportunities for engagement at their own pace. Future studies should explore the factors contributing to why some Black students do not engage with the Black campus community.

Coda

As I exited the BSU meeting, I talked with Zee, the cultural chair and a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., the sister organization of my fraternity. That day, the theme of discussion at the BSU meeting was "community conversations," during which students shared their experiences on campus and discussed ways to enhance the Black campus community. Zee mentioned that it was the first time the group had such an open discussion. In a light-hearted tone, I jokingly remarked to her that, given the discussion topic, they were conducting research for me. Zee explained the goal was to provide a space where students could openly share their experiences to facilitate improvements in the community. Ending the meeting with each student sharing one thing they could do to enhance the community demonstrated a sense of

accountability and responsibility among the participants. Before I departed, I commended the group for engaging in such a mature conversation and expressed my pride in the level of care they demonstrated during the discussion.

This brief vignette demonstrates how the Black campus community at SSU has been cultivated through care and dedication to fostering a sense of belonging among Black students. This dissertation began with a reflection on the value of higher education for Black individuals. Having navigated PWIs for over 2 decades, I have witnessed the challenges associated with this pursuit. Amid growing skepticism about the value of higher education, bell hooks reminds us "The academy is not paradise." However, she contends that it is a space where learning thrives and where "a place where paradise can be created"(hooks, 1994, p. 2).

This research demonstrated the ways in which Black students create their own paradise in PWI campuses. The findings revealed a Black campus community characterized by resilience and active engagement, with Black liberatory spaces serving as its foundation. The study underscored the significant role of the BSU as the cornerstone of the community highlighting the hidden labor costs involved in sustaining it. The findings from this study provide theoretical and rich qualitative insight into Black students' experiences.

This study emphasized Black campus communities' resilience and agency in shaping their environments to meet their needs. However, to achieve genuine equity and inclusion, institutions of higher learning must recognize and actively support the development of Black liberatory spaces. By addressing various forms of inequality and racism and providing support and resources for initiatives led by Black campus communities, institutions can cultivate an atmosphere of inclusivity and belonging. Prioritizing the perspectives and needs of Black students ensures that no student is overlooked, misinformed, or miseducated.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Adult Consent Form
For the research study entitled:
From Counterspaces to Community: A Qualitative Case Study Analysis of Black Community Making at a PWI

I. Purpose of the research study
Charles L. Watkins III is a doctoral student in the Education for Social Justice program in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore how members of BSU find, build, and maintain community at a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to take part in the following research activity:

Interviews: You will be asked to meet with a researcher for a semi-structured interview. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience. During these interviews, you will be asked to answer questions about your identity, campus culture, mentorship, friendship on campus, culture, race, challenges faced, support systems and the Black Student Union. You do not have to answer any questions you choose not to answer. If you agree, your participation will be audiotaped. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, handwritten notes will be taken. Your participation in the study will take a total of 60 minutes.

Location: Interviews will take place either in person or virtually via zoom. In-person interviews will occur at the SDSU Black Resource Center or a campus location of the participants' choosing. In the instance of virtual interviews that take place via zoom, a link will be provided to the participant by Charles Watkins. Participants will be asked to turn off their camera to only record the audio portion of the interview.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
There is a possibility that the questions, conversation, and dialogue involved in participating in this study could elicit some discomfort or uncomfortable emotions from participants and therefore presents a minimal risk of emotional discomfort. Below are resources to pursue mental health services, and hotlines to reach mental health professionals in a time of crisis or need:

- Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCRT) - Access & Crisis Line: (888) 724-7240

- San Diego County Behavioral Health Resources for managing Mental Health
  https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/hhsa/programs/bhs/
- https://211sandiego.org/health-wellness/mental-health-services/

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the Black campus community, BSU as a student government association, and information to better support Black undergraduate students experiences' more broadly and at predominantly white institutions in particular.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:
1) Charles L. Watkins III USD Email: xxxxx@SanDiego.edu
2) Dr. Joseph Lathan USD Email: xxxxx@SanDiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Please check each one of the boxes to tell us what you want to do:
☐ No, I do not want to be in the research study.
☐ Yes, I want to be in this research study.

Please check box to indicate your consent for the following:
☐ I give permission to be audio recorded in the interview.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval

September 8,

2023

Charles

Watkins
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science

Re: **Expedited** - Initial - IRB-2023-465, From Counterspaces to Community: A Qualitative Case Study Analysis of Black Community Making at a PWI

Dear Charles Watkins:

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-2023-465: From Counterspaces to Community: A Qualitative Case Study Analysis of Black Community Making at a PWI.

Decision: Approved. This study may start no earlier than **September 8, 2023**.

