The Collegiate Black Space: Black College Students' Use of New Counter-Spaces for Support, Knowledge Production, and Organizing for Activism

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THE COLLEGIATE BLACK SPACE: BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS’ USE OF NEW COUNTER-SPACES FOR SUPPORT, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND ORGANIZING FOR ACTIVISM

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The Collegiate Black Space: Black College Students’ Use of New Counter-Spaces for Support, Knowledge Production, and Organizing for Activism

Black collegians who attend historically white institutions continue to struggle with racism, microaggressions, feelings of alienation, minimal or improper advising, and an undue pressure to prove themselves (Bonner, 2010; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Strayhorn, 2010). These barriers to success result in part due to a lack of support from the colleges and universities that they attend (Allen, 1992; Parker, Puig, Johnson & Anthony, Jr., 2016). With institutional benefits designed to benefit white students over students of color, Black students must find their own alternatives for collaboration and to provide support for their peers.

Many Black spaces can be defined as third spaces (Bhabha, 1994), where Black people go to find community, share information, and get advice. Using a concept I developed called the collegiate Black space, this dissertation argues that Black college students who attend historically white institutions have also turned digital spaces into Black spaces—spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to use in-depth interviews to explore Black students’ use of digital spaces help their peer support efforts to organize and find community at historically white institutions. A better understanding of how Black students use third spaces to navigate the academy will help address the minimal body of research that looks at student uses of digital counter-spaces as a form of resistance against institutional oppression. This dissertation draws upon three theoretical frameworks—Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) in education, Social Identity Theory
SIT), and Black Identity Theory (BIT)—to explore the lived experiences of Black college students at historically white colleges and universities.

A focus group and individual interviews were conducted with a group of six Black students at a Tier 1 school in California who are building a digital platform that will allow peer connections, the sharing of resources and information, and organizing of activism efforts. A thematic data analysis revealed four main themes: 1) what it is like to be an academic while Black, 2) the challenges of Black collegians dealing with the inequalities of dual pandemics, 3) institutional oppression and Black student self-reliance as a form of resistance, and 4) how Black student fugitivity has gone digital. The findings of this dissertation affirm the need for a greater understanding of how peer spaces shape a Black student’s experience while in college, and the implications of my research study call for authentic institutional support of autonomous Black student spaces.
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all that you’ve done for me, but I’m at a loss for words. Until I come up with something, for now I’ll thank you for having high expectations of me. I sincerely hope I have done you proud.

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To my parents, I am what I am because of you. Daddy, even though I lost you in the middle of this dissertation process, I know that you’ve been checking on me because from time to time I’d hear your signature line, “Hey, Kid, what’s going on?” After I’d say, “Hey, Daddy,” I’d give you a quick update and envision your proud smile. Most people believe they have the best mother there is, and I’m no different. I struggled over what to say because I did not want my acknowledgement of her to sound trite, canned, or uninspired. Instead, I’m going to keep it short and quote a line from one of our favorite cult classic films, Throw Mama from The Train: “Owen loves [her] mama.” Only my mother understands the heartfelt sentiment of that statement and how deep that one simple sentence is.

Lastly, to those who came before me as my “doctoral scholar ancestors,” thank you for modeling what it means to be an intelligent Black badass. A cliché statement people often make is that their family values education, and I believe mine is no different in that regard. Where we are different is how we express it. I am the fifth person on my dad’s side of the family and the second on my mom’s to earn a doctorate. I am proud of our collective educational achievements and proud of us individually. My uncle Pat and cousins Aaron, Kelly, and Nikki set the bar extremely high. But it was my uncle-mentor Virgus who paved the way by setting an example for me to live up to. He never suggested that I would need to think hard about whether I had what it took to get over that high bar. While we sat in his favorite booth at his favorite café, I asked if I could do it. With a slight smirk and eye roll he said, “I have no doubt that you can. Now what are you ordering for breakfast?” Because of him, I had no doubts either. Thank you for being right, Uncle Virgus.
This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Chapter I: The Research Problem

Statement of the Problem

When the faculty or the staff couldn’t help you, or wasn’t trying to help, you had to confide in somebody. We [Black students] had to stick together. The brothers that were upperclassmen showed you how to navigate the campus in and out of the classroom. (Brooms & Davis, 2017, p. 318)

In the quote above, a young African American man describes a common issue that occurs among Black college students who attend historically white institutions (HWIs)—they turn to each other for support because they do not receive it from the academy (Brooms & Davis, 2017).

The lack of support from faculty and staff, and the organic formation of Black student spaces, is an old topic of interest for me. While reflecting on the many years I attended HWIs, whether in high school, college, or graduate school, I noticed a recurring theme: we Black students banded together to share information and resources, acting as fictive family members. I could count on a fellow Black student to have my back.

My story is not unique. More than 20 years after I graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) I discovered that not much has changed for Black college students. They are still having to serve as a fulcrum for one another; the present dearth of HWI support prompted the idea for this study. Black collegians attending HWIs continue to struggle with racism, feelings of alienation, tokenism, and microaggressions (Grier-Reed, 2010; Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen & Milem, 1998). These barriers result in part due to a lack of foundational support from the colleges and universities that they attend (Allen, 1992; Parker, Puig, Johnson & Anthony, Jr., 2016). According to
Patton (2016), institutions of higher education, along with state and federal policymakers—the preponderance of whom are white—all have a hand in determining who is given the opportunity to flourish. In addition, these institutions do little to disrupt the status quo of systemic racism, beyond developing policies and curriculum that on the surface promote diversity, but at their core do not provide students with a deeper understanding of oppression and the importance of dismantling it (Patton, 2016). There is no incentive or vested interest in HWIs doing so, as the creation of transformative spaces for students of color poses a threat to the power structure that privileges white students over everyone else (Patton, 2016). As such, only the most problematic forms of discrimination are addressed (Hurtado et al., 1998).

A college campus is a complex social system, due in part to the relationships among people, bureaucratic procedures, institutional traditions, and larger socio-historical environments (Hurtado et al., 1998). Black college students enter these institutions feeling that they are intruders who have been granted special access to be there (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Additionally, Black and other students of color feel that many of the networks available to their white counterparts are either closed off to them or difficult to access, or they experience feelings of alienation in academic settings (Lewis, Chesler, & Foreman, 2000). As a result, Black collegians receive little support from the institution that is, according to their charter, mission, and goals, obligated to provide them with a quality educational experience regardless of the color of their skin (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Despite the progress of Black students’ enrollment in colleges and universities across the country, national trends suggest that they continue to face unique obstacles and stressors while attending HWIs (Bonner, 2010; Strayhorn, 2010). Black college students
face racism and discrimination (e.g., stereotypical assumptions, microaggressions, and flagrant hostilities), difficult transitions, minimal or improper advising, undue pressure to prove themselves, and a lack of supportive relationships (Bonner, 2010; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Strayhorn, 2010). They continually encounter white students, faculty, and administrators who treat them as though they are socially and educationally “indigestible” (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 51).

Historically white colleges and universities have yet to dismantle systemic whiteness and white privilege on campus (Franklin, 2016). When “embedded benefits” (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 285) exist that benefit white students—like predominantly white fraternities and sororities that have houses that give members a place to meet or live on campus—Black students have to find their own alternatives for peer socialization and collaboration, to provide support for their peers, and minimize feelings of alienation.

**Background and Need for the Study**

College achievement does not rely on a singular factor; academic success is due to several influencers, including peer support (Bonner, 2010). The intellectual development college students experience is partly a result of the role their peers play in their lives, and peer interactions can be just as influential as classroom experiences, if not more so (McFeeters, 2010). Social support from peers fosters feelings of resilience, and, therefore, opportunities to develop positive, supportive relationships with other students on campus can enhance their ability to persist in the face of challenges (Strayhorn, 2010). Peer support may be extremely important for the academic adjustment of college students, as peers are more able to provide the resources needed for their specific challenges (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Many Black students prefer to get the
guidance and mentoring they need through peer relationships, and because of the conspicuous absence of role models who look like them; they will encounter few, if any, Black professors, or those who will provide them with a Black perspective (Bonner, 2010; Feagin & Sikes, 1995).

The physical and social spaces of historically white institutions often embody the presumption of a one-way integration for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students (Feagin et al., 1996). For Black students, being able to identify with the higher education settings they find themselves in can be incongruent with who they are culturally, financially, ethnically, or racially, which presents a challenge during their college experiences—and underscores the importance of support (Bonner, 2010). Historically positioned as outsiders, Black college students have come together to form their own insider organizations, including Black student unions, fraternities and sororities, culture centers, major-specific clubs, civic, government and religious organizations, and arts groups (McFeeters, 2010). These third spaces have prided themselves on developing social, moral, intellectual, and cultural values to uplift the Black college student (Strayhorn et al., 2010). Black peer groups have helped to enhance students’ feeling of belonging, and the information and resources gained from participation in them influence their satisfaction while on campus (Museus, 2008). For some students, Black cultural centers and organizations on HWIs serve as safe havens, a home away from home, a retreat from campus hostilities, and a counter to the resistance to their presence on campus (Museus, 2008; Strayhorn et al., 2010).

Black collegians’ participation in organizations gives them the opportunity to leverage the environments as a source of identity development and expression, and
connect with other Black peers (Museus, 2008). The roles that Black student support systems play include maintaining self-esteem, increasing social and academic capabilities, and the management of stress and coping (Fidler & Godwin, 1994). Black students become empowered by peer organizations to express discontent with their campus environments and effect change for the betterment of the racial and ethnic cultures and communities of which they are a part (Museus, 2008).

Social media also functions as an important cultural expression for Black collegians at HWIs (Lee, 2012). They see social media as a vehicle to express their culture in a physical environment where the population of students who look like them is low; it serves as a way for them to connect and bond (Correa & Jeong, 2011). Black students have also used social media to organize and share information (Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). It is a tool that has been instrumental in helping Black students spotlight racial discrimination when traditional mainstream media outlets ignore their concerns and the violence against them and other marginalized people (Williams, 2015).

Black students at HWIs find themselves engaged in protest and activism as they fight to find acceptance in their educational environment (Jones & Reddick, 2017). However, while activism has long been a part of the Black student experience at colleges and universities across the country, it has evolved over the years by adapting to and growing with technological advances (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Activism against acts of macro and microaggressions targeting Black college students has gained more visibility in recent years with the advent of social and digital media, which help put the issues of race and racism on campus at the forefront of the national consciousness in the
twenty first century (Bauer-Wolf, 2017). Social media hashtags, such as #BlackOnCampus, have been instrumental in allowing Black students to share experiences of racism and hostility across multiple college campuses, which can ultimately lend support and momentum to a student-led movement (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Digital activism can be a transformative experience for some Black college students whose “accumulated frustrations” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 10) from witnessing continuous moments of injustice force them to go from being passive observers to active participants in digital and boots-on-the-ground forms of activism.

A significant number of studies have explored the negative experiences of Black students on HWIs, with researchers such as Strayhorn (2008) and Parker et al. (2011) focusing on Black male persistence and the role of same sex peer support. This singular exploration of male identified students warrants further investigation on the impact peer support has on all genders. Moreover, research is scant on how Black college students use digital tools to connect, organize and share information (Davis III et al., 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Also, little research exists on the role social and digital media play in the activist efforts of Black and other students of color (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Schofield Clark, 2016). Although Black students continue to receive minimal support from the institutions of higher education they attend (Parker et al., 2016), there is negligible research that brings together Black student uses of digital counter-spaces that serve as vehicles for support, knowledge production, and organizing for activism.
Purpose of the Study

Many Black spaces can be defined as third spaces; historically, Black churches (Gilkes, 1998), barber shops (Mills, 2013), beauty shops (Gill, 2010), and social clubs (Lacy, 2004) represent examples of spaces where Black people can go to find community, share information, and get advice. Using a concept I call the collegiate Black space (see Figure 1), this dissertation argues that Black college students who attend historically white institutions have also turned spaces into Black spaces—spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported.

Figure 1

*The Collegiate Black Space Model*

*The Collegiate Black Space, Defined*

There are Black college students who have taken the academy out of the equation when it comes to attempting to deal with the anti-Black racism that they experience at HWIs (Bowden & Buie, 2021). Without the expectation of institutional support, Black
collegians have instead created Black peer spaces, which they use to help buffer themselves from the anti-Blackness of the academy (Carter, 2007). Applying Ross’ (2020) definition of a Black educational fugitive space where Black students practice educational fugitivity “through the social production of Black space in the margin” (p. 48), the collegiate Black space is a concept that reflects the creation of Black spaces to address anti-Black racism in higher education in its myriad forms.

The collegiate Black space concept uses a positive, anti-deficit lens to center how Black college students leverage each other’s strengths and gifts to persist and thrive while attending historically white institutions. The heuristic in Figure 1 symbolizes the collegiate Black space as a three-pronged flexible approach that Black college students employ when creating and maintaining spaces and represents how they hold space for one another through the necessary and vital ways of sustaining themselves during their HWI experience.

The spaces Black students create are authentic and nurturing. Sometimes organic, sometimes planned or structured, the creation of these Black spaces or “micro-communities” (Brooms, 2018, p. 142) have the goals of defining and then fulfilling the needs of Black students who attend historically white colleges and universities. The collegiate Black space exemplifies three ambitions of Black student agency: support, knowledge production, and organizing for activism:

1. **Support.** Black collegiate peers can help buffer some of the negativity that comes from being in an environment perceived as hostile (Thelamour et al., 2019). They do this in part by creating micro-communities that allow them to develop meaningful relationships that provide comfort and
support (Brooms & Davis, 2017). These micro-communities, or what bell hooks (1990) described as safe “homeplaces,” give Black students “the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture [their] spirits” (p. 42). Two functions of these supportive homeplaces are to share information and resources and provide advice and counsel (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Brooms, 2018). Black collegians also rely on each other to help mitigate the psychological stressors of an HWI, problem solve, and validate their existence on campus (Grier-Reed, 2013). These supportive peer relationships and micro-communities contribute to Black college students’ success and allow them to persist in college (Brooms & Davis, 2017).

2. **Knowledge Production.** Black students produce knowledge to counter dominant false narratives that describe them as not being as capable as their white counterparts (Sawyer III & Palmer, 2014). Black collegians also use counter-representations to frame themselves positively to disrupt negative narratives that situate them as violent, lacking in intellect, and poor contributors to society (Hotchkins, 2017). Knowledge production through counter-storytelling can foster relationships and connections for Black students who experience anti-Black racism, as their stories reflect a mutual understanding of their circumstances (Delgado, 1988). Another benefit of Black students producing knowledge through counter-stories is a collective self-preservation and healing (Delgado, 1988).

3. **Activism.** Although Black college students are a part of an educational system that has been integrated since the 1950s, many of them still
encounter a lack of resources, they have few role models who look like them, and there are just as few representatives at the decision-making table (Hendricks et al., 2021). These issues serve as catalysts for their activism, as well as having to deal with microaggressions and unhospitable campus racial climates (Hendricks et al., 2021; Hotchkins, 2017). Black students use tools, tactics, and spaces to organize efforts focused on collective resistance and engage in actions to correct injustices and unequal treatment (Hendricks et al., 2021).

Online meets offline: the intersection of social media activism and traditional activist efforts, including protests and rallies, have mobilized the current generation of Black student activists (Hendricks et al., 2021). Social media can also serve as a springboard that activates in-person activist events on university campuses (Hendricks et al., 2021). Activism has long been and continues to be an integral part of Black college students’ reaction to the anti-Black words and deeds of the academy (Hendricks et al., 2021). Yet, “in order to participate in activism, one must first be racially socialized to see themselves as Black, value Black people and culture, and then spend a lifetime working toward achieving social change” (Hotchkins, 2017, p. 278).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use in-depth interviews to explore Black students’ use of the collegiate Black space and how it impacts their experiences at historically white four-year institutions. I also studied how they use online spaces and other technologies to help their peer support efforts to organize and find community.
Having a better understanding of how Black students use various spaces to navigate the academy helps fill a gap in existing research.

**Research Questions**

The four questions for this study are supported by a central research aim, all of which are defined below.

Research aim: To examine how third spaces help Black students succeed at historically white colleges and universities, and in addition to physical spaces, what other forms of support (e.g., online spaces) may play a role in them helping one another.

Research questions:

1) What do Black college students expect of the HWI they attend in terms of supporting them academically, socially, and emotionally?

2) In what ways do Black students use digital peer spaces to provide support (due to a lack of HWI support) and what motivates them to seek alternatives?

3) How do new counter-spaces (e.g., technologies) currently play a role in Black college students supporting each other?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This research is framed using three theoretical frameworks: Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) in education and two identity theories, those being Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Black Identity Theory (BIT). BlackCrit addresses the importance of and need for peer support and how it becomes an integral part of Black college students’ success. The SIT framework helps to explain the practices of online participatory tools among
people of color. BIT offers a critical view of the influence a strong Black racial identity can have within the contexts of institutional discrimination and oppression.

**Black Critical Theory in Education**

BlackCrit in education assists in analyzing how social and educational policies draw upon anti-Blackness and serve as forms of violence against Black students (Dumas & Ross, 2016). BlackCrit exposes how these policies aid and license Black student struggles (Dumas & Ross, 2016). I proverbially take my hat off to the theories that paved the way for BlackCrit in education to come into existence: Critical Race Theory (CRT), CRT in education, and Black Critical Theory.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory is a theoretical framework that emerged in the 1970s with the work of Derrick Bell, a legal scholar concerned about stalled or rolled back civil rights advances and the slowness of racial reform in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado, Stefancic & Harris, 2017). In their criticism of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement, Bell and fellow scholars, lawyers, and activists—including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Lani Guinier—felt that although CLS problematized the role of the United States (US) legal system in legitimizing oppressive structures in American society, it lacked the dimensions of race and racism in its analysis (Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Yosso, 2005). These critical race scholars were committed to exposing the presence of racism in US rules of law (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

CRT was a natural outgrowth of CLS; it accounts for racism’s role in American meritocracy in that it helps critique racist structures in many of its variations (Delgado et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT scholars and activists focused on analyzing and
changing the connections between racism and power in the law and broad categories such as history, economics, space, and self-interest (Delgado et al., 2017). CRT also incorporates the concepts of community, and group empowerment and cohesion (Delgado et al., 2017). It is a theory that has an activist component that attempts to understand society, its racial hierarchies, and how society can be improved (Delgado et al., 2017).