IRB Review Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Administrative Check-In Date: November 23, 2023. Please submit a Renewal application for the study by this administrative check- in date. If the project is completed by this date, please submit a Closure application for the study instead.

Findings: This approval is based on the intended work and scope of activities outlined in the submitted proposal. If the research team makes changes to the project and/or its study protocols or materials used with participants, the PI or their designated team member must submit a modification application for IRB's re-evaluation.

Researcher Notes: Please note that the PI's human subjects research training will expire on Nov. 23, 2023. Administrative check-in date is set for this date instead of the standard one-year anniversary check-in period. If the project continues past this date, please update your CITI training record and **submit a renewal application by Nov. 23, 2023**.

Internal Notes:

The USD IRB requires annual renewal of all active studies reviewed and approved by the IRB. Please submit an application for renewal prior to the annual anniversary date of initial study approval.
If an application for renewal is not received, the study will be administratively closed.

Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.

Applications for full review must be submitted at least two weeks prior to the next scheduled monthly IRB meeting; see https://www.sandiego.edu/irb/updates/ for specific deadlines. You may submit an IRB application for expedited or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

Truc Ngo, PhD

APPENDIX C

Instrument 1 – Student/Recent Alum Semistructured Interview Guide

***If conducted in-person**: Do I have permission to audio record this interview?
***If conducted virtually via Zoom**: Do I have permission to audio record this interview? For the purposes of this study only your voice recording will be kept and analyzed, please turn off your camera during the audio recording.

Student Culture

Context and Introduction

- Please share how you identify yourself ethnically and racially?
- Why did you choose to attend this university?
- Describe what a typical day looks like for you
- *Probing (follow-up)*

Friends

- Do you hang out with and study with the same group of friends?
- How did you originally make friends on campus?
- Are most of your friends involved in the Black community?
- Do you have many friends of other races? About how many?
- How has race impacted your life on campus?

Gender

- Would you say there is a difference between the experience between men and women in the Black community?
- What's the difference between being a black (man/woman) and a man/woman of another race?

Academics

- What is your major? Why did you choose this major?
- How has your experience with academics been?
- *Probing (follow-up)*
    - o Where do you go for help? Support?

Black Community

- How would you describe the Black culture here?
- How would you define the Black community at SSU?
- *Probing (follow-up)*
    - o What/who would you consider to be key components of the Black community?
    - o Where do most Black students hang out? Study? Live?
- How, if at all, does race shape your experience on campus?
- *Probing (follow-up)*
    - o What's different about being Black at SSU?
    - o What's good about being Black at SSU? Something positive.
- *Probing (follow-up)*

  - Do you know many black students who started at SSU that ended up transferring? Why did they leave?
- What about you? Why do you stay?
- What do you enjoy about SSU?

Institution and BRC
- Describe your experience with the BRC
- How did you find out about the BRC
- How often do you frequent the BRC? How much time per week do you spend there?
- Are there any BRC staff that you consider to be supportive of you specifically or of Black students in general?
- Do you feel supported by your institution? Why or why not?
- *Probing (follow-up)*
  - What types of support have you received?
  - Where or who do you go to when you need support?
  - Is there any support that you or your student organization has needed that has not been met? If so, what?
  - How do you learn about the information?
- Are there any staff or faculty that you can talk to, or have positive relationships with?
  - *Probing (follow-up)*
  - Would you consider any of them a mentor?
  - Say you needed recommendations from 3 of your professors, who would you pick?

<u>BSU/ASU</u>
- Why did you initially choose to participate in BSU
- *Probing (follow-up)*
  - How did you hear about BSU? Why do you stay involved?
  - Do you know of any people who aren't involved, if so, what reasons have they shared if any?
- How would you describe BSUs role in the Black community? In the larger campus community?
- Is ASU important on this campus? Why?
- How is ASU different than other organizations? Why are you involved in this as opposed to other student orgs?
- How many hours per week do you participate in BSU? What about other student organizations?
- Are you involved in any other student organizations? Tell me about your decision to join or not join.
- What student organizations would you consider to be important to the Black community? Why?

<u>Social Media</u>
- Talk about social media or online technologies — like websites, apps, or your cell phone — that you use to connect with or find out what's going on with other Black students.

- What social media platforms do you use personally? What about BSU?
- How do you use social media personally? What about BSU?
- May I have permission to follow you on social media? If so, please provide me with your social media handles.

APPENDIX D

Staff Interview Protocol

- Describe your position here.
- How do you support Black students?

Relationships

- How often do Black students come to you? What do they typically ask?

Perceptions of Black students

- When you think of Black students, what comes to mind?
- How would you describe the Black campus community?
- What are some of the main challenges you see?
- What are some things that Black students seem to be good at?
- Do you have any questions about the lives of Black students here?