Multiple tenets comprise the CRT model, and for the purposes of this dissertation I draw on the five that are most relevant to it. Critical Race Theory:

1. Argues that whiteness is a socially constructed and malleable identity, leveraging systems that work to benefit those who are seen as white and exclude those who are not (Leonardo, 2009).
2. Centers and recognizes the significance of race and racism and their intersections with other forms of oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
3. Challenges white privilege and dominant ideologies including meritocracy, equal opportunity, and color blindness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
4. Is committed to social justice by offering a transformative response to oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
5. Recognizes the importance of centering experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Critical Race Theory in education.** Although CRT began as a movement centered around the law, it spread beyond the discipline into other areas including
education (Delgado et al., 2017). It is a theoretical and analytical framework that identifies how racism presents itself in education and helps explain:

1. Racial disparities, and how race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005).
2. The contradictory nature of education; schools most often oppress and marginalize certain groups while maintaining the power to emancipate and empower (Yosso, 2005).
3. That educational disparities are intractable, and racism will endure (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRT critiques instructional strategies that label Black students as deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Through counter-storytelling, CRT in education allows dominant ideologies, white privilege, and deficit thinking to be refuted while validating and centering the experiences of people of color (Yosso, 2005). Those who are marginalized and oppressed discover that they are not alone as victims of racism and become “empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

**Black Critical Theory.** Introduced to the field of education by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, CRT is considered a Black theorization of race in that it attempts to analyze and respond to the institutionalized racism faced by Black people (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Ladson-Billings and Tate’s interpretation of CRT focuses on anti-Black racism, but CRT in itself is not a theory that looks specifically at Blackness; it functions as a critique of white supremacy and analyzes the administration of laws
designed to subdue Black people (Dumas & Ross, 2016). While CRT addresses white dominance, Black Critical Theory, also known as BlackCrit, was designed to expose and address anti-Blackness ideologies and institutional practices that are racist in nature (Dumas & Ross, 2016). There is a discernable difference between CRT, a theory that focuses on racism, and BlackCrit, which centers around Blackness in an anti-Black world: the former may leverage Black examples in its critiques of racism, while the latter “confronts the specificity of anti-Blackness, as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps most importantly, as an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416).

At the foundation of BlackCrit is anti-Blackness, which goes beyond describing racism against Black people; anti-Blackness exposes the “antagonistic relationship between Blackness and (the possibility of) humanity” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 429). Black humanity and its possibilities are threatened and despised by those who carry feelings that come from societal attitudes entrenched hundreds of years ago because of slavery and its aftereffects (Dumas & Ross, 2016). As a result, dogmas, policies, and practices find their reasoning in and reproduce Black pain (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

Another conceptual framing of BlackCrit is that “Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 430). With neoliberalism gaining popularity in the 1980s, so did the sentiment that racism is a hinderance to equal opportunity; those who are not upwardly mobile fail because of their own actions (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Black people are considered a problem and stand in the way of multicultural progress as the least assimilable to the neoliberal-multicultural
imagination, as “persistent joblessness, disparities in educational achievement, and high rates of incarceration are all seen as problems created by Black people, and problems of Blackness itself” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 430).

A third BlackCrit frame centers around the need for a Black space for fantasy that is liberatory in nature and counters the revisionist narrative that erases white people from a history of racial supremacy (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

**Social Identity Theory**

The core principle of Identity Theory is that human beings have multiple identities, and these identities are descriptors attributed by other people and acknowledged by the individual (Burke & Stets, 2009). As such, a person incorporating an identity into the self involves integrating the meanings and roles that link the person to social structures (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to Burke and Stets (2009) a social structure is defined as the organized interactions and role relationships that happen in small networks: groups, organizations, communities, or institutions. A person is embedded in social networks by his or her role within each individual network (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The central premise of Social Identity Theory is that people categorize themselves in terms of the social groups to which they belong or associate (e.g., race, religion, or class) (Chan, 2014; Harlow & Benbrook, 2019). Individuals are motivated to make subjective positive evaluations of their societal inner circles relative to everyone else to maintain a positive sense of self (Chan, 2014). SIT helps explain group identification, where those who highly identify with a group are more likely to internalize the groups’ norms and values, act in accordance with its goals and interests, and behave in a manner
that heightens the group’s social position (Chan, 2014). Group identity is a necessary component of creating solidarity and commitment, and fosters collective action (Harlow & Benbrook, 2019). High identifiers to a group have a greater propensity to participate in protests, social movements, and other forms of collective action (Chan, 2014).

**Social Identity Theory in education.** People look to connect with and be accepted by those they can relate to in ways that affirm and enhance positive feelings about themselves (Thelamour, George, & Ezeofor, 2019). As it relates to the motivations of college students who use participatory tools, social identity gratification demonstrates the importance of group belonging to young people; they seek out certain individuals and messages that support their social identities (Correa and Jeong, 2011). Race is the most important social group for people of color, and racial allegiances influence how they communicate amongst themselves (Harlow & Benbrook, 2019).

Race and ethnicity make up a social category used in social identification theory that provide young people with a layer of group membership and the emotional significance associated with it (Correa & Jeong, 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). College students value opportunities to connect with their communities, as said opportunities allow the students to bolster their social identity and have positive experiences by interacting with those who are like them (Correa & Jeong, 2011). Furthermore, the social identity gratification of media use can strengthen collective action participation (Chan, 2014) among college students of color.

**Black Identity Theory**

A racial group is a collective of people based on biologically- and socially-based associations, ancestry, behaviors, and practices (Morton & Parsons, 2018). The
expression of an individual’s racial identity is the extent to which a person incorporates or dismisses beliefs and ideas that are in relation to their understanding of and connection to a specific racial group (Morton & Parsons, 2018). Black Identity Theory posits the complex intersectionalities of one’s identity, which include knowing oneself as an individual and understanding the social context of what it means to be Black, and that Black identities are constructions—both sociological and psychological (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). According to Zirkel and Johnson (2016), having a strong Black racial identity means having positive identifications of being Black, along with possessing a critical consciousness of race and racism and how they connect to the historical, cultural, and societal contexts of being Black in the US.

The definition and implications of what Black racial identity is have a direct connection to the history of Black people in the US; anti-slavery, Black Power and Black Nationalist movements have all helped to define what it means to be Black (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Black theorists, including W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, noted that Black people having a distinctively Black identity was key to their successes post-slavery (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). This focus on identity development proved to be important primarily because “both slavery itself and pro-slavery rhetoric were so focused on depriving Black slaves of their humanity through the obliteration of personal identity” (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016, p. 302).

**Black Identity Theory in Education.** The collegiate space can provide an important context for Black students developing their racial identities (Thelamour et al., 2019). Additionally, HWIs may be perceived as alienating and isolating spaces by students who strongly identify with being Black, due to anti-Black prejudice from their
white peers, professors, and campus staff (Thelamour et al., 2019). However, having a positive racial identity can potentially help them anticipate, make sense of, and respond to acts of racism and discrimination (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). When Black students maintain a positive belief and pride in who they are racially, racial identity expression may act as a barrier to protect themselves against racism’s psychological effects (Morton & Parsons, 2018).

Racial identification can serve as a mode of defense for Black students who find themselves in difficult learning environments (Morton & Parsons, 2018). For example, those with a strong Black identity may realize that educators’ expectations may be lower for them and compensate by setting the bar higher for themselves (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). The realization of how institutional racism works better equips Black students to navigate the school space, including the classroom, interactions with other students, and the environment outside of class (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Black students who become aware of racism and discrimination on campus create “tools of resistance and resilience to gain and maintain school success” (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016, p. 305). A positive Black racial identity can enhance the educational outcomes and academic achievements of Black students (Morton & Parsons, 2018). Furthermore, peers can affirm one another’s Black identity in ways that an HWI’s setting may not (Thelamour et al., 2019).

**Delimitations**

Four delimitations are readily apparent relative to this research. First, students who attend two large public universities in Northern California were surveyed via focus group and one-on-one interviews. I am aware that conducting research at two universities put pressure on the data to represent various types of institutions, those being large versus
small and public versus private. Second, research representing other parts of the US was not included in this study. Third, only Black students are represented in this study, and those of other racial or ethnic groups were not asked to participate in either the focus group or interviews. Lastly, data collection occurred during a limited period, that being July 2020 through August 2020.

**Definition of Terms**

Within this research I may use terms that should be defined for the reader, and the definitions will help provide context.

**Anti-Blackness.** The socially constructed rendering of Black people as inhuman, disposable, and inherently problematic. Anti-Blackness endures in the organizational arrangement and cultural ethos of American institutions, including K-12 schools, colleges, and universities (Warren & Coles, 2020).

**BIPOC.** The acronym for Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

**Black students.** Refers to students of African American (AA) descent who were born, live, and have been socialized in the United States. It also includes students whose parents migrated to the US from an African country, but the students themselves were born in the US; AA students whose family descended from slavery or indentured servitude; and students who are multi-racial but identify as Black or African American. I may use the terms Black and African American interchangeably to identify the population of this study.

**Counter-story.** Stories that serve as tools to expose, analyze, and challenge the dominant narratives of racial privilege (Delgado, 1988). Counter-storytelling is also the
act of telling the stories of those whose experiences are rarely told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Digital media.** Digital media is digitized content that can be transmitted over the internet, computer networks, and mobile devices. This can include text, audio, video, graphics, websites, and social media.

**Microaggressions.** A term coined by Black psychiatrist and physician Dr. Chester Pierce, microaggressions are subtle insults that are verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual in nature; as well as other acts of disregard directed toward people of color, that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and are connected to internalized bias, power, and privilege (Franklin, 2016; Mwangi, Bettencourt, & Malaney, 2018). Smith et al. (2011) focused on defining the insults of racial microaggressions by describing them as 1) subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered insults, based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and 3) cumulative insults, which cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging whites (p. 300).

**Historically white institution (HWI).** The term “historically white institution” is typically interchangeable with the term “predominantly white institution” (PWI), which denotes a college or university with a white student enrollment of 50% or more. However, by definition, the term HWI does not reflect the historical dehumanization of Black people as property, who built and maintained the upkeep of predominantly white institutions of higher education (Johnson, 2019).
**Racial battle fatigue.** The cumulative physical and emotional effects of coping racial micro and macroaggressions endured by people of color (Smith et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2016).

**Racism.** Prejudice plus power (Rothenberg, as cited in Pease, 2010). Racism encompasses subtle and overt discriminatory practices, their institutional contexts, and the attitudes and ideologies that shape or rationalize them (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 7). Because racism is more than prejudice, one does not have to be racist to reproduce racial inequality (Pease, 2010). Institutional racism is defined as one group having comparative advantages or disadvantages of another based on race, particularly when the disadvantaged group has a colonial relationship with the dominant one (Anderson, 1988). “Like any other ‘feeling’ or ‘sense,’ racism is capable of affecting the social climate, political ideology, and economic policy within an educational … institution” (Anderson, 1988, p. 259).

**Students of color.** A term used to describe students who identify as Black or African American, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, or multiple racial identities.

**Third space.** A term originated by scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha, third spaces refer to places where people spend time between home (considered the “first place”) and work (defined as the “second place”). They are in-person or virtual communal spaces where people come together to exchange ideas, build relationships, and develop a sense of cohesion and identity (Bhabha, 1994). A third space can take the form of both creation and resistance, where the tactics behind forging the space serve as the creation to undermine the burdens placed on people (Doucet & Kirkland, 2021).
Educational Significance of the Study

Research studies have shown that Black college students—historically positioned as outsiders—come together to form their own insider groups that pride themselves on developing social, moral, intellectual, and cultural values to uplift them (Hurtado et al., 1998; Parker et al., 2016; Strayhorn, Terrell, Redmond, & Walton, 2010). As previously stated, Black peer groups help to enhance a college student’s feeling of belonging, and the information and resources gained from participation in them influence their satisfaction while on campus (Strayhorn et al., 2010). Also referenced earlier is the role of social media as an additional way for Black college students to connect and bond (Correa & Jeong, 2011).

Using BlackCrit in education, Social Identity Theory and Black Identity Theory, this study aims to contribute to existing research on Black college student peer spaces by presenting a view of how digital counter-spaces operate as modes of support, information and resource accumulation, and organizing for activism. Several studies focus on Black college students’ use of online spaces to organize for activism efforts. However, few speak to how these students use technologies as general support mechanisms. Scant research looks at both in-person and online spaces and how they serve as tools for Black college students to provide peer support, build funds of knowledge, and find community.

As previously noted, colleges and universities are complex social systems due to the interconnections of the people, policies, traditions, and socio-historical factors of the institutions (Hurtado et al., 1998). Therefore, in my view, the expectation that institutions of higher education will redesign their structures to improve the racial and cultural climates needed to support Black students should be viewed as a long-term endeavor. In
the meantime, furthering the research on how Black students leverage their peers to help
navigate the colleges and universities they attend because of a perceived lack of
institutional support may present new considerations for Black peer spaces.
Chapter II: Review of The Literature

As stated in Chapter I of this dissertation, little scholarship exists that addresses how Black college students at HWIs use digital counter-spaces to serve as vehicles for support, producing counter-knowledge, and organizing activist efforts. Therefore, this literature review represents an expanded discussion of peer support efforts and the ways in which they become an integral part of the success of Black college students. In addition to research that examines how Black college students support one another and how anti-Black racism have made this necessary, studies that explore Black college students’ use of online spaces and other technologies as tools to organize and find community have also been included. Both recent research and respected classics on the topic of Black peer support are represented in this literature review.

In order to explore Black peer support at HWIs, the following review of the literature is organized into three main sections: (a) Black students and education, (b) Black student peer support, and (c) digital communities.

Black Students and Education

Racial Capitalism

“Spaces are orientated around whiteness” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158), and “collective white space is physically, virtually, and technologically enclosed and encased in white societal values of privilege, capital, and phenomenology” (Desnoyers-Colas, 2021, p. 139). As it relates to higher education spaces, Anderson (1988) contended that the primary value and role of Black students who attend historically white institutions tend to serve as false symbols of integration and diversity and assist in the propagation of a white
ethnocentric ideology. Patton (2016) stated that colleges and universities have deep roots to white supremacy and are intrinsically linked to capitalism.

In a seminal work entitled Critical Race Theory: An Introduction (Delgado et al., 2017), Richard Delgado argued that the subordination of people of color and the relief of said subordination are dictated by the interests of white people, are rarely altruistic, and tend to coincide with the changing economic circumstances of white elites. Leong (2013) described the common practice of racial capitalism as white people and predominantly white institutions using non-white people for their social and economic value. According to Leong (2013), the process of racial capitalism requires and reinforces the commodification of racial identity and degrade that identity by “reducing it to another thing to be bought and sold” (p. 2152). As a society founded on capitalism, non-whiteness is commoditized and exploited for its market value (Leong, 2013). (Mustaffa, 2017) explained how educational systems use racial capitalism to sort students into categories based on their perceived value and disposability. Dancy et al. (2018) described how the very nature of racial capitalism means it is not possible for the American social order to continue without white people maintaining a transactional relationship to Black flesh.

Ahmed (2007) contended that white people do not have to face their whiteness and their whiteness goes unnoticed. Leong (2013) extended Ahmed’s argument by stating that white students, whose whiteness is invisible, are not required to think about their race, nor engage in complex identity performances as Black and other students of color are obliged to do. In Leong’s (2013) view, non-whiteness has become a source of value and HWIs have internalized the idea that diversity is a social good. By assigning value to
the inclusion of non-white people into our educational institutions, it allows colleges and universities to use BIPOC students as a commodity to be pursued and used. Leong (2013) provides examples of how Photoshopping a Black student onto the cover of an HWI’s application brochure or using their images in the school’s diversity and inclusion materials demonstrate two of the myriad ways racial capitalism perpetuates the exploitation of Black collegians. Scarritt (2019) stated that historically white colleges and universities are revenue-generators that are inspired to sell diversity as an attractive quality, while divorcing themselves from their association with racism, thereby empowering oppression. Ahmed (2006) argued that diversity signifies the presence of racialized others, which means historically white institutions have orientated themselves around whiteness—around those who were already in existence on campus. “The happy smiling face of diversity would not then simply re-brand the university but point instead to what gets concealed by this very image: the inequalities that are behind it, which give it its surface appeal” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 7).

Affiliating with students of color allows HWIs to benefit from the association without having to address racial equality and deflect charges of racism leveled at them (Leong, 2013). Without making a concerted effort to address the racial inequalities that HWIs perpetuate, the push to deflect and ignore rather than critically evaluate the characteristics that lead to racial capitalism make institutions of higher education sell what Scarritt (2019) called a “consumerist diversity” (p. 189).

Leong (2013) contended that despite being the source of capital, BIPOC students often do not benefit from racial capitalism and are instead harmed by it. Leong (2013) also argued that commodification of BIPOC students’ racial identity comes before and
then enables racial capitalism, however, racial capitalism confirms the existence of the commodification of race and deepens the harms it causes. Commodification requires certain types of identity performance, which damages the integrity of students of color, and results in an identity that “may be bought and sold on the individual market” (Leong, 2013, p. 2205). Leong (2013) argued that racial capitalism detaches racial identity from the person who lives that identity (Leong, 2013). Therefore, by not seeing a Black student’s racial identity, historically white institutions’ focus on acquiring and displaying diversity can preempt discussions about past racial injustices, current racial inequalities, and possible outcomes to improve such inequalities.

**Affirmative Action and Higher Education**

Cummings (1998) defined affirmative action as an attempt to create a systematic approach to open the doors of education, employment, and business development opportunities to qualified people who are members of groups that have faced enduring and persistent discrimination—specifically, people of color and women. Cummings (1998) described the purpose of affirmative action as an opportunity to give the US a way to address the systematic exclusion of people because of their race or gender “from opportunities to develop, perform, achieve and contribute” (p. 59). In Cummings’ (1998) view, affirmative action should evolve to address any shortcomings, and it should be retired when it has achieved what it set out to do. When Cummings (1998) wrote a journal article for the *Public Interest Law Journal*, he believed that day would come, but also acknowledged that evidence strongly suggests that it has yet to happen.

In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209 (more commonly known as Prop 209), an initiative that amended California’s constitution to prohibit the state from
giving preferences based on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public education, employment, and contracting (Oppenheimer, 2011). As it relates to higher education in California, including the two institutions in my study, Prop 209 banned race-sensitive admissions at California’s public colleges and universities (Oppenheimer, 2011). Jones (1998) contended that Prop 209 was cleverly packaged as the California Civil Rights Initiative, but the passing of the proposition dismantled both affirmative action and the civil rights it helped secure.

By passing Prop 209, California voters discarded a strategy designed to deal with the tremendously complex issues of racism, sexism, and inequality that plague our society (Jones, 1998). In higher education, statistical evidence has shown “an impact ranging from the minimal to the catastrophic” (Jones, 1998, p. 24). Jones argued that after the passing of Prop 209, the battleground for affirmative action in higher education became California’s elite public schools. He further elucidated that Prop 209 proponents believed that “‘because racial and gender preferences are wrong,’ students given a place in the system's undergraduate, graduate, or professional schools on the basis of affirmative action take away a place that should have been awarded by more ‘legitimate and traditional means’” (p. 24). Jones pointed out that from an educational point of view, affirmative action was designed to create exposure to diverse experiences and people, thereby adding to the quality and depth of a student’s collegiate experience. Jones also called out the irony that the one characteristic that cannot be considered as a contributor to a well-rounded educational experience is race. Jones believed that without affirmative action, equity and excellence at California’s public colleges and universities are sorely
impacted, not just for students of color, but also for white students whose educations are less rich because of Proposition 209.

Jones (1998) argued that the passage of Prop 209 exposed a correlation between more selective colleges and universities seeing a more dramatic downturn in enrollments of students of color. Despite some partial recoveries, the enrollment of Black students at California’s prestigious public institutions sharply declined after the enactment of Prop 209 (The JBHE Foundation, Inc., 1999). Students protested, lawsuits were filed, and strategy sessions were held to find ways around Prop 209 (Jones, 1998). Kelliher (2021) stated that in 2020, advocates attempted to repeal Prop 209 through a ballot initiative known as Proposition 16. It failed, but attention was drawn back to California’s continued racial disparities in higher education, despite an increase in the state’s racially diverse population.

“One key problem with [Proposition 209] debates is that affirmative action is framed as a zero-sum game, that if you give people a chance, you’re taking it away from another person” (Flores, as cited in Kelliher, 2021). “What we’re not talking about is the centuries of racial inequities and racial privilege that we’ve had in this country. As long as we’re framing this as me-me-me versus you-you-you, we’re going to keep forgetting that education is a public good” (Flores, as cited in Kelliher, 2021).

**A Lack of Black Faculty**

Gregory (2001) argued that the number of Black faculty members at an HWI is the most important predictor of enrollment and retention rates for first-year Black college students and the number of Black graduates. Grier-Reed (2013) contended that frequent contact with Black faculty members can be linked to Black students’ feeling that they are
better socially integrated and supported in a collegiate environment, earning higher grades, and perceiving themselves as progressing well in their courses. Strayhorn (2008) concurred that Black student-Black faculty relationships impact students’ satisfaction while in college. Brooms & Davis (2017) further elucidated that the sociocultural capital gained in student-faculty relationships can enhance a Black student’s collegiate experience and their sense of belonging. Grier-Reed (2013) argued that when a network that includes Black faculty and staff comes together to provide support and guidance to Black college students—particularly related to problem solving and making sense of their collegiate environment—it can help alleviate the perpetuation of inadequate strategies that prohibit them from successfully navigating the collegiate terrain of a historically white institution.

Because of the paucity of Black educators on historically white campuses, Black students continue to call for increases in the recruitment and retention of Black faculty members (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Despite the calls for more Black educators, Anderson (1988) stated that by limiting Black college student matriculation and refusing to hire Black faculty and staff members in significant numbers, historically white institutions assure the anti-Black and ethnocentric nature of higher education. The constant and unjust nature of anti-Blackness in the academy is additionally reflected in the fact that Black faculty members tend to be relegated to teach courses focused on race- or ethnic-related topics (Anderson, 1988).

**Feelings of Exclusion and Alienation**

In their research on anti-Blackness and higher education, Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018) described how historically white universities were originally created to
educate the children of US colonizers; institutions preserved social and racial inequality by only educating the male children of elite white families. With HWIs’ history of limited access and exclusion, present day students of color can feel alienated if their representation is small, according to Hurtado et al. (1998). Ahmed (as cited in Desnoyers-Colas, 2021) pointedly stated that BIPOC who attempt to exist in white spaces tend not to be welcomed, as these spaces often fail to accommodate the needs of anyone but white people. As such, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that Black students often enter institutions of higher education in the role of intruders who have been granted special permission to be there. Lewis, Chesler, and Forman (2000) also found that BIPOC students felt that many of the networks available to white students were closed off to them and difficult to access, or they were not wanted in academic settings.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that multicultural education began as a reform movement designed to effect change in educational institutions so students of color would experience educational equality. Multicultural education practices evolved from an intergroup education movement in the 1950s—designed to help African Americans and other “unmeltables” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 61) assimilate—to a desire of Black students in the 1960s to reclaim their Blackness and not conform to the standards of white America. This was evidenced in the academy through the formation of Black Studies courses (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Volpe et al. (2020) contended that Black college students experience tripartite levels of racism: individual, cultural, and institutional. They defined institutional racism as the unfavorable and differential treatment systematically embedded in institutions, including colleges and universities (Volpe et al., 2020). McFeeters (2010) argued that in
the 1950s, HWIs were forced by a government mandate to admit students of color, and little thought was given as to how to make them feel welcome. Therefore, tensions escalated because of the lack of change within campus settings (McFeeters, 2010). The unchanging nature of colleges and universities sent a message to Black students that white institutions thought themselves superior, and Black students were expected to assimilate to the culture of the HWI they attended (McFeeters, 2010). Strayhorn et al. (2010) added that the 1960s marked a critical turning point for Black students at HWIs; in consonance with the wider Civil Rights Movement that resisted white power and privilege, they demanded institutional support that affirmed their cultural indemnity and reduced obstacles to success. In response to racial agitations, Black college students and educators created Black cultural centers (BCCs) to promote, protect, and affirm Black culture (Strayhorn et al., 2010).

In his research on Black collegians, Strayhorn (2010) discussed how colleges and universities in the United States are more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse than ever before, and this trend is likely to continue. Despite progress in Black students’ enrollment in institutions of higher education, national trends suggest that Black collegians continue to face unique obstacles and stressors while attending HWIs (Strayhorn, 2010; Bonner, 2010). Fidler and Godwin (1994) discovered in their research on retention that Black students’ search for identity at HWIs is often due to an environment that is indifferent and sometimes hostile to their development. The Black freshmen in the study described the institutions they attend as unfriendly, unfair, and generally unsupportive. Brooms (2018) noted the plethora of current and historical research that identified campus climate as a significant detriment to Black students’
success at historically white institutions. Strayhorn (2010) and Bonner (2010) also documented a myriad of challenges Black college students face, including racism and discrimination, difficult transitions, a lack of proper advising, undue pressure to prove themselves, and a scarcity of supportive relationships. Black students who attend HWIs are also “plagued by low expectations, biases, and prejudice regarding their intellectual abilities by faculty members” (Brooms, 2018, p. 144). In predominantly white collegiate spaces where Black students seek services, they may be avoided, bypassed, or become socially invisible (Feagin et al., 1996). Feagin et al. (1996) noted the over-policing of Black students by campus police and security personnel, while some forms of violence perpetrated by white students is tolerated by administrative and police officials.

McFeeters (2010) contended that Black students experience direct acts of social alienation at HWIs, and many in indirect, subtle ways that are demeaning and damaging. McFeeters further asserted that because of the “chilly climate” (p. 109) Black collegians face, they can feel like outsiders, isolated and not welcome, and as such, social alienation plays a significant role in their adjustment.

Perceptions of discrimination have a significant and negative effect on Black students’ grades, and first year students who thought that they were treated differently felt a deeper sense of alienation at the end of their freshman year (Hurtado et al., 1998). This perspective was also discussed by Lewis et al. (2000), who argued that Black college alumni experienced a sense of isolation and did not fit into the larger community while in school. As one student in their research sample stated, “It’s good for me to converse with people of my own race, but some days I can go the whole day and not see another Black person on this campus” (Lewis et al., 200, p. 80).
According to Doucet and Kirkland (2021), Black students experience “small daily deaths” that result from “shots at their race, language, dignity, identities, esteem,” (p. 626) and the like. Smith et al. (2016) defined racial battle fatigue as the result of the toxicity and persistence of racialized microaggressions described by Doucet and Kirkland (2021) and the subsequent negative health consequences they have. Franklin (2016) argued that racial battle fatigue’s cumulative effects felt by Black college students are different than the academic stress they face in that they are physical or emotional responses to the daily impacts of racism on campus. Although Black students have typically faced microaggressions most of their lives, the additional stresses of attending an HWI that has a negative racial campus climate can prove to be overwhelming for some students and result in racial battle fatigue (Franklin, 2016). Dancy et al. (2018) stated that, “Microaggressions, tokenism, impostorship, and racial battle fatigue attest to the psychological torment regularly visited upon Black humanity in higher education” (p. 188).

**Black Student Peer Support**

As previously stated, college achievement does not have a singular nature; academic success is influenced by multiple factors, including peer support (Bonner, 2010). McFeeters (2010) stated that the intellectual development college students experience is partly a result of the role their peers play in their lives, and further asserted that peer interactions can be just as influential as classroom experiences, if not more so. Holland’s (2011) research on the effect that Black students have on their peers’ academic engagement and educational aspirations found that peers are considered suitable go-tos when students are making decisions or contemplating choices. Brooms and Davis (2017)
asserted that peer group relationships are important components of enhancing the educational experiences of Black collegians, particularly those at HWIs. Peer relationships also have the potential to play a critical role in a college student’s social adjustment (Thelamour et al., 2019).

Strayhorn (2010) contended that social support from peers fuels resilience; therefore, opportunities to develop positive, supportive relationships with other students on campus can enhance their ability to persist in the face of challenges. Similarly, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) suggested that peer support may be extremely important for the academic adjustment of college students, as peers are able to provide the resources needed for their specific challenges. They found that peers can provide support that is instrumental to college outcomes by forming study groups, sharing notes and experiences, and providing advice about classes to take and strategies to use. Activities like peer tutoring and peer mentoring are typically beneficial when they are educationally purposeful, and influence student learning (McFeeters, 2010).

Namakula and Prozesky (2019) contended that third spaces allow students to develop peer relationships. The more students interact with their peers, the greater their cognitive growth and influences thinking and writing skills (McFeeters, 2010). The Hurtado et al. (1998) study identified how student peer groups influence students’ attitudes and behaviors and are principally responsible for socialization. Brooms (2018) argued that taken collectively, supportive Black peer relationships and having access to resources can help enable Black college students to become resilient and persist to graduation.
**Black Students’ Need to Create Community**

Museus’ (2008) research on the role of ethnic student organizations in helping Black students adjust culturally while at HWIs indicated that dominant cultures can pose challenges for BIPOC students, as they are marginalized, and face pressures to represent their race and assimilate. In his investigation of the academic integration experiences of Black students at HWIs, Bonner (2010) elucidated that what matters to students of color, and particularly Black students, is finding a sense of belonging in environments that treat them differently or with hostility. Bonner (2010) further asserted that for Black students, being able to identify with the higher education settings they find themselves in can be incongruent with who they are culturally, financially, ethnically, or racially, which presents a challenge during their college experiences and underscores the importance of support. Thelamour et al. (2019) stated that peer relationships act as a layer of protection for Black students who experience a negative racial climate on campus. Black students become empowered by peer organizations to express discontent with their campus environments and effect change for the betterment of the racial and ethnic cultures and communities of which they are a part (Museus, 2008).

In their exploration of Black students and Haitian ethnic clubs, Doucet and Kirkland (2021) described third spaces as sanctuaries or “sites of resistance to test and exercise resistance against demoralizing forces” (p. 613). According to Namakula and Prozesky (2019), third spaces allow Black and other marginalized voices to be heard, serve as vehicles to help reframe deficit discourses, and act as resources for navigating academic spaces. Brooms (2018) also explored how creating micro-communities for Black students can help positively impact their college experiences. Doucet and Kirkland
(2021) described these types of micro-communities as Black educational fugitive spaces where Black students can go to “reimagine and resist and heal” (p. 622).

College campuses can minimize racial tensions by creating environments that center around the student, according to Hurtado et al. (1998). Fidler and Godwin (1994) suggested that student services based on white middle-class norms designed to meet the needs of all students may not be responsive to those of Black collegians. Student organizations and other support services for students of color play an important role on HWIs, including for Black students who want to find support for their culture (Fidler & Godwin, 1994). Bonner (2010) also revealed that Black collegians achieve better and persist longer when critical supports are present, including social interactions, which must be purposeful and specific.

Namakula and Prozesky (2019) argued that Black student third spaces leverage higher education’s dominant discourses—which include the dominant languages, formalized knowledges, and modes of representation learned while in college—and combine them with the unofficial, everyday discourses drawn from their homes and cultures to create new ways of dismantling the academy’s hegemonic claims of knowledge production. Formal and informal funds of knowledge come together in student spaces, and this intersection redefines what counts as knowledge (Namakula & Prozesky, 2019). Namakula and Prozesky (2019) further asserted that the goal is not to promote one knowledge set over the other, but to draw on them all to create “rich zones of collaboration and learning” (p. 43). Students draw upon multiple funds of knowledge to navigate across and between various academic settings (Namakula & Prozesky, 2019). Namakula and Prozesky (2019) stated that the written and unwritten rules of academic
life are socially constructed conventions that can be used as ways to navigate across educational spaces.

**Black College Students Creating Support Systems**

In his study on collegiate Black male achievement programs, Brooms (2018) described Franklin’s (2002) cultural capital for Black students as a feeling of collective consciousness and group identity that helps serve as a resource that can advance an entire group. Fidler and Godwin (1994) contended that Black college students use support systems to help buffer or solve many of the difficulties they experience. Similar to Bonner’s (2010) research, Fidler and Godwin (1994) found that a nurturing environment for Black students is almost certain to have a positive impact on retention and graduation rates. For some students, Black cultural centers and organizations serve as safe havens, a family, a home away from home, a retreat from campus hostilities and a counter to the resistance to their presence on campus (Strayhorn et al., 2010; Museus, 2008). In their research on student organizations as venues for Black identity and expression, Harper and Quaye (2007) reflected on how BCCs help Black students level the playing field, learn about things they otherwise would not be exposed to, introduce new opportunities, help increase graduation rates, and respond directly to their needs and concerns. Strayhorn, et al. (2010) and Museus (2008) further defined BCCs as a place for Black students to receive both academic, social, and emotional support. McFeeters (2010) added that student organizations and clubs give Black students the opportunity to grow personally, learn social responsibility, and develop a sense of community. Museus (2008) also reported that the most important reasons for Black students’ participation in organizations
were to leverage the environments as a source of identity development expression and connect with other Black peers.

In her research on creating sanctuaries for Black college students dealing with racial microaggressions, Grier-Reed (2010) argued that counter-spaces help Black students make sense of and cope with their collegiate surroundings and are critical to their success. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) defined counter-spaces as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). Grier-Reed (2010) stated that the safety inherent in counter-spaces can provide the haven needed for Black students to make sense of their experiences on campus. (Smith et al., 2016) suggested that counter-spaces help Black students validate the existence of racism, affirm their Blackness, and provide a supportive environment when dealing with microaggressions. Morales (2021) explored the phenomenon known by Black students as “beasting,” a strategy they employ to produce knowledge that raises counter-narratives that challenge racial microaggressions.

In their study that explored Black Education Spaces, Warren and Coles (2020) provided examples of the fugitive spaces that Black college students, including “the 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,” and “other cultural practices that establish solidarity in and among diverse groups of Black people” (p. 383). Their examples demonstrated a few ways Black collegians “are intentional about creating sanctuary meant to acknowledge
their humanity in an otherwise assaultive school environment” (Warren & Coles, 2020, p. 383).

McFeeters (2010) added that student support systems give Black students the opportunity to grow personally, learn social responsibility, and develop a sense of community. Museus (2008) also reported that the most important reasons for Black students’ participation in groups were to leverage the environments as a source of identity development expression and to connect with other Black peers.

Namakula and Prozesky (2019) contended that third spaces allow students to negotiate between their multiple funds of knowledge to help each other. These spaces help create opportunities for students to share information and resources (Brooms, 2018). In their research on peer bonding and Black male persistence in college, Brooms and Davis (2017) argued that Black peer networks can enhance students’ learning in and out of class through academic support, study groups, accountability partners, and peer mentoring and tutoring. They contended that the positive peer relationships developed by Black students are the result of issues that arise from segregated HWIs or those that present a hostile campus climate. Moreover, the segregated environment causes Black males to seek comfort and academic support from peers in their micro-communities.

Success for many Black males hinges on critical factors, such as peer group influence (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Hurtado, et al. (1998) stated that Black fraternities and sororities are of critical importance to those who join them. Harper’s (2009) research suggested that members of Black fraternities and sororities keep each other engaged and create a sense of peer-imposed accountability to excel.
The Lewis et al. (2000) study lends to the perspective that Black students come together to form a more positive and affirmative environment than that provided by the larger white community. Fidler and Godwin (1994) revealed that the specific roles that Black student support systems are believed to play include the maintenance of self-esteem, increasing social and academic competence and mastery of the environment, and the management of stress and coping. For Black college students, finding a mentor or role model, particularly someone who is attuned to the nuances of institution, is an important reality for their socialization into the academy (Bonner, 2010). According to Bonner (2010), a mentor or role model who is familiar with the challenges and pitfalls, as well as the opportunities of collegiate life, can help create linkages and connections for a fellow Black student. Many Black students prefer to get the guidance and mentoring they need from peer relationships (Bonner, 2010). As stated by Brooms and Davis (2017), peer-to-peer mentorship is a contributing factor to degree completion for Black students. Fidler and Godwin (1994) found that some HWIs appear to improve graduation rates through strong Black peer organizations and networks that foster a sense of belonging among an African American student population.

**Digital Communities**

*Uses of Online Spaces*

Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social network sites as web-based media that allow people to construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and peruse their list of connections plus those made by other people. Davis III et al. (2015) argued that social media for the current generation of young people serves as a primary means of
communication, social engagement, information seeking, and can serve as a central component of their identity and community building. Lee’s 2012 study found that social media platforms serve as a means of self-presentation along with building and maintaining contact with other people. Because of its collaborative nature, information shared within social media is not a static object that is simply accessed and retrieved; it is dynamic and collectively shared based on shared interests (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011; Davis III et al., 2015). Mackey and Jacobson (2011) stated that the production and sharing of information are critical activities in participatory online environments and promote critical thinking and relationship development. Social media users are cyberliterate, in that they are active—not passive—participants, critically consume content, and use a variety of platforms to express their own viewpoints (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011).

Davis III et al. (2015) researched social media use among community college students and contend that social interactions are a critical component of their educational experiences. In her review of social media uses for academic practice literature, Guy (2012) stated that digital technologies support the social aspects of a community and enhance the effectiveness and value of personal interactions. She further asserted that the socialization features of virtual spaces allow for information sharing, collaboration, and community formation (Guy, 2012). Alhabash and Ma (2017) found that college students’ motivations to use Twitter include self-expression, information sharing, social interaction, and self-documentation. Students also use Instagram as a means to express themselves (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). As it relates to social media use in education, it can serve as an effective way to enhance student engagement and build communication skills, as students
feel more comfortable with self-expression in a less intimidating environment (Guy, 2012).

**Content Creation.** Correa and Jeong (2011) proposed that in the current online environment, users are no longer simply consumers of content; new technologies have enabled them to actively participate by creating and sharing content in the forms of text, images, audio, and video. According to Correa and Jeong (2011), “the advent of the user-generated Web” (p. 639) created tools for self-expression, content creation, participation on social network platforms, instant messages, blogs, and citizen journalism. Black and other people of color are more or as likely than white people to create content online, and content creators are more likely to be students (Correa & Jeong, 2011).

Florini (2019) heralded digital media as fugitive spaces for resistance, counter-discourse production, and the sharing and distribution of information, which allow Black and other people of color to bypass traditional forms of media to create and circulate their own content. Digital media and other forms of technology allow Black users to intervene in dominant racial discourses (Florini, 2019).

**Connecting.** Correa and Jeong (2011) stated that two of the most common uses of user-generated online tools are for communication and interaction. In his research on Facebook usage, Joinson (2008) argued that social networking facilitates social connection, which is important for creating and maintaining relationships with people who are not seen very often. Joinson (2008) found that people use social networking sites as a means of creating shared identities—they join online communities of like-minded people. Correa and Jeong (2011) contend that Black people in particular use social networking for identity creation and maintenance, and to build community through
fostering online discussions. Digital tools allow them to create communities of shared interests or outlets with which they feel identified and comfortable, and their voices can be heard (Correa & Jeong, 2011). Correa and Jeong (2011) further revealed in their study that participation in online micro-communities allows Black people to feel that they are a part of something, where their comments are considered relevant, and participation is inclusive for a group who otherwise may feel excluded.

**Black Students and Social Media Activism**

It played a huge role. Some people wouldn’t know about the protests without social media. Also, some people were sparked into activism because of images of racism all over the country that they would not have seen if it weren’t posted on Facebook, posted on Instagram. People could see things . . . There are a lot of racist Twitter rants that spark people into action. So, social media is huge thing. These racist acts—police shootings, police killings—are not new things. It’s been happening. Social media is just bringing it out and allowing people to see it more. (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017, p. 291)

A campus’ racial climate is an ongoing topic of concern for Black students who attend HWIs (Thelamour et al., 2019). According to Jones and Reddick (2017), they find themselves engaged in protest and activism as they fight to find acceptance in their educational environment. However, while engaging activist and social justice activities are a traditional part of the Black college student experience, the emergence of new technologies has helped evolve these forms of student engagement (Mwangi et al., 2018).

In the quote above, a young African American woman learned of protests and other
planned actions because of the racial violence that occurred at the HWI she attends not by word of mouth—but through social media.

Thelamour et al. (2019) asserted that Black students rate their campuses low in terms of its racial climate in comparison to their white peers in part because the institutions they attend reflect the racial tensions present in society at large. Similarly, Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) argued that Black students today are still having to call attention to the systemic racism that is deeply rooted in both American society and higher education. Jones and Reddick (2017) elaborated on Reynolds and Mayweather’s argument by stating that Black students challenge HWIs’ historically race-neutral ideologies, noting that these ideologies and discourses continue to mask the unequal distribution of power.

In colleges and universities across the nation, Black students confront institutional racism and systemic biases in the form of racial harassment and intimidation, racist symbols such as confederate flags and monuments to slave owners, bananas hung from trees, and racist graffiti written in feces (Fortin, 2017; Rogers, 2011; White, 2016). Ahmed (2007) described what it means to stop: “to cease, to end, and also to cut off, to arrest, to check, to prevent, to block, to obstruct or to close” (p. 161). In her view, Black activism has demonstrated how policing involves the stopping of some bodies more than others, a political act that is unequally distributed.

Bauer-Wolf (2017) found that activism against acts of macroaggressions and microaggressions targeting Black college students has gained more visibility in recent years with the advent of social and digital medias, which help put the issues of race and racism on campus at the forefront of the national consciousness in the twenty first
century. Forsren (2017) also explored the social media explosion that began in 2014 with accounts of Black students protesting anti-Black administrative practices and ineffectual responses to anti-Black crimes at HWIs, which stem from a rich tradition of Black student activism that spans nearly five decades.

Davis III et al. (2015) discussed the potential of social media among college students to support a vibrant multiracial and multidimensional virtual community space that supports feelings of belonging and connectedness. Lee (2012) drilled down further by stating that because of the importance of the college years for the exploration of racial self-expression and identification, Facebook is seen as a potentially rich site for the display of one’s racial identity. As such, Black college students tend to use Facebook and other forms of social media to interact and communicate mainly with other Black students (Lee, 2012). Social media serves as an important cultural environment for them, as they do not necessarily want to see themselves as part of a white public (Lee, 2012; Schofield Clark, 2016). Heiberger and Junco (2011) argue that no other method is as engaging as social media to enhance student-to-student engagement. Hotchkins (2017) posited that tools like GroupMe, a mobile app that enables group messaging, provide additional ways for Black students to communicate if a covert strategy is essential, as they allow them to keep the discrete use of particular digital interactions with their peers private.

Technology facilitates new solutions to old problems and Black students have used social media to connect, organize and share information with greater efficiency than their predecessors from decades ago could have imagined (Davis III et al., 2015; Reynolds and Mayweather, 2017). Cumberbatch and Trujillo-Pagán (2016) contended
that social media also allows students to learn the struggles and methods of activism of
the past, discover the similarities of experiences across campuses, and share and identify
strategies to confront inequities. Schofield Clark’s 2016 study exploring social media as a
contested public space for diverse young people revealed that by using artifacts of
political engagement—defined as photos, memes, quoted sayings, and commentary that
demonstrate young people’s emotional investment and participation in unfolding
events—BIPOC students add their voice of dissent within social media platforms. The
sharing of comments, videos, tweets and news stories via text, Snapchat, Facebook, and
Twitter serves as a form political action that allows young people of color to become
aware of their situation, and the possibility that their situation could change because of
their involvement (Schofield Clark, 2016). TikTok, one of the newer video-based social
media platforms, is another activism instrument used by young people (Alexandro et al.,
2022).

Information sharing moves students from being less-involved bystanders to
engaged participants, and they become part of a “collective counter-public” that joins
them in “connective action” (Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 244). Telling stories digitally
allows them to combine storytelling with current technology and digital media based on
their own experiences, told through their own perspectives (Rogers & Estomin, 2016).

Williams (2015) asserted that social media has been instrumental in spotlighting
racial discrimination when traditional mainstream media outlets ignore the concerns and
violence against marginalized people. In the present day, in what is being called the new
civil rights movement (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017) is hashtag activism, which is
defined by Yang (2016) as discursive protest on social media united through a
hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence. Hashtag activism has helped Black student activism evolve, as it simultaneously creates community and critical dissonance, and has gained enough validity to be deemed an effective, definitive mode of activism (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017).

Cox (2017) stated that social and digital medias—including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube—serve as means to find and share information, and these technology sources allow people to take in that information and then form an opinion or ideology based on what they have learned. Social movement scholars have long recognized the power of narratives and see social media activism as having a distinctly narrative character (Yang, 2016). Yang (2016) argued that because comments and retweets include personal stories and appear in temporal order, they take on a narrative form, and therefore, narrative agency is key to social media activism. He describes narrative agency in hashtag activism as the capacity to tell stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the general public (Yang, 2016).

**Social Media in Action.** In their research on digital protest and the racial politics of social media, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) found that digital activism has become a significant tool for people of color, whose protests against police brutality have been disparaged as acts of rioting and misrepresented in the media. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) continued their argument by stating that this form of activism serves as an important tool for challenging racial profiling and media representations. Digital activism also assists with contesting victim blaming and the idea that Black and Brown people can control the perception of one’s body and the violence inflicted upon it (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).
Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argued that participation in digital activism can be a transformative experience, triggering some to participate in both hashtag activism and boots-on-the-ground activist efforts, shifting seamlessly across the two modes of engagement. Social media also allows Black activists to develop new and tight knit forms of community, which is sustained by their addiction to the medium (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

 Communities of color are connected through movements such as Black Lives Matter, driven by a collective knowledge of daily oppressions and the continuous devaluing of Black people (Hoffman, Granger Jr., Vallejos, & Moats, 2016). Hoffman et al. (2016) asserted that the national prevalence of systemic bias, such as police brutality, has influenced resistance to institutionalized racism on college campuses. Jones and Reddick (2017) studied how Black students utilize engagement and activism to challenge HWI inequalities and claim that because of the daily microaggressions Black students experience they often utilize various forms of engagement and activism—including social media—to hold colleges and universities accountable for equity in higher education.

 Due to the increasing use of social media to challenge white privilege and assert the mattering of Black lives (Carney, 2016), Black students can engage in collective resistance and connect social injustice to their sense of identity as Black academics on white college campuses (Jones & Reddick, 2017; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) found that students collectively rally to demonstrate their status as full members of their universities, and to reaffirm their humanity in person and on social media through hashtag activism like Facebook PSAs, Snapchat, and Instagram and YouTube videos, while documenting and streaming walk-outs and sit-ins.
In his research on how social media serves as a Black Lives Matter information source, Cox (2017) argued that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is often used in social media to highlight the killing of Black people at the hands of law enforcement and police brutality in general. Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) proposed that although many hashtags have helped redefine activism, #BlackLivesMatter, the Black Lives Matter organization, and the Black Lives Matter Movement are unique in that they can be traced to the Black Freedom Movement and Black Campus Movement of the 1960s. They also stated that like the Black Campus Movement, and through its digital presence, #BlackLivesMatter engages Black people civically, giving them the power to create their own authentic narratives (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Although there has been a plethora of social media campaigns where students of color have expressed concern and opposition over their campus’ climate (Jones & Reddick, 2017), Wilson (2015) noted that some scholars have pointed to the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a galvanizing force mobilizing Black students, especially, to demand systemic changes in how HWIs address racism on college campuses.

White (2016) researched the rise of the new Black student movement and elucidated that as activists organized around the call of #BlackLivesMatter, it was inevitable that their attention would turn toward institutions of higher education, which are microcosms of larger societal trends. White (2016) argued that as the campaign took off, experienced and first-time Black student activists mobilized in protest. Meanwhile, students of color complained regularly about being targeted and harassed at the hands of campus police and peace officers, creating the perfect storm of student activism (White, 2016). According to Bauer-Wolf (2017), it is not only law enforcement who victimize
and oppress Black students, but racism also comes at the hand of fellow students, faculty, and staff. “Of the nearly 50 campuses [the Southern Poverty Law Center’s executive director] visited, on only one did he not find a Black student who had been called a ‘nigger’ by some campus community member, sometimes even a professor…” (Bauer-Wolf, 2017, p. 2).

The most visible anti-racist protests occurred in fall of 2015 at the University of Missouri, also known as “Mizzou” (White 2016). According to White (2016), after an inadequate response from the school’s administration because of multiple racist events targeting Black collegians on campus, students launched a protest demanding the resignation of University President Tom Wolfe. The racist events at the University of Missouri and the resulting protests brought new attention to student activism across the country that mobilized around various social media hashtags including #concernedstudents1950, #blackoncampus, #studentblackout, and #Istandwithmizzou (White, 2016). Students nationwide expressed support and solidarity in the form of walk-outs, rallies, sit-ins, and protests at over 100 colleges and universities across the US, including Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, UC Berkeley, Michigan State and the University of Washington (Milner, 2017; White, 2016). White (2016) proposed that similar to the frustrations experienced by students at the University of Missouri, Black students at these institutions of higher education also argued that their administrations were not responsive to concerns about the acts of racial discrimination they experienced in all parts of their lives on campus, including in residential spaces—from racially offensive and culturally insensitive Halloween costumes, to the racial profiling of Black students by campus security and local police. Green (2016) contended that throughout
these protests and subsequent discussions, a common thread emerged: colleges and universities have not shielded students of color from the effects of societal racism, and at times they have exacerbated it.

Black Twitter is a cultural identity consisting of Black Twitter users from around the world who are galvanized by social and political issues that impact Black people (Florini, 2019). Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argued that Black Twitter played a significant role in individual hashtag activism acts like #WeAreTrayvon and group hashtag activism acts like #HandsUpDontShoot, #NoAngel, and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. Yang’s (2016) research on narrative agency and hashtag activism suggests that Black college students were positioned as an identifiable group of hashtag activists and contributors, and their hashtag symbols of online protest also brought attention to the power of digital and social media activism’s role in shaping public discourse. White (2016) argued that as these student activists mobilized around social media hashtags including #concernedstudents1950, #blackoncampus, #studentblackout, and #Istandwithmizzou, they were supported by walk-outs and protests across the country, and the reverberations were felt at colleges and universities from coast to coast.

**Summary**

This literature review represents the exploration of Black college students’ feelings of exclusion and alienation at primarily white institutions, which can result in the need for peer support, and the role of social media in digital activism. Together, these studies introduce a broader context in which this study is situated and demonstrate a gap in the literature regarding Black college student peer support. Although the aforementioned topics have been individually discussed in the literature, there has not yet
been a holistic view of the ways in which Black college students advocate for each other, nor how they use various forms of digital media as support mechanisms.

This research helps fill the gap in existing studies by exploring two key areas. First, it seeks to identify digital ways of providing peer support for the Black college student. Second, it presents an opportunity to identify avenues for building community by asking Black college students to address what they believe technological prospects should look like to create their own sense of equity and level a historically white collegiate playing field.
Chapter III: Methodology

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this research study is to explore how Black college students who attend historically white institutions have turned digital spaces into Black spaces—spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported. I also study how they use online spaces and other technologies to help their peer support efforts to organize and find community.

Research Questions

The research questions developed for this study are as follows:

1) What do Black college students expect of the HWI they attend in terms of supporting them academically, socially, and emotionally?

2) In what ways do Black students use digital peer spaces to provide support (due to a lack of HWI support) and what motivates them to seek alternatives?

3) How do new counter-spaces (e.g., technologies) currently play a role in Black college students supporting each other?

Research Design

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) posit that people of color have historically been marginalized and gagged by methodologies, but that methodologies can instead be used to give voice to the voiceless and help create spaces of transformative resistance for Black college students. Leveraging Critical Race Methodology in education and drawing upon Black Critical Theory as methodology, I present additional considerations for a BlackCrit Methodology through the use of case study.
**Critical Race Methodology in Education**

Critical Race Methodology in education proposes ways for researchers to understand the experiences of students of color along the educational pipeline (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The methodology produces knowledge by focusing on how students of color in the US educational system experience and respond to being epistemologically marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical Race Theory and qualitative inquiry work well together, as CRT has helped advance the use of storytelling and narratives to expose and challenge the myriad contexts in which racism has been declared eradicated (Hughes & Giles, 2010). Critical Race Methodology in education uses counter-storytelling to challenge narratives based on biology and cultural deficits (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the past, Black people have relied on storytelling and continue the tradition today; it serves as an essential tool for survival and liberation (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race scholars leverage the tradition of counter-storytelling using personal stories or narratives, sharing others’ stories, or through composite narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Black Critical Theory as Methodology**

I pay homage to ross (2016), who adeptly applied Black Critical Theory as methodology in her research on all-Black educational counter-publics constructed with the purpose of supporting Black students in racially specific ways. BlackCrit as methodology goes beyond describing racism against Black people by centering anti-Blackness, as opposed to centering racism in a general sense as CRT as methodology does (ross, 2016). Anti-Blackness exposes the incompatible relationship between Blackness and possessing humanity (Dumas & ross, 2016). Black humanity and its
possibilities are threatened and as a result, beliefs, policies, and practices find their reasoning in and reproduce Black suffering (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Thus, Black Critical Theory can be leveraged as a methodology in this way:

BlackCrit as methodology is a theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds anti-Blackness in all aspects of the research process; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of Black students; (c) considers the possibilities of Black futurities; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of Black students. (Ross, 2016, p. 34)

Case Study

The potential value of a case study serves as an important part of a researcher’s methodological inventory (Yin, 2012). Case study research begins with the aspiration to gain an in-depth understanding of either one or a few cases drawn from a real-world perspective, ideally resulting in the production of new ideas, learnings, and insights about real-world behaviors (Yin, 2012). A case study may be used when an empirical inquiry needs to examine a present-day phenomenon in its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not readily apparent (Yin, 1981). A researcher will need to investigate the context of the real-life issue and answer questions that explore the “how” and “why” of the issue instead of focusing solely on the “what” (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002).

Case studies can be a relevant tool for studying knowledge utilization, as the topic covers a phenomenon that cannot be separated from its context (Yin, 1981). Examining the knowledge utilization process can help recommend and design appropriate
interventions (Yin, 1981). A case study will include data about the case’s contextual conditions, and its ability to cover both the phenomenon and the context makes the case study a strong research strategy (Yin, 1981, 2012). If the study is about a small group or organization, data about social, cultural, or political conditions or trends can serve as contextual components, although the boundary between a case and its context may be blurry because real-life events do not necessarily fall within clear cut classifications (Yin, 2012). Examples of case study topics include community studies, organizational decision making, program evaluations, and innovative projects (Yin, 1981).

A successful case study requires an explicit design that outlines the main topics to be explored, the type of individuals who will share information and the units of analysis that will be used (Yin, 1981). The case itself serves as the main unit of analysis and can represent an organization, event, person, behavioral condition, or other phenomenon (Yin, 2012). A case study case can consist of a single case where the selected case can be categorized as rare, critical, or may be considered ordinary (Yin, 2012).

A descriptive form of case study can serve as a vehicle to present rarely encountered situations or ones not normally accessible to researchers (Yin, 2012). A case study’s data collection sources may include interviews; focus groups; observations; documents, memoranda, and other records; and illustrative materials such as publications and other artifacts that help illuminate an organization’s history (Yin, 1981). Triangulation of the data sources allow multiple ways of corroborating a description, fact, or event that is represented in the study, which assists in strengthening its validity (Yin, 2012). Using data coding, the study’s evidence is categorized into broader themes and hierarchical relationships or matrixes (Yin, 2012).
Research Setting

This study focuses specifically on Black college students who currently attend or recently graduated from a historically white university. As previously mentioned in the Delimitations section of this dissertation, participants for the focus group and individual interviews were selected from two four-year post-secondary institutions, both with a historically white student population. Five of the six participants attend a school henceforth known by the pseudonym the University of Northern California (UNC). UNC has over 40,000 students, and under 3% of its student body identify as Black or African American (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2020). A prestigious and high-tiered public institution, UNC is frequently ranked as a top 10 school on the annual America’s Top Colleges List and in 2021 ranked no. 1 (Kreznar, 2021). One participant attends a sister school given the pseudonym the University of Coastal California (UCC). With a student population of over 19,000, 1.7% of the students identify as Black or African American (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2020). America’s Top Colleges List ranks UCC as no. 41 in the Public Colleges category (Kreznar, 2021).

Participants

Leveraging the general process Solórzano et al. (2000) followed, the six students were selected using a purposeful sampling technique, defined as a process where researchers select participants based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the participants can contribute to the study. Because it was essential that the students I spoke with had experiences related to my research topic, I used a criterion sampling approach, which involves establishing criteria for identifying and then speaking to select
individuals (Creswell, 2007). Participant criteria for my study are outlined below. The students:

1) Are currently enrolled at, or have graduated from an HWI within the last two years
2) Self-identify as Black and/or African American
3) Have experienced some type of racism on campus
4) Have been the recipient of peer support from a fellow Black student or have supported another Black student
5) Were willing to be interviewed by me about their experience(s)
6) Were willing to allow me to record and transcribe their interview(s)
7) Were willing to participate in this research study, which may be published in an academic or non-academic publication such as a journal, white paper, book, or website

Recruiting measures were not necessary, as a group of students who fit my participant criteria had been identified. Michelle—a Black USF Organization and Leadership doctoral student with whom I had taken several classes and to whom I will forever be indebted—attended a Black educational leadership event at UNC. While at the event, Michelle met its organizers, who are members of the university’s Black Student Union (BSU) and building a digital platform henceforth given the pseudonym Blacksace, a tool that allows them to connect with their peers, share resources and information, and organize activism efforts. This particular group of Black students at UNC identified a need but saw a gap in how to fulfill it. Hence, the creation of Blacksace was deemed a necessary venture by them.
Michelle and I are aware of each other’s dissertation topics, and because of her familiarity with mine, she surmised that the Blackspace team would be the ideal group for me to engage as partners in my research. After getting my consent, she graciously informed the UNC BSU students of my research topic and asked if they would be interested in speaking with me about their project. Nate, one of the Blackspace co-founders, contacted me and committed himself and his fellow developers to being participants in my research.

**Getting to Know Each Other**

After receiving approval to conduct my research from USF’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects and prior to the formal data collection process, Bobby, Blackspace’s CEO, Nate, and I scheduled a conversation via Zoom, a video conferencing technology, so we could meet, talk about the concept of Blackspace, and discuss my research topic. Given the proprietary nature of Blackspace, I was asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement, and for the purposes of my dissertation, their development team provided me with descriptions and visual representations of the tool.

Blackspace is a Black college student-created digital platform that “addresses the institutional inequities in higher education and employment, especially for Black students. By creating a space for community, peer-to-peer connection, mentorship, and organization, Blackspace promotes an equitable and inclusive experience for Black students in their college journey” (Blackspace, n.d.). Designed to support Black students on the UNC campus, it equips them with the tools to connect, interact, and engage with each other in a centralized space. Bobby and Nate walked me through the basic design of Blackspace as envisioned at the time of our discussion (see Figure 2), which included a:
• Registry of Black student organizations
• Calendar of Black student-related events
• List of community events
• Roster of Black faculty
• Scholarship repository
• Repository of job opportunities

Figure 2

Sample Blackspace Screenshots
We then had an informal “meet and greet” Zoom session with the larger team, which allowed them to get to know me and me them, as well as discuss my study and the dissertation research process. Table 1 provides a snapshot of who my amazing research partners are. Although I did not conduct Participatory Action Research, I often referred to the Blackspace team as “my partners” because I did not conduct research “on” them, but “with” them—an important distinction which made them true partners in every sense of the word. CRT dictates the importance of ensuring that the participants in a study, or in my case, my research partners, are valued and seen as co-contributors of the knowledge produced in research studies (Sawyer III & Palmer, 2014). My relationship with the Blackspace team reflects this important distinction.
Table 1

Educational Demographics and Descriptions of the Students in My Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>UC/College</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>UNC Student</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Blackspace CEO</td>
<td>Bobby is reluctant to call himself the founder of Blackspace, but all of the team members shared stories about how they were introduced to the concept and each other through him. He is humble, and a visionary, even if he does not think of himself as one. I deeply admire Bobby and hope to be able to provide support to him and the rest of the Blackspace team long after this dissertation is published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>UNC Student</td>
<td>Data Science</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Blackspace Product Developer</td>
<td>Chris had me saying, “Yeah, that part!” a lot. His way of describing the anti-Blackness that happens on UNC’s campus was unusually refreshing. Chris had me thinking that there are some systemic issues related to Black college students that I had long taken for granted and that could easily be solved with one conversation with him, if the university’s administration had the courage to do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien</td>
<td>UCC Student*</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Blackspace Product Developer</td>
<td>Damien recognized the value of being able to tell his story as a Black man at an HWI in an unfettered way and in a safe environment. As kindred spirits, he and I felt so much better after what we deemed to be our “therapy sessions,” and we joked about finding a way to continue them. Damien, I’m still down if you are!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>UNC Student</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering &amp; Computer Science</td>
<td>Rising Sophomore</td>
<td>Blackspace Marketer &amp; Data Analyst</td>
<td>Layla, the only female member of the Blackspace team, was direct, candid, and inspiring. I loved her energy. She is the embodiment of self-empowerment and will achieve her goals despite any and all challenges. My mom called me “militant” when I was an undergraduate at UCLA and she would probably think the same of Layla had they met, but it definitely would have been meant as a high compliment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musa</td>
<td>UNC Student</td>
<td>Data Science</td>
<td>Rising Junior</td>
<td>Blackspace Data Analyst</td>
<td>Musa is soft spoken, cerebral, and introspective. As an international student from Uganda, his perspectives on American anti-Blackness were powerful reminders of how Blackness is uniquely constructed in the US. His ability to quickly grasp the concepts and nuances of race and racism would take some born here years to do so, if they could at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>UNC Student</td>
<td>Political Science &amp; African American Studies</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nate is the younger brother I wish I had, despite not knowing I wanted one until we met. He had me constantly cracking up, and even our discussion about selecting a pseudonym for him made me laugh. Nate’s serious side also runs deep, and his ability to eloquently express the current challenges he and other Black college students face had me reminiscing about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*Damien is the sole member of the Blackspace team who does not attend UNC. As a student at UCC, a sister school of UNC and a historically white institution, his input and views were as relevant to the conversation about Black college student peer support and the accompanying need to create a tool as the other members of the team.

As much as I see a part of myself in each of the Blackspace members, I wish I had been as profound and thoughtful as them when I was an undergraduate. They are brilliant, expressive, and humble Black scholar activists. With no formal training, they are creating a unique tool that has the potential to change the world for Black college students as they know it.

The team was excited to be the focus of a research project, as there are not many opportunities for Black college students to not only tell their stories in an academic capacity, but also have the impetus behind the need for Blackspace chronicled in a study. Although they were aware that I would be using pseudonyms to represent both them and the tool, they were still excited to be the focus of my work.

**Data Collection**

I had informal conversations with the Blackspace team during the month preceding the focus group, and formal data collection occurred from July 2020 to August 2020. My original intent was to conduct research in person at a location where the students felt most comfortable. However, the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19, a highly contagious infectious disease that is spread from person-to-person, caused outbreaks in communities across the United States and around the world (Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). On Monday, March 16, 2020, officials in six San Francisco Bay Area counties issued a shelter-at-home mandate, which ordered residents to stay home and go outside only for food, medicine, and outings that were deemed essential (“Bay Area Officials Issue Shelter in Place Due to Coronavirus,” 2020). As a Bay Area resident, I was bound by USF’s IRB process, which followed the mandates of San Francisco and other Bay Area counties. The shelter-at-home order went into effect on March 17, 2020, and was rescinded by California Health Officers on January 25, 2021 (Alameda County Health Services Agency, 2020; Luna, 2021). Because it was unknown how long the pandemic and resulting shelter-at-home order would endure, the USF IRB’s COVID-19 guidance suggested that researchers minimize in-person interactions based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and the California Health Department (IRB COVID-19 Guidance | myUSF, n.d.).

The Interview Process

A key advantage of interviews is that they have the potential to provide deep and rich data (Ellis, 2016). Interviews allow for counter-storytelling—a method of telling stories of those whose experiences are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) pointed out, “there are numerous unheard counter-stories within the histories and lives of people of color. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 32). The interviews conducted placed the students’ knowledge at the center, rather than on the margin of inquiry (Tillman, 2002).

In lieu of in-person conversations, data was collected via semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group leveraging Zoom to uncover how a group of
Black college students at UNC support each other using digital tools. Interview guides (usually referred to as interview protocols) were developed—one for the focus group and another for our one-on-one interviews (as shown in Appendices A1 and A2). I referred to them as discussion guides to respect the fact that our meetings felt more like conversations versus formal interviews. The guides were referenced by me throughout my discussions with the Blackspace team. Because being interviewed by an emerging scholar who was conducting research could considered a unique and rare experience, the discussion guides were shared with the Blackspace members prior to our Zoom meetings. I felt that it was important to allay any fears about what I may ask, give them a chance to think about their perspectives on my research topics, or tell me ahead of time that there were subjects that they did not feel comfortable talking about. Fortunately, there was nothing that they considered to be off limits.

Informed consent letters were sent to the students, which they signed prior to scheduling the focus group and interviews, and dates that were convenient for them were selected. Video interviews allowed me to explore topics and themes in considerable detail, as well as respond to and note body language (Ellis, 2016). Body language can account for much of the interaction between the participant and the interviewer, and being able to observe body language is an important advantage when having a dialogue about subjects that may be considered sensitive (Ellis, 2016).

**The Data Analysis Process**

The focus group lasted a little under two hours and the one-on-one interviews were between one and two hours each. Following the process of Solórzano et al. (2001), the conversations were video recorded with the permission of the students, and I
personally transcribed each discussion to become intimately familiar with the data. Extensive field notes were compiled for each interview (Solórzano et al. 2001), which aided in the coding process. Using an online data management application called Dedoose, a research application designed to uncover hidden data patterns, I leveraged open coding so I could begin to identify distinct concepts and themes related to the participants’ responses (Williams & Moser, 2019). Guided by the research work that Parker, Puig, Johnson & Anthony, Jr. (2016) conducted with Black males on white campuses, the transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis, and salient themes and corresponding codes were assigned. As is the goal of culturally sensitive research, the knowledge gained through participant inquiry and interactions focused on the self-preservation and resiliency of Black college students facing anti-Black racism.

**Background of the Researcher**

As a young student, I had grown used to school administrators not taking an interest in my academic health and welfare. I attended an all-girls high school that was predominantly white and had a Black population of less than five percent. The anti-Black racism, both overt and covert, ran deep. Multiple forms of racial aggressions, including a racially motivated attack in the cafeteria, became known as “the white girl events” by a friend who recently reminded me of a red-inked tampon that was thrown at us. I, in turn, reminded her of the orange and chair that narrowly missed us during a different “event.” Events like these brought the Black students together to form a Black Student Union (with the help of our sole Black teacher), as well as informal Black girl collectives, where we would gather around our prime self-designated table by the window in the cafeteria (no one was going to run us out of our spot) to discuss taking over the school from a
leadership perspective. We felt that changing hearts and minds, and ultimately the narrative about who we were as young Black girls was an uphill battle that felt futile and showing them how amazing we were would be easier. Plus, the extra work of being a part of student government, taking leadership positions in various civic and sports clubs, and anything else that demonstrated our stellar competency would look good on our college applications—the silver lining of high school anti-Black racism. (Despite being a school leader, I was told by a white girl that I probably got into UCLA because of affirmative action.)

Our Black girl collective sometimes expanded to include our Filipina and Chicana sisters, and we shared stories about administrators who brushed off our complaints of racism as nothing more than “girls being girls,” discussed how to work around counselors who suggested we have a backup plan when applying to top-tier universities, and agreed on which teachers truly believed in and supported us.

The need for peer support was even greater in college, as I experienced similar issues, but on a much larger scale. With a student population of over 35,000, I was seen as just a number at UCLA. I did not attend the Freshmen Summer Program for incoming Black students, which proved to be problematic, as I initially did not know who to talk to or where to go to learn about matters other than class registration and housing. I attended college before the existence of the internet, so simple tasks like navigating the financial aid process eluded me. For example, after filling out multiple forms and standing in line for what seemed like hours during my first month on campus, I was told by a financial aid counselor that my parents made too much money, so I need not bother to apply.
My first semester in college left me wanting to transfer to another school, but with all that I had done to be admitted to UCLA I chose to stay and figure things out. That was where my friends came into play. The more friends I made, the more assistance I received. Fellow Black students, including classmates, sorority sisters, upperclassmen, and even members of the football team, were there to support me. They assisted with topics ranging from identifying the most helpful school administrators to the best courses to take, who in Financial Aid might give me a fair shake, and how to get involved in social justice activities. The knowledge I gleaned outside of the classroom came from my friends—my fictive family.

My collegiate experiences and appreciation for the peer support I received from other Black students, along with my curiosity about current Black activist efforts at my undergraduate alma mater, led me to conduct personal ad-hoc research about the plight of Black collegians during the height of Black Lives Matter movement protests in 2016. Anecdotal conversations and a YouTube spoken word video a UCLA Black alumnus produced entitled “The Black Bruins” (Stokes, 2013) confirmed that with time does not necessarily come change. Black college students are still facing an overabundance of anti-Black aggressions, and as a result they are still having to support each other. Days after these discoveries, I determined that the best way for me to honor them was to use research as a vehicle to tell their stories. I committed myself to writing a dissertation that reflects their extraordinary contributions to the creation of Black spaces, which is only a small part of what they richly deserve.
Chapter IV: Findings—Black Students Cannot Be Just Students

Introduction

All of these metrics … are honestly a microcosm for the larger world in the Black community at university campuses—it’s almost a disservice in the sense that we're not empowering ourselves through our activity. And so, we find that if we have a centralized platform that works as [a] communication network [for] coalition building, we would then have the information and the data to track and prove the importance of valuing Black people on campuses.

— Bobby, UNC student and Blackspace team member

The goal of this research study is to explore how Black college students who attend historically white institutions have turned digital spaces into Black spaces—spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported. To achieve my goal, I had informal conversations, and conducted a formal focus group and semi-structured interviews with a group of students who are doing the work of creating a digital space that supports Black collegians and improves their experience during their college journey. Being able to explore a concrete example of a Black student space focused on creating community, peer connections, and the sharing of information in a digital environment allowed me to first get at the crux of why spaces like these are needed and what drives students like the Blackspace team to create them before delving into how the tool is used.

This chapter begins by revisiting my research questions as outlined in Figure 3, and then presents an overview of the findings that emerged from the conversations I had with six of the Blackspace team members. This and the subsequent findings chapter
address the research questions posed in the Methodology chapter, and the themes and associated subthemes that presented themselves during a thematic analysis of the data.

Two main themes emerged from my conversations with Bobby, Chris, Damien, Layla, Musa, and Nate, each with associated subthemes, as represented in the table below.

**Figure 3**

*Research Questions and Associated Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What do Black college students expect of the HWI they attend in terms of supporting them academically, socially, and emotionally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways do Black students use digital peer spaces to provide support (due to a lack of HWI support) and what motivates them to seek alternatives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do new counter-spaces (e.g., technologies) currently play a role in Black college students supporting each other?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Subthemes:**

- Being an academic while Black
- Dealing with the inequalities of dual pandemics

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I feel that it is important to offer a clarifying note that in my findings chapters I use “we” when I was a part of the conversation, and “they” when I was not participating and instead actively listening. This findings chapter examines what it means for the Blackspace team to not be just students, the anti-Black harm from peers and faculty members that triggered a need for them to “go above and beyond,” and how they alleviate
such harm so they can persist as Black students at UNC. To address this topic, the chapter is divided into two sections, each touching on significant themes that arose in the data—specifically, what it means to be an academic while Black, and dealing with the inequalities of a new pandemic and how it factors into an enduring one—anti-Black racism.

Chapter 5, my second findings chapter, begins by articulating the rationale and motivations behind the students in my study feeling as if they had to create a tool like Blacksplace; their resistance stemmed from attending a top-tier historically white institution that was oppressing them. Continuing to fulfill a legacy of fugitive self-reliance at UNC, the Blacksplace team felt an immense sense of responsibility to right institutional wrongs by intentionally taking on anti-Black issues that their university has yet to remedy. The second subtheme of the chapter examines how the members of Blacksplace countered old problems in new ways by leveraging the power of “for us, by us,” or FUBU, as a positive counter-discourse (Knight, 2012), with the goal of elevating the Black student experience at UNC.

Through a discussion of Black college students’ expectations, motivations, and actions, Chapter 6 answers the study’s research questions by synthesizing the key findings and positioning them within the context of the scarce literature on the connection between anti-Black racism in higher education and Black collegians creating spaces to counter it. I then describe the implications of this research for the Blacksplace team, myself, and Black college students who attend historically white institutions. I conclude the chapter with considerations for future research and practice.
First Providing Context: UNC, Social Change, Social Justice, and Black Students

As one of the top public universities in the country, the University of Northern California is known to have a strong tradition of leading technological and social change. UNC’s students have sustained a strong tradition of involvement in social justice movements since the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, an attitude that currently permeates the UNC spirit (Kreznar, 2021).

Before delving into my findings, I believe it necessary to first share how the University of Northern California has created and marketed organizations within the walls of the institution that help position it as a leader in social movements. In doing so, my goal is not to analyze, nor critique UNC’s efforts related to the categories of social change, social justice, or addressing anti-Blackness on its campus. However, I do feel that to fully appreciate the context for what was disclosed by the UNC students as we dialoged, it is important to have a baseline of knowledge about the institution’s organizations dedicated to serving the needs of marginalized people, whether they be their students or the community at large. The ways in which the University of Northern California positions itself as a beacon of light for the oppressed is crucial to understanding the chasm between its public persona and the multifaceted and racialized realities of life as a Black UNC student as presented in my findings.

I do not intend to provide an exhaustive list of UNC groups and associations focused on social change, social justice, and its support of Black students, but instead note a few examples that reflect its efforts. All organizations described in this chapter have been given pseudonyms. UNC is the home of the Center for Research on Social Transformation (CRST), a project-based research organization that analyzes inequality
and power dynamics. The group’s academic output is meant to have practical social effects on California’s diverse populations and helps to bridge the gap between academic inquiry and a community’s needs (Research | Center for Research on Social Transformation, n.d.). The parent organization of CRST is UNC’s Foundation for the Study of Societal Issues (FSSI), whose mission is to engage in research focused on issues related to institutional issues that impact marginalized people (About the Foundation | Foundation for the Study of Societal Issues, n.d.). Under the social justice category, UNC’s Institute for Educational Justice & Public Engagement (EJPE) is a multi-association collective that uses data to support social justice initiatives to enrich the academic success of UNC students “while fostering a campus climate that honors the dignity of all people” (Institute for Educational Justice & Public Engagement, 2021). For Black students, African American Student Growth is a center under EJPE that serves to support the academic, social, emotional, community, and cultural needs, and professional development of students of African/Black ancestry at UNC (AASG | Institute for Educational Justice & Public Engagement, 2021). The aforementioned organizations provide a brief, but important overview of UNC’s work in the social justice arena.

**Black Students Cannot Be Just Students**

… Black students aren’t afforded the liberty of just solely being students, especially at [UNC].

— Layla, UNC student and Blackspace team member

When Layla made the statement above, we were discussing the additional efforts Black students make in order to maintain their existence at an HWI. To me, her comment was the embodiment of what so many Black college students who attend or have attended
an HWI experience. Not being afforded the liberty of being just a student means we do not wear a singular “student” hat. They wear multiple hats that can include “peer supporter,” “tutor,” “mentor,” “organizer,” and “activist.” Each of those hats represents extra work. When Black people say, “you’re being extra,” it is usually a slight, as the recipient of the dig is perceived as doing more than necessary in that moment. In this case, the extra is warranted. Layla shared how Black collegians, particularly at a top-tier university, have to do extra work to ensure they can endure, and that includes helping fellow Black students in an attempt make sure no one is truly left behind. In this findings chapter, I will focus on what it means for the Blackspace team to not be just students, the anti-Black harm from peers and faculty members that make it so, and how they mitigate such harm so they can survive the academy as a Black student.

To address this topic, the chapter is divided into two sections, each touching on significant themes that arose in the data—specifically, what it means to be an academic while Black, and dealing with the inequalities of a new pandemic and how it factors into an enduring one—racism.

**Being an Academic While Black**

Coming to the US, the question of Blackness fell under scrutiny …. Because being Black means something a little bit differently.

— Musa, UNC student and Blackspace team member

Paying homage to the expression *driving while Black*, which is the criminality of everyday activities and behaviors of Black folks and exemplifies how “Blackness itself faces increasing criminal penalty—both actual and perceived” (Russell-Brown, p. 717, 1999), I define *being an academic while Black* as the racialized, anti-Black, and
criminalized treatment Black college students face as members of the academy because of the color of their skin. In academia, Black college students are not only seen through a criminal lens, they also are viewed through additional ones like not being seen as smart as everyone else, needing academic assistance, and receiving “handouts” in the form of affirmative action. As Black collegians, there is a perceived insufficiency, inferiority, and impropriety related to their Blackness that is put upon them by white peers and educators (Feagin et al., 1996; Sawyer III & Palmer, 2014). These perceptions come from equating Blackness to wrongness, and the resulting consequences for Black students include being vulnerable and susceptible to microaggressions and other forms of harm.

Being an academic while Black was a theme in my data that showed up in multiple ways; the Blacksplace team felt students inflicted harm on them, as did the faculty and the institution itself. The stories that my participants shared represent the ways harm factors into how they are treated and the experiences they endure; being in historically white collegiate spaces like classrooms and during faculty office hours can be less than convivial and is a collective actuality for them. They also discussed the ways in which cumulative harm affected them and how they mitigated it.

The concept of anti-Blackness on campus was the initial topic discussed, as it drove the need for a tool like Blacksplace. The team earnestly, solemnly, and with an almost matter-of-fact air shared accounts of what it means to be an academic while Black, including anti-Black acts they and their friends encountered and the resulting impacts on their well-being. From a macro perspective, the students discussed how racism has affected our national consciousness, and as Damien put it, “Obviously it's a crazy ass time, regardless of [Blackspace] regarding race relations in the country.” A few
of them felt the 2016 national elections and their results helped exacerbate overt racism on the UNC campus. As Chris described, “A lot of closeted racists just came out and were essentially doing whatever they wanted to do.” However, Damien felt that covert acts of racism were more prevalent: “It's pretty nuanced. In 2020 it's a lot harder to find something that's super blatant.” Bringing it closer to home, Bobby reflected on the negative racial climate faced by Black students at UNC and discussed how the strife they experience is not only anecdotal, but also documented in formal research and the media: “We had like a lot of bad press given a study that stated our campus was the worst campus in California for Black students.” He and Nate talked about how it became well known that Black UNC students experience both covert and what was described by Nate as "in your face" forms of racism, as well as how the sentiments were not solely based on the rumblings of a few disgruntled students.

**Treatment By Students.**

Me and my roommate were talking about [racism] because she became a double major in Business [and Math] in the spring. So, she was taking her first Math course and she noticed there were no Black kids in STEM, and no one would sit next to her.

— Layla, UNC student and Blackspace team member

Layla shared multiple examples of the harm inflicted on her and her Black peers by fellow students, including overt acts like people not wanting to share space with them and conversations that revealed beliefs about the inherent inferiority of Black people, where “they basically had no arguments, other than the fact they thought we were underqualified.” Despite Layla having previously described the Blackspace team and
other Black UNC students as being overqualified, she talked about how she recognized that no matter how intelligent they are, how many campus organizations they belong to or activities they participate in, there will always be a faction of white students who believe Black students do not measure up. She further illustrated the anti-Black sentiments of her white peers using another example that spoke to an assumption about Black students’ inferior academic abilities: “Other students were saying that Black students did not get in [to UNC] off merit and that the only reason why we have Black students on this campus is due to affirmative action.” For Layla, being a Black student who is considered less qualified “makes it difficult to find study groups and people [who] don't think that you'll cheat off them or actually believe you have something to contribute to the group.”

Nate described how daily denigrations imposed by white students factor into the perpetuation of anti-Blackness in the classroom and the harm it causes:

In those key moments where even if I have a question to ask or I want to ask a student next to me to borrow a pencil or something like that …. You can see a lot of times how their interactions with you are very different from their interactions with one another. That ostracization is, it's crazy in a classroom experience. And I think it makes you almost like very defensive a lot of the times because you start to kind of understand what's what, who's who, like who's really who … because a lot of times, the smallest actions speak volumes to a person's perspective on you. So, I think that's just a constant thing that …. It really sucks because it's also a really hard campus environment.
The Blackspace team also expressed how their white counterparts perpetrated anti-Black sentiments by not wanting to be in the same spaces as Black students, limiting their interactions, or refusing all interactions. Chris explained,

If you don't know anyone in the class already it's a lot harder to try and find a group who would actually be willing to work with you. So, that friend who was in a [Computer Science] class said the same thing happened to her and students essentially told her to her face we're not going to work with you because you're Black.

Layla shared how ill prepared her white counterparts are to address racism because of their myopic view of the world outside their own. After educating a group of white students on racism and anti-Blackness, she confirmed her suspicions that her peers do not know what it means to be antiracist: “I'm just like, ‘Wow, you've really been sheltered your whole entire life and it just sucks.’” She further discussed the link between whiteness and students being uneducated on race-related topics they believe do not directly affect them:

They've never understood things like mandatory minimums or predictive policing … and things of that nature. And it really shocks them, and they asked questions on how this country can be so terrible to the certain demographic of people. And I'm just like, “That was the foundation of this country.” And then they'll be like, “Well, how does this happen?” Okay, this is a joke, but I’ll be like, “I don't know, ask your grandma.”
Treatments By Faculty.

You have a lot of people who are racist within classes or closeted racists or [teaching assistants] who don't really want to support you. Or teachers who fake like they want to support you, but don't really care.

— Chris, UNC student and Blackspace team member

The Blackspace team believe that educators are responsible for equitably educating all of their students by ensuring that classroom experiences and outcomes are enriching for everyone they teach. Despite their expectations, the group shared their thoughts on professors and other faculty members who they feel do not provide the same level of support to Black students as they do white ones, nor acknowledge or accept the harm inflicted through their words and deeds, and ultimately, do not realize that they are direct barriers to Black students’ success. Faculty are often unaware of the multiple ways that they harm students of color because they are oblivious to their own implicit biases (Sue et al., 2009). In this section, the students in my study share several ways that ignorant faculty can cause harm to Black students by forcing Black students to educate them about racism; selecting insensitive, racist curricula; and not interrupting racism that is brought to their attention.

The Blackspace team had quite a bit to say about how they have been treated by white professors and almost everyone had a story to tell. While the quotes below may be long, having a complete account of what was shared paints a picture that informs the realities of them feeling they have not received the level of assistance from their professors that they deserve, which in part drove the need for a tool like Blackspace.
Rather than being a part of a support system, Nate described how professors are inflicting harm by serving as a hinderance to his scholastic progress:

Any support you can get is much needed but feeling like you can't even get those things from the people that you'd expect to be able to—it just hinders what you consider possible. You know, you almost feel like lowering expectations for yourself. Even me, I was like, “Yo, I don’t even care if I get an A in this class … a B is the new A.” Those things aren't because you're lazy, but it's because all these obstacles start to become almost deterrents to what you consider success.

Chris also identified how a UNC faculty member’s deliberate and purposeful actions can serve as barriers to Black student success. He stated, “[There are] some advisors who would almost rather you just get out of here, kind of thing. So, it's a lot. A lot of different things that just make more obstacles than I feel like there really should be.”

While discussing the Black Lives Matter movement, Damien shared the additional labor of Black students by describing his efforts to teach a faculty member about race and racism.

I talked to one of my professors and they were very gracious, and I appreciated it. And they thanked me for showing that perspective, because I'm probably the only Black student in a 250-student class …. That was cool. It was like okay, relief—it was validated. They understood it, and then immediately after that it was just frustration that I even had a doubt that it will be about that I needed it to be validated by somebody that couldn't understand. A 65-year-old white man made me feel good by validating my experience. It's bullshit. They need the ownership to be on them.
What Damien shared revealed three different issues at play: 1) He was responsible for educating his faculty, which should not have been the case, 2) He initially felt good about doing this work and felt both validated and appreciated, and 3) He later realized that he did not need the validation and appreciation of the faculty member. Damien’s greater need was for the faculty member to already be aware of Black students’ struggles with Black death being repeatedly televised, or for the university to take responsibility for educating its faculty. Thus, he was treated by his professor as a personal tutor.

Layla discussed the pain white UNC professors inflict on Black students by way of their curriculum and rhetoric and how both can have triggering effects:

I found that professors are really insensitive to Black issues. I found that through Humanities courses I've taken, they don't really understand that the subject matter they're teaching are real life experiences that our students experience …. So, it's interesting to see people who have no positionality speak on these issues, as if from I want to say scientists—because it really is science—but from a standpoint that it's so academic and unemotional. I've seen people walk out of classrooms crying or in distress because subject matters have resurfaced traumas for them.

Chris also reflected on harmful UNC curriculum that triggers Black students, the lack of acknowledgement that it does so, and the role that the university should but does not play in protecting him and his peers from it:

When it comes to teaching and talking about the curriculum, being mindful to the fact that there's not a lot of Black people in the classes as it is. So, when you talk about race, or you talk about subjects of that manner being aware that whatever you say everyone in this room is going to take with them as a learning experience,
right. And so, by you saying something that may be biased like say a thing that is just, you know, bad towards our view as people, then you know it 1) impacts me, and then 2) impacts everyone in the room by basically giving them that perception of us, so I expect [UNC] to pay attention to those instances from teachers and actually do something about them.

Damien discussed the colorblind approach to educating that he has experienced in the classroom where white professors’ teaching neutrality causes harm:

When professors act like they're good people because they're taking the exact same tone and the exact same approach with every student …. They're not accounting for a lot of the—to put it lightly—distractions that we might be dealing with …. I do want us to be held to a high standard. I don't want to be patronized. But there seems to be a lack of understanding, especially in Computer Science. There does not exist a Black professor in computer science. There doesn't even exist a female professor from what I've seen in Computer Science. It's all been old white men. So, to act like everything is the same in their book in itself, I think, is a little racist. Or just too uneducated. Sorry. Does that make sense?

Chris talked about his expectation that professors provide the same level of support to Black students that they give others and not self-selecting when to intervene when a problem arises, particularly when an anti-Black act is brought to their attention that causes harm to one of their students. Continuing the story he shared about his friend who was told by white students that they would not partner with her because she is Black, Chris said she spoke to her professor, who in turn “did nothing about it. He was like,
‘Well, you will just have to .... Either way, you have to finish the project and I'll give you an extension or something like that at the most’." Chris seemed to be disappointed, yet not surprised that the professor exacerbated the problem instead of resolving it. He felt that rather than dealing with the problem of anti-Blackness that jeopardized his friend’s ability to complete her coursework, the professor’s inaction inflicted additional harm on her by not acknowledging what was going on in his own classroom. The professor allowed a Black student to feel uncomfortable and did not allow her to succeed in the class, rather than taking a stance and protecting her from further harm.

For Nate, accessibility to white professors extends to not feeling comfortable in their spaces: “Being one of very few Black students … even the Political Science spaces aren’t very welcoming. The office hours are very daunting.” Seemingly out of a sense of frustration, Bobby chose not to discuss his thoughts on harm imposed by the faculty in his program and instead stated, “I don't even want to get into that ... there's so many microaggressions and biases that those programs are trained to promote and it’s sickening.” I interpreted Bobby’s comment and body language to mean there was no need for him to further validate nor lend credence to his feeling that anti-Blackness is baked into the fabric of UNC.

**Treatment By the Institution.**

We're not having the same experience in this university.

— Nate, UNC student and Blackspace team member

We’re by and large inhibited being a minority demographic on campus.

— Musa, UNC student and Blackspace team member
Being a Black student on a historically white campus brings limitations, as interpreted by the statements made by Nate and Musa. As it relates to how university-sanctioned anti-Blackness in the form of control targets the Black student body, literally and figuratively—specifically policing, surveillance, and profiling—there were examples shared by all but one student. Layla discussed collegiate violence in the form of policing:

You see PD constantly profiling Black students, especially during times like dead week. That's when we have all our classes canceled for the week to study, like the week prior to finals. Usually, people pull all-nighters at libraries and obviously Black students will be walking home late at night and they'll be stopped by [UNCPD].

Bobby shared what has come to be his expectation of Black college students being policed because of their Blackness, how policing comes with an equal expectation that they in turn must protect one another, and peer protection serving as a necessary requirement that includes the creation of counter-spaces like Blackspace. He explained that with these safe spaces, Black students can be accountable to and for their peers.

Bobby stated that “even the police department … they're targeting students …. It's important for us to have tools and methods in which we can kind of check in … and make sure our people are good.”

Feeling as though he is passing through a white space that was not created for nor adapted to embrace him, Nate described UNC as, at best, not being a welcoming environment, and, at its worst, being a hostile environment for Black students. He stated that:
It's really like I'm almost somebody who's visiting here. You know, I feel like a guest on my own campus. I know that was an outrageous statement … but that's just an example of things that are allowed to slide. And even that Free Speech Week … I was ready for something to pop off every time I was on campus. There's a lot of Black girls being called niggers walking through the dining commons, stuff like that. I remember there was this truck that was driving around with the American flag behind it, and it stopped to say something to us. And we're here like, “Okay, what's going on, what's going to happen now?” type of thing.

Bobby also shared his perspective on UNC’s anti-Black racism, particularly toward Black women:

It's just terrible. One of the smallest demographics on our campus is Black males, and I think the retention rate for Black males on our campus is extremely crazy. And then on the flip side, [UNC] is also an extremely predatory campus. And so for Black women … you're not only dealing with this stuff in class, but you're also trying to figure out how to navigate a very like predatory environment on campus.

**The Effects of Harm and How it is Mitigated.**

As a Black college student, I think that ‘Black’ in front of the ‘college student’ phrase is extremely important because that's what's first and foremost going to influence your college life or your student life, whatever it might be.

— Nate, UNC student and Blackspace team member

For Nate, the adjective “Black” as a descriptor of who he and his peers are as scholars helps define their collegiate experience. His comments about Blackness led to a
discussion about anti-Blackness and how it affects them as students, and both he and Damien focused some of their thoughts on what it means to deal with racism as a student, the racial battle fatigue Black collegians deal with, and ultimately, its negative impacts on their mental health. Nate’s reaction was philosophical: “I’m a person who believes in the energy around you becoming the energy that is you. So, when you’re constantly around this predominantly white institution … it’s off-putting energy at the end of the day.” After describing a covertly racist incident involving a group of white students whom he thought were his friends, Damien shared a more pragmatic sentiment: “There’s a bunch of other examples like that one that are uncomfortable to even talk about to professors or whatever you might need, but just racism period is going to weigh on you as a student.”

Damien and Nate also shared similar feelings on carrying the weight of representation as a Black student at an HWI, given that they represent such a small demographic on their respective campuses. Nate talked about blatant and more discreet forms of racism and noted that “you get a lot of both, but what I was talking about in the classroom, especially that burden representation plays …. I’m not even talking about it being a burden you have to carry all the time, which it is.” Damien felt that the diminishing number of Black students in his classes over time factored into the growing challenge of underrepresentation on his campus:

The fact that we barely exist on these campuses in itself is another burden to bear. And I've noticed, like I said, I'm in Computer Science and the higher and higher I go … I remember being surprised my first quarter going into Computer Science at how diverse the classes were. And then just every quarter advancing further and further, seeing that thin out. And now I'm the only one. The majority of classes
that I'm in, I'm the only Black student. And just that fact alone is hard. All the
study groups and stuff like that, nobody I can relate to. Whatever it may be that
you're going through gets a little exhausting, especially after four years.

Damien and Nate’s comments are examples of the cumulative psychological effects anti-
Black racism at HWIs can have on Black students.

As previously noted in Chapter 3, Musa is an international student from Uganda.
He shared how he first had to learn about and contextualize what Blackness is from an
American perspective before being able to digest the concept of anti-Blackness, and then
intellectualized racism at UNC and the role Black students play in combatting it:

Understanding the various degrees of racism …. How it impacts people, but also
how we can make a difference. And we're at [the University of Northern
California] so we’re smart. Or it must mean that we're smart. But like really
thinking about it ….”

There are a few ways of looking at Musa’s comment: Black students at UNC bear the
responsibility of disentangling themselves from academy-sanctioned anti-Blackness and
build defense mechanisms as ways to cope, or they attempt to do so while still
questioning whether it is too big of a problem to solve.

Damien reflected on one of the ways he mitigates the impacts of white harm,
which is to surround himself with peers who understand what it means to be an academic
while Black, as well as the natural camaraderie that comes with it. He shared, “It's much
easier to express those ideas of why I felt like I wouldn't belong in certain places to
people that will understand. So, those are pretty much the first people I talked to about
that.” Bobby was very direct in describing his ability to affirm his Blackness in what he
considers to be white spaces while remaining true to who he is: “For me, it's really being intentional about how I navigate spaces as a Black man and not being apologetic of it and not being kind of submissive of this idea of being tokenized.” Bobby’s statement about being intentional about how he shows up in white spaces is a powerful example of resistance, as he did not allow the anti-Blackness of UNC dictate who he is as a strong Black man.

The barrage of microaggressions Black UNC students deal with daily acted as a catalyst for Layla to purposely seek Black spaces and remove herself from white ones, when possible—a decision she came to early on in her freshman year:

I've had Black friends within my [Computer Science] classes receive microaggressions and I've seen other students touch other people's hair. And just those things that you should not do. So that's why I joined the Black Student Union and the Black Recruitment and Retention Center.

Layla also shared that at the beginning of her student tenure at UNC, the ramifications of anti-Blackness on campus were balanced by surrounding herself with her Black peers so she could feel nourished, validated, and supported.

A couple of the Blackspace team members discussed how they and their peers participate in Black student-centered organizations as a counter to anti-Blackness at UNC. Nate described Black UNC students coming together by participating in organizations that focus on their field of study, while others look to join groups that are more generalist in nature like the BSU. He shared, “The same way there's a collective Black student body, there's specific nuances within it like people who are interested in engineering, people interested in entrepreneurial projects, etcetera.” Layla also detailed
the commitments of her Black peers through numerous examples and stated that “a lot of our students … we're not only in these hard classes, trying to get good grades … we’re in about two or three organizations each.” Bobby affirmed Layla’s comments by stating that participating in multiple extracurricular activities applies to the greater Black student population and that “Black students aren't only excelling in their classes, they're part of two, three organizations at the same time. And that's not only unique to one or two people. That's everybody, right.”

Neither Layla nor Bobby explained why Black students at UNC feel compelled to prove themselves by attempting to excel in their classes and be involved in multiple activities during their college tenure. They were describing an unwritten requirement, and as someone who had a similar experience as an undergraduate and could therefore relate, I understood where they were coming from and did not press them to address the “why.” However, we did talk about the realities of being seen as less than and pushing against anti-Black stereotypes by creating our own high benchmarks and then exceeding those expectations. As Layla put it, “If we were to bring up our statistics and what we've done within our communities, we’re overqualified.”

**The COVID Context: Dealing with the Inequalities of Dual Pandemics**

There's an idea for incoming freshmen or admitted students that the university itself is pretty anti-Black and it's not a great place for Black students.

— Bobby, UNC student and Blackspace team member

I had the opportunity to partner with the students in my study in June of 2020, about six months after the COVID-19 pandemic first struck. At that time, over 7 million people in the United States had contracted the virus (Ritchie et al., 2020), and it was well
documented that the Black community was disproportionately impacted, both physically and psychologically (Novacek et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). COVID-19 exposed longstanding and stark disparities for Black people that “underscore important medical, social, economic, environmental, and political contexts that predate the pandemic” (Tai et al., 2021, p. 705). These disparities are based on centuries of anti-Black racism, which is in and of itself a long-standing disease, and as distinguished anti-racism scholar activist Ibram Kendi (2020) noted, Black people are living with “the racial pandemic within the viral pandemic.”

The effects of these twin traumas on Black college students in particular in 2020 were significant, as they lived through a pandemic where Black people made up 24% of COVID-19 cases and 34% of hospitalizations despite being 13% of the US population (Tai et al., 2021), bared witness and then reacted to the national exposure of Black death that resulted in another wave of Black Lives Matter protests, and dealt with unspoken personal turmoil—all while attempting to adapt to new ways of learning with little-to-no emotional or mental support mechanisms to help guide them. This is what I call the COVID context.

Specifically, I define the COVID context as 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; for them, a 400-year race-based pandemic that impacts their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, coupled with a newer contagion that has similar effects and targets Black people with greater acuity than it does others, directly affects how they navigate collegiate spaces. The
weight of these two pandemics makes Black students uniquely vulnerable to the challenges of racism in higher education, as stated by Bobby:

How do you mirror that collective experience and that feeling of “I was part of a Black community” when you're at home? And that sucks. But at the same time, it's what we battle with is kind of the pressure of COVID and everything going on in the world.

The sickness of racialized violence is not new, as anti-Blackness is a pandemic that has been in existence for centuries. Layla stated, “I feel like it's a consensus that Black life hasn't mattered on a global scale. People think it's only in the US, but globally, historically, there's been a mistreatment of Black bodies and Black people.”

Chris shared a similar sentiment: “We've had this system that's been holding us down and just been oppressing us for a very long time.” Bobby and Layla also spoke about the traditions of anti-Blackness and the stagnancy of change related to it. Bobby shared, “This has been a long-lived movement. But unfortunately, it feels like a new thing every time somebody dies.”

Layla described how she did not feel protests and other demonstrations of support would translate into systemic change, and said, “I've seen ‘Black Lives Matter’ being painted on the side of the street. I've seen murals. I'm like, ‘What is that going to do for us as a people?’” Layla and Bobby believe the protracted history of anti-Black racism continues to infect this country, despite the support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Chris shared his feelings about public displays and replays of white violence against Black people and how he believed it directly affects his collegiate peers. To him, despite the increased, albeit temporary media attention it receives, “the lynchings to killings… [are] definitely going to have a very large impact on Black college students
Everywhere in general.” Chris’ perceptions about the magnitude of Black death burgeoning on social media is an example of what it can do to the living, as confirmed in the research by Whitnéé Garrett-Walker (2021) that discusses its impacts on the soul in the form of digital lynching. Garrett-Walker (2021) defines digital lynching as Black subjugation at the hands of white people though the sharing of racialized violence on social media.

The complexities of Black UNC students having a different journey than their white counterparts presented themselves during our discussions about Blackness, COVID-19, and the Black Lives Matter movement. As Bobby explained, Black students “always have to be aware and cognizant of the larger things that are happening in the world…. While this COVID stuff is very current, we're feeling the pressures every week. I think the implications of it are long term.” The COVID context represents the intersection of the coronavirus and racial strife, which Damien said his non-Black counterparts do not have to deal with. He stated, “Obviously, all the Black students have been dealing with a specific burden that the rest of the campus just can't relate to.” Bobby spoke of Layla and other Blackspace students’ good works with pride and admiration but made it clear that their efforts are indicative of commitments specific to his Black collegiate peers, whose responsibilities include dealing with the stressors of two pandemics: “As [Layla] was saying, she's doing her work-study, she's working on Blackspace, and she's taking classes in the summer. Who do you know who's doing that amidst a pandemic and racial…? This is just constantly what we're doing.”

The COVID context manifested itself in a contradiction Damien observed between the support the UCC student body received to deal with the COVID-19
pandemic, juxtaposed with the lack thereof for Black students coping with the murder of George Floyd. It was a difficult story for Damien to share, as the details of what happened were still raw:

At the beginning of the quarter every professor reached out with a very, very specific heartfelt message to every student about how they understand how uniquely difficult this quarter will be, you've never done anything like this. Yada, yada, yada. “We understand if you need extensions”—all that type of stuff, right. And that's because [COVID-19] affects everybody universally. And honestly, them even more because they're all older so they're all high risk, and they have more empathy towards that situation. And then when race relations in the country explode in like two days there was nothing. And I checked with a bunch of people in a bunch of different majors, with a bunch of different professors and there was like 1% that reached out. I’m not sure all the complications they deal with on their end, but I'm just saying. Nobody said shit. They all understood when it was about the pandemic, and nobody said anything about this. And it was on the students to muster up the strength to call their professors and deal with minimizing their struggle… and request extensions or whatever they needed. But nobody put forth that effort without that. So, they're lacking empathy where it matters, I think. Yeah, that one's a little emotional—that story—but it was a lot to deal with last quarter.

One unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic was that coursework moved to remote instruction and, as Layla describes, the remote environment helped to mitigate some of the racial harm that happens in the in-person classroom. Virtual learning
allowed Layla to “mask up” by creating distance between herself and white peers she deemed as racist. With online learning, racial battle fatigue was minimized because she could better avoid anti-Blackness in the form of microaggressions and in-person racist confrontations. When Layla talked about the impacts of racism, COVID-19, and remote learning, she was unapologetic about what she perceived to be a newfound benefit the coronavirus initially presented her through physical distancing; she saw the pandemic as a vehicle that provided a temporary respite:

In STEM there’s people not wanting to be your partner. No one wanting to sit next to you unless it's the last available seat in the course, which was kind of fun when coronavirus was [first] happening. I was sitting in a row with four seats on each side.

Layla also shared how anti-Blackness has been easier to mitigate during virtual class sessions. Fewer in person interactions with white students who treat her differently because she is Black meant fewer slights, confrontations, insults, and other denigrations. Remote instruction provided social distancing, which was necessary to protect students from COVID-19, but also provided the social distancing necessary to protect Black students from the racism pandemic. For Black students like Layla, remote instruction provided a reprieve from her white counterparts in the name of self-preservation and allowed her to maintain her mental health.

While sharing their feelings about the intersection of systemic racism and COVID-19, Nate and Bobby linked it to their personal resistance. They believed that agency begins with declarations of action. Nate stated, “For me, it’s calling out the injustices, because asking for equality does not work, and I don't think that's what we're
doing at this point anymore. Just saying we're so sick of it.” Bobby shared similar thoughts:

You have to stand up for it in any space that you’re in. In any space…. Right now, it feels like our backs as a people are against the wall and if we're not true to our Blackness in this time then it could do a little bit of damage. Actually, a lot of damage to the Movement, collectively.

Bobby rounded out the dual pandemics conversation with a discussion about the immediate need for a tool like Blackspace, as well as the positive impacts it will have on future generations of Black collegians:

While this COVID stuff is very current … I think the implications of it are long term. And so, the necessity for a Blackspace won't just be for this moment. But it will be from here on out.
Chapter V: Findings—Resistance Through Self-Reliance

I think UNC, as a campus that prides itself on diversity, freedom of speech, politics, etcetera, does nothing at all to support Black students, gaslights Black students and other marginalized communities, and basically uses us for diversity campaigns without giving resources.

— Layla, UNC student and Blackspace member

Honestly, I usually find out from other Black students.

— Nate, UNC student and Blackspace member

In Chapter 4, I discussed what it means for Black UNC students to feel that they cannot be just students. I shared “the what” of the problem: to be Black, attend a top-tier university, and deal with two anti-Black pandemics. My goal was to describe the sickness of racialized violence in higher education and its varied effects on the Blackspace team, and my intent was to provide context for the interpersonal forms of anti-Black racism they faced so I could adequately set the stage for my second findings chapter.

This findings chapter describes how anti-Blackness at UNC presented itself through specific forms of institutional oppression, and how the students relied on each other to resist it. In the quote above, Layla described a lack of institutional support that exposed itself in ways that include her feeling that Black students do not receive their fair share of resources and information, and the use of racial capitalism (Leong, 2013) to commodify her and her peers. In lieu of having university support, Nate’s quote reveals “the how” of attempting to solve the problem, which is to continue the long-standing tradition of Black student resistance in the form of self-reliance. These topics make up the two sections of Chapter 5; I will first present examples of how institutional anti-Blackness and oppression were viewed in the eyes of the Blackspace team, which led to
the impetus for them creating a transformative digital space, and then talk about the manifestation of the tool as a form of self-reliance that elevates the Black student experience. The first section covers “the why” behind institutional oppression causing the need for Blackspace, and the second demonstrates “the how” of Black student resistance by the team claiming the problem as their own so they could solve it.

**Institutional Oppression and Black Student Resistance**

Everybody thinks that resistance comes way after oppression, [as if] it’s a reaction to the oppression. It’s not a reaction …. When oppression occurs, resistance occurs simultaneously …. As the oppression shifts, the form of resistance changes (C. Cann, personal communication, December 22, 2021).

As the quote above demonstrates, oppression and resistance go hand in hand. When oppression happens, resistance immediately occurs to fight it, as if oppression were a virus and resistance serves as the antibodies to battle it. The antibodies are always there, waiting to attack. And so it goes for institutional oppression in education and Black students resisting it. The virus of anti-Blackness has existed on historically white university campuses since their inception, as the economic powerhouse of slavery played an essential role in building the system of higher education (Mustaffa, 2017).

To fight the virus, Black college students employ Black life-making, a term that describes “the creative spaces of possibility and freedom Black people produce when practicing self-definition, self-care, and resistance” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 712). In university settings, resistance for Black students can take the form of third spaces that function as fugitive sanctuaries, where they are “carving out culture, but not owning the official space in which that culture can exist” (Doucet & Kirkland, 2021, p. 637). For the
students in my study, Blackspace is more than a digital sanctuary, but a set of purposeful strategies that “value, protect, create, affirm, and explain their life in social death … thereby creating new strategies for being Black and remaining alive” (Doucet & Kirkland, 2021, p. 637) in the academy.

**Lack of Institutional Support as a Form of Oppression**

What does it feel like to be a problem?

— W. E. B. Du Bois

The Blackspace team talked about how UNC promotes the usual rhetoric—“we support Black students”—and Nate shared his feelings on the dangers of not knowing how to read between the lines of institutional rhetoric:

Honestly speaking, [UNC] is very good at talking the talk and not really walking the walk. You have to be very cautious of people's words. Because at the end of the day, words are just words—it’s all about actions.”

Ahmed (2006) theorizes that non-performative anti-racism—institutional speech that claims to be committed to racial equality—are words “that do not bring about the effects that they name,” and “expose the gap between what organizations say they do and what they do” (p. 1). This exposure happens because the plans an institution articulated do not have the means needed to succeed (Ahmed, 2006). In other words, and as Nate shared, UNC’s non-performative anti-racism is “just words.”

Layla spoke about the legacy of Black students fighting for on-campus programs specifically designed for them, as opposed to the university proactively creating means of support:
Oftentimes, all the resources on our campus are fought for by Black students, and especially most of the resources that other POC students receive as well were started by Black students on our campus. And we see that even right now with legalizing affirmative action. Currently, our Black students at [UNC], we're on the forefront of that …. The African American Student Development Program was fought for by students …. We also have a Black Resource Center that was also fought for by students. So, it wasn’t like the university set up any type of way for students to receive resources …. So, I don't have any expectations for UNC because they've always failed Black students.

Consequently, Layla does not view Black on-campus organizations as part of the university. While the groups may reside on campus, she and the other Blackspace members consider them to be entities separate from the institution, even if the organizations are sanctioned by it. Because Black students fought for the programs’ creation, the students in turn can claim them—not UNC.

For Bobby, a lack of intuitional support is derived from a UNC ideology that Black students are not necessarily viewed as an oppressed group by the neoliberal academic establishment, which, in his view, speaks to one of the reasons why little attention is paid to the importance of supporting him and his peers. As an institution that stands on a social justice foundation, Bobby found the minimal assistance it provides to be hypocritical: “Another thing that I hate about it is the idea that you go to [UNC] and it's [supposed to be] some super progressive university, but the neoliberalism BS is really real.” One of the ways top-tier universities maintain their position in the higher education status hierarchy is by enrolling BIPOC students, which is a strategic move that allows
them to gain and keep their status by marketing its reputation as being progressive and inclusive (Leong, 2013)—a UNC strategy which Bobby saw through.

While talking about institutional anti-Black racism, the students in my study identified multiple forms of it stemming from a lack of support. They recalled examples of an inequitable distribution of resources and information, which negatively impact Black UNC students. They also discussed how the university promoted diversity without fulfilling its promise—and more pointedly—used their Blackness as a tool to benefit the university without it benefitting Black students. Feeling that they were not being listened to, protected, or guided rounded out the conversation about institutional anti-Blackness.

**They Are Not Sharing Information.** A theme I heard repeatedly was the Blakespace members not knowing which university-related processes to follow or having access to the information, tools, and resources that would allow them to, at the very least, have a baseline of understanding of how to be a college student, and at most, a successful one. Nate spoke about his expectations not being met after entering college and being surprised that he was not provided with basic information: “I didn't expect to be a college student not knowing how to even just do my day-to-day activities on campus.” We talked about the challenges of navigating the morass of financial aid information, and as it relates to scholarships Nate said, “I don't even know what a lot of these deadlines are. I don’t even know where to go to figure out this information.” He then shared other examples of what it was like for him coming into a space like UNC with preconceived expectations about being a well-prepared student, and then not knowing where to turn to get what he needed. He did not know the university would throw him into the proverbial deep end of the pool when he did not know how to swim.
Bobby described the onus being on the student to know how to gain access to university information and resources: “When it comes to your specific journey through classes and whatnot, you're finding that information on your own through those various mediums. Because, again, you gotta go out of your way to know how to ask questions.”

Chris shared a similar sentiment, and related it to one Black student not having information can mean all Black students are adversely affected:

It's a lot of information at [UNC] that is just hard to find and if you don't know about it, you would never know about it or even know where to start to look for it. So, on top of that, our community is already small, so … we wouldn’t all collectively know about it. So, at the end of the day, if no one knows and my friends don't know, and their friends don't know, then none of us are going to be exposed to these opportunities.

**They Are Not Guiding Us.** The students also discussed the dearth of university support that results from a paltry number of Black faculty, which for them translates into a lack of advice and counsel from someone in a position of authority who the students can relate to. For Nate, being one of few Political Science majors and not having access to faculty who look like him presented a challenge with getting help: “There's very few Black Political Science majors out there. [And] there's not many people you could talk to, it's not much advice you can get.” Chris shared what it means to traverse the UNC landscape with few Black professors and talked about how a lack of awareness denied him access to the ones who do exist: “… And also just letting us know of other Black faculty at [UNC] and having that available because we just don't know.” Chris’ statement demonstrates how Black UNC students must learn how to navigate the HWI without the
guidance of Black faculty. During Musa’s discussion about UNC not listening to the concerns and needs of its Black student population, he spoke about the importance of not tethering Black professors’ Blackness to the types of courses they teach. In his view, it minimizes Black faculty’s access to Black students, as a Black professor’s knowledge base goes beyond their ability to teach only what are deemed Black classes. Musa stated, I have not had a Black professor and that's something that is very normalized, still. I haven't taken an African American Studies course. But I also don't think that should be the prerequisite to actually having a Black professor. I think that's very overlooked, at least from the student side. It's very overlooked. Because we also need Black educators and I think that's where it starts. It's also how well the student can relate to the teacher. And how well the teacher can relate to the student. I think across the scale it just needs to be more Black professors.

They Are Not Listening to Us, and They Are Not Protecting Us. While sharing what the Black Lives Matter movement means to him as a Black student at a historically white university, Musa found it important for his school to support him by actively listening when he and his Black peers express their wants and needs: “Particularly as a college student, I think it means being listened to. Definitely in the academic sphere and side of things.” Musa believed Black UNC students were not being heard and felt patronized. I found Musa’s perspective telling, given that he has only been in the US for about five years and has a limited historical frame of reference, yet he was able to draw upon the nuances of institutional rhetoric at an HWI.
Musa also gave an example of an absence of institutional support for Black UNC students in the form of the school not physically protecting them, nor publicly acknowledging Black harm:

A friend of mine and two of her friends were walking back home late at night and they were apprehended by policemen, who asked them if they had any weapons. One of them carries a taser for self-defense …. I don't know what [her] age was, but she was underage, having a weapon. So, the policeman harassed them and arrested them. And they were being charged by the state. There was a protest in their names. And to my memory the school did not help as far as like pushing the county to drop the charges.

Musa went on to speak critically of how the galvanization of students around the young Black women did not serve as a signal to the university’s administration to step in and act. There was no university acknowledgement of the incident, nor help to right a wrong against two members of its own student body, which speaks to how the over-policing of Black college students can make them both hypervisible, and at the same time, unseen (Doucet & Kirkland, 2021).

**They Are Not Committed to Our Needs.** Several of the Blackspace team members discussed their low-to-no expectations that UNC would actively, thoughtfully, and authentically change its practices to benefit Black students and instead continue to perpetuate its oppressive practices. Layla stated, “There's this push to rename buildings. But if we have the same systems of oppression within our campus attacking our students every day, renaming a building isn’t it going to fix that.” Chris’ expectations centered
around the university assisting its small Black student population in the same way that it prioritizes other students’ needs:

If we're such a small percentage of the entire student population as it is already, we should at least be able to get our classes and trying to improve … because if we can't get our classes, we can't graduate. And if we don't get our classes on time when we have things planned out down the line, the next thing you know it'll be tougher to get that class next semester if something else comes up. Basically, it just makes us always have to readjust our plans while other students are constantly able to just bypass that and have the smoothest experience possible, while we can't get any of that.

Bobby felt that Black student success is not linked to, nor dependent upon university guidance, given that the school has not committed itself to them: “We've never really been trained to navigate these spaces, and these spaces were never really curated to enable us to learn.”

**They Are Using Us.** UNC promoting diversity without fulfilling the promise of creating and maintaining an authentically diverse institution was a robust topic of discussion. To explain what it felt like to have UNC use his Blackness in a way that felt disingenuous, Bobby used the term *predatory Blackness*, meaning that the university used students’ Blackness for its own gain. He gave a specific example of how the school links Blackness to its marketing efforts centered around diversity and inclusion: “One thing that I want to really emphasize for our campus is predatory in using our Blackness as a mechanism of promoting diversity, and they do that so much. And that's not okay.
It's really not okay.” Musa also shared an example of how UNC employs predatory Blackness to market itself:

I've been told this firsthand that the [diversity and inclusion] documentation is, first of all, [whitewashed], because it's not done by Black students. [It states,]

“We support Black students, and we are diverse, and we are all these things.” And you have a very happy student with some books and she's smiling …. That's a very cherry-picked story, as opposed to let's go out and hear from various individuals, what their experience is like.

Bobby and Musa’s critiques about the over- and mis-representation of Black students in UNC’s marketing efforts spoke directly to Bobby’s predatory Blackness, or as discussed in Chapter 2, racial capitalism’s effects on Black students, as “commodification can … foster racial resentment by causing non-white people to feel used or exploited by white people” (Leong, 2013, p. 2152). Musa calling out UNC for exploiting Black students by using their Blackness to project an image of having a diverse student population is an example of how “schools are motivated to capture the likenesses of Black and Asian students in their viewbooks, which in turn suggests an institutional attempt to capitalize non-whiteness by converting it into a recruitment tool” (Leong, 2013, p. 2192).

As it relates to the recruitment of Black students, several members of the team mentioned that they were aware of UNC increasing the number of incoming students of color but pointed out that they were not aware of any plans to retain them. For the Blackspace team, increasing the Black collegiate population does not go far enough in that it does not address the institutional support needed to maintain their status as students. Chris shared,
I did hear them say they upped the diversity intake for this freshman year. It's, you know … that's cool. But how are we going to retain these students? What I'm afraid of in terms of what they'll do now is … just take as many students as they can, but not really help and support them.

Bobby further expounded on the topic of retention: “I think a lot of the times when it comes to the Black experience on a university campus [it's] a matter of recruitment, but there is not a lot of attention to the idea of retention.” The enrollment of Black students at an HWI has been and continues to be tokenized as the institution’s “core practices and policies still [reflect] white supremacy” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 720), which speaks to how a university like UNC can enroll Black students, yet maintain the anti-Black status quo of not supporting them.

**Self-Reliance as a Form of Resistance**

Black students have always fought for the resources given to them on this campus.

— Layla, UNC student and Blackspace team member

I haven't borne the brunt of [The University of Northern California's] biggest ill wills, but I've seen it with my friends and my colleagues. And yeah, I'm here to help. And in whatever way I can.

— Musa, UNC student and Blackspace team member

Musa and Layla’s comments demonstrate the agency in Black UNC students’ reliance on each other and their desire to force change, fueled by the previously discussed anti-Black racism of minimal institutional assistance. As the Blackspace team described it, the lack, dearth, hole, gap, or any other adjective that defines less than adequate
institutional support of Black UNC students sparked Black student resistance, triggered by collective self-reliance. Bobby shared,

    Outside of the classroom setting, you're consistently having to fight and create institutional changes through organizations and through your activism. Or through just being Black on that campus through your bare existence there to make things change. And it really shouldn't be on us as Black students to hold those roles …. Everybody's putting in work and we're all trying to make our campus better.

**A Collective Responsibility to Fix What the University Has Not.** A theme that I heard across the board is the team’s self-imposed mandate that they feel responsible for correcting the perpetual mistake of UNC not caring for its Black student population in a manner that allowed them to thrive. The students were not attempting to partner with the institution to help it solve the systemic problems of institutional anti-Blackness that it created and continued to perpetuate. Yet, as Black students, they felt it was incumbent upon them to fix the problems, because as the direct recipients of institutional anti-Black racism, they knew how to best influence a paradigm shift. Nate gave an example of the team feeling the responsibility of creating such a dramatic change: “We got into the field of utilizing digital spaces and then figuring out all the possible ways we can add, and I guess even fix, the university experience.” Nate additionally talked about how experiencing the problems of being a Black student at UNC made the team the ideal people to solve them:

    I remember Bobby basically set up a meeting for us to … come together and talk about a couple ideas and when it came to the idea of Blackspace, we were all sold
because again we all shared this similar experience within the Black community and the Black experience at UNC.

Bobby also linked their Blackness to the tenets of responsibility, self-preservation, and self-reliance:

I just feel like as of now, everybody is realizing that our responsibility and that our identities as Black people — it needs to be taken to another level. And that's exciting. That brings [a] self-awareness kind of healing and growth and also strategy and impact. Today at [UNC], this is most diverse class in about 30 years. That's great …. But it's gonna be our responsibility to make sure that all those people stay here …. We're at a very unique place where we can change [the] narrative on UNC’s campus.

Damien shared his thoughts on Black students having to be self-reliant, as well as protecting the most vulnerable among them, those being Black freshmen and transfer students:

One of the main things we all mentioned in our introduction, but some of the purposes we've had to serve for each other was [being] a source of information or helping each other out with certain things that we know eased our experience as a Black student at a [top-tier university]. And I think we all know certain students that might not have had that community as quickly, or present in their lives when they were introduced to the campus and they couldn't stay …. I'm pretty sure we all have … come into our first year with [not] being able to find that comfort or place of home on campus early enough that by the time you got a few years into your experience, they were gone. And I think one of the big goals of one of the
specific demographics we talk about in this light are Black freshmen and
incoming students, and quickly integrating them into a system that is providing
them with information that can make them feel more at home in a place where
they probably only make up one or two of the students in a lecture hall.
The Blackspace team shared how as individuals, they each feel a personal
responsibility to affect change. For Damien, working on Blackspace,
Has helped a lot personally, just feeling like there's some sense of purpose.
There’s something that's making some sense because a lot this stuff isn’t making
any sense right now in the country and knowing that I'm—in some way—
contributing to bettering that in whatever community we’re able to.
Chris said, “I think really important to keep giving back so that everyone can make it
through,” which was sentiment that was agreed on by the entire team.

**The Long-Standing Tradition of Peer Support Continues.** The team
recognized that they are one of many Black student-centered groups whose purpose is to
look out for each other. Bobby shared, “I think one thing about being a Black
student...there's always multiple organizations doing a lot of work ... in order to make
space for our people.” Historically, the proverbial glue that once held together the
collective work UNC’s Black-centered student organizations was the African American
Student Handbook (as illustrated in Figure 4). Created in the 1990s by Black UNC
students, the Handbook was the original north star for UNC Black peer support, as it
provided them with resources, information, and a sense of community. The team paid
homage to the now defunct Handbook (as shown in Figure 5), which served as an offline
historical reference for the present-day digital tool that is Blackspace. Bobby shared how they were introduced to Blackspace’s predecessor:

We were hearing stories about a document on our campus called the African American Student Handbook. And a bunch of campuses throughout history across the country—they've all had their versions of Blackspace, but essentially, it worked as like a directory. Imagine like a Yellow Pages for student organizations, Black owned businesses, faculty, alumni, all that.

**Figure 4**

*The UNC African American Student Handbook Cover*

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**Figure 5**

*Blackspace Instagram Video Screenshot Honoring the UNC African American Student Handbook*
In addition to acknowledging the importance of the African American Student Handbook to Black UNC students, recognizing the deliberate sharing of information and resources was another component of the discussion centered around the value of Black student peer support. Bobby stated, “You can always depend on Black people that you meet on our campus to support you and to have some type of resources to point you in [the right] direction.” Damien specifically called out the link between Black peer support and information sharing: “I think peer support, as the umbrella term, is super important for getting put on with some of these opportunities.”

There was a “cause and effect” discussion around the challenge of not receiving resources from UNC as the “cause,” which led to a conversation about the critical importance of the students receiving key educational information from their peers as the “effect.” Damien stated, “Every opportunity I found out about has been from another Black student …. if I didn't have people that I trusted telling me specifically about certain
things to go after, I would have missed out on a bunch of opportunities.” Layla also talked about similar experiences with the Black student community:

There definitely were a couple of resources that people had to tell me about, and one of them would be [UNC] Nerds, which is this 24-hour study space …. The majority of the things I attend actually are things that other people told me about, or at least are the most valuable to me.

Where information comes from and who provides it factors into authentic Black peer support for Damien, and he talked about university-related information as being valid and legitimized when it comes from another Black student:

The source of the information is also coming from Black students. Even if you could, in essence, find the same information or the same orgs if you did a lot of digging through the [school’s] resources, just the trust and the knowledge that the information being provided to you is given by people who have actually been in these positions, instead of just whoever decided what could go out on the [school] forum.

I found it interesting that Damien felt more comfortable accepting and trusting school-related information from a Black peer than from what he considered could be a potentially filtered form of it. Damien also spoke of the sensitive nature of certain school-related information—like financial aid—that a Black student may be looking for also plays a role in seeking it specifically from a Black peer, as they are “not necessarily going to publicize that request to everybody around you. It’s going to be people you trust.” He shared that although students of various races seek information about financial resources, certain assumptions made by white people factor into stereotypes about Black
students, which is another reason why Black students ask for help from their fictive Black family.

**Blackspace: A New Digital Fugitivity**

The genocidal policies and practices directed towards [I]ndigenous people in the conquest and settlement of the “new world,” and towards African people in the organization of racial slavery, combined to form a template ... that has perniciously shaped the treatment and experiences of other subordinated groups as well. This template includes not only the technologies of exploitation ...; it also includes the technologies of resistance .... (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 107)

For the members of Blackspace, it is not about using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1984), as that is not their goal. They have instead created their own tools to protect themselves for the time they are under the master’s roof. The team is building what Omi and Winant (2014) called “technologies of resistance” through the design of a tool that helps define a future that reimagines what life for a Black college student attending an HWI can look like with the proper means to succeed. Taking their cues from online resources that foster the sharing of information, Nate and Bobby described how other digital tools that predate Blackspace serve as vehicles for peer support through information dissemination that is of direct benefit to Black UNC students. While Nate may receive an occasional informational email from UNC, the value of the information may not be as significant as the messages he receives from fellow Black students via a resource like GroupMe, a messaging app that facilitates group communication: “We have this ‘Black at [UNC]’ GroupMe where a lot of people say, ‘Don't forget to apply for the scholarship,’ or ‘X, Y and Z is coming up. Make sure
you’re prepared, make sure you’re ready.”” Bobby also validated GroupMe’s benefits and discussed how the UNC Black student community “just kind flood you with valuable information that people can use. [And] there's a lot of mailing lists that have Black resources.”

**Old School to New School: The Sharing of Resources Evolves**

I shared with the team that I believe the reasons why Black students who attend HWIs continue to support one another have not changed over the years, but the ways in which they do so have. The advancement of resources that Black students use to share information speaks to the progression of Black student spaces from analog to digital. For me, finding out about events, protests, and rallies as a Black undergraduate back in the day may have meant a trip to the BSU office to see what was posted on the bulletin board like the one in Figure 6, since we did not have Instagram, Twitter or GroupMe. (The team was kind enough not to laugh, because I was definitely showing my age.) The sharing of information in this way did not necessarily foster connections or community, unless other Black students happened to be in the BSU office, and we could strike up a conversation.

**Figure 6**

*Example of a Black Student Union’s Information Display*
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. As Bobby saw it, what he and his fellow Blackspace team members are building is the evolution of creating community between Black students:

I think we as students understand and especially as Black people, we understand the need of connecting our community to a broader community …. The document that existed on campus, the African American Student Handbook, it did the same thing. It's just in a different medium.
Although the Blackspace platform may be the digital modernization of an offline tool, the team pointed out that what they are creating is revolutionary. Chris said, “I'm pretty sure most Black communities and schools haven't seen anything similar to this, where there was software meant to help them organize things for themselves.” Bobby concurred: “From what I have seen, and from what I've experienced—I've never seen a platform geared towards Black students specifically generating Black content.” As a testament to Chris and Bobby’s framing of Blackspace as a groundbreaking idea, the Blackspace team won the 2020-2021 Big Ideas contest, a competition that awards the physical manifestation of innovative thinking (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Blackspace Instagram Big Ideas Contest Post*

The agency behind being a connector and supporter of the Black college student community started with an idea that Bobby brought to life, which Musa acknowledged:
In many ways … even meeting and talking with Bobby and hearing about his plans for Blackspace was … I wasn't able to, at that time, find words for it. And he had them and that was really, really cool. I think from the jump I was on board.

*A Fugitive Community Built in the Name of Self-Reliance*

By creating a space for community, peer-to-peer connection, mentorship, and organization, Blackspace promotes an equitable and inclusive experience for Black students in their college journey.

— Partial definition of Blackspace

The team believes that creating a digital community is crucial to supporting the Black college student population, which speaks to why “community” is referenced in the definition of the Blackspace tool. Bobby shared that “everything is changing now and the importance of organizing digitally is so much more important.” Damien said, “One of the core features of this platform was organization and being able to bring people together.”

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer to the necessity of a digital support tool, as explained by Bobby:

It's hard to predict what the next couple years are going to be like, but there still has to be something rooting the connectivity of the campus while everyone is in their individual homes, and Blackspace could be that tool, and we believe it is that tool.

The group discussed how Blackspace may be a new way for the Black student community to engage with each other, but it is just as important to ensure that they have access to one another. We talked about how being on a large campus with tens of thousands of people can mean not only a lack of access to resources, but also a lack of
access to other Black students. Bobby said, “I feel very bad for the students who are Black who don't have access to that community, and that's where we fundamentally saw that Blackspace could be extremely relevant.” Figure 8 is an example of what creating connections in the Blackspace tool looks like.

**Figure 8**

*Blackspace Student Network Example*

The team wants Blackspace to be a digital representation of the Black student community feeling valued and at home while in college. Musa described Blackspace as “a comfortable environment. And [it can] engage with the community in ways that are … novel.”

For Damien, one of the few advantages of Black students being such a small demographic on campus means it is easier to communicate with each other:

One of the main benefits of being only—I just looked it up—it actually said like 2% of the student population, is that you can spread awareness of certain things
really quickly among the community. There tends to be a connectivity between
the students on campus because of how little population they make up.

Nate also talked about the benefits of Black student connectivity by saying, “What
excites me the most is being able to see where and how Black people are able to utilize
each other and create these partnerships to succeed collectively.” The Blackspace team
staying connected to and maintaining partnerships with other Black student organizations
is of vital importance to them. Bobby shared,

Initially, one of our key ideas was to coalition build as a matter of fostering
support towards the project. And so, there's something on campus, called the …
Is it the Black Caucus? And the Black Caucus is where all the student
organization presidents and leaders, they come together to discuss how to better
their community. And we were working with the BSU in the past year and Musa
and Layla had played a big role in aggregating a collective community calendar.
And so that was something that we were able to offer the community early on is a
collective place for all the events that were happening. And of course, because of
COVID that got cut short. But that line to the BSU is almost essential because …
we need that input, and we need that kind of constant line of communication.

**Control Through Autonomy.**

I am a Black man number one, because I am against what they have done and are
still doing to us; and number two, I have something to say about the new society
to be built because I have a tremendous part in that which they have sought to
discredit.

— C. L. R. James, *C. L. R. James: His Life and Work*
In the interest of self-reliance, the Blackspace team is controlling their own intellectual property. They are not on a university platform, which allows them to say what they want without fear of university reprisal. Autonomy also allows the students to communicate with their Black peers in ways that will resonate with them. Blackspace communications present the Black UNC community with what they see as the truth, instead of the biased messages that they have become accustomed to receiving. Musa shared,

I think by delivering the information about what is going on as honestly and in as much light as possible that whoever is reading, whoever is consuming whatever broadcast message, whatever update, whatever newsletter, can see all sides to the situation and know that they are part of a community.

The members of Blackspace not only speak truth to power as it relates to their feelings about Black students and higher education and specifically UNC, but also affect truth to power, which I define as going beyond calling out injustices and demanding change, and actively affecting change in the face of those in power. Bobby summed up how creating a digital tool like Blackspace affects truth to power by stating,

If you just think of how transformative social media has been in kind of like empowering collective communities to act or voice their ideas, like Damien was saying, just imagine a platform built by those same people that are leading most things that is of them. There's no restrictions anymore.

Bobby then linked the need for an autonomous fugitive space when affecting truth to power: “It's not talked about a lot and it's very much like performative addressing [the]
treatment of our experiences and that's frustrating. And that's why we chose to navigate outside of the university with Blackspace."

Despite being able to build Blackspace while divesting themselves from UNC assistance—which, as Bobby discussed, keeps the institution from the performative use of a positive Black student experience that it did not create—the team has still been able to navigate the waters of the university’s undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013). Simply put, the Blackspace members produce fugitivity (Harney & Moten, 2013); they get what they need from UNC and then go back to their autonomous state. These Black students, who have created a digital form of resistance and built an autonomous community in the name of self-reliance, are the embodiment of what it means “to be in, but not of” the university, as beautifully described by Harney and Moten (2013, p. 26):

To be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university …. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still Black, still strong.

The Blackspace team navigate the undercommons by building and maintaining relationships with Black organizations on campus, and they recognize the value and necessity of doing so. To validate this point, it is important to recall that the Blackspace team does not consider Black student-led organizations as part of the university. As the team sees it, they are therefore not receiving direct university support, and as subversive intellectuals are instead actively seeking partnerships that help them build a stronger
platform while maintaining their autonomy. Bobby described their collaboration efforts by stating, “We've been kind of pursuing a bottom-up approach through the Blackspace brand and through coalition-building events with organizations and whatnot.”

Maintaining a connection to the school through partnerships with university-sanctioned Black organizations helps fulfill a Blackspace goal of creating meaningful opportunities for Black students, like their partnership with UNC’s African American Student Department. Together, they have created an internship program to teach Black UNC students the “intersectional skills of entrepreneurship and innovation” (Programs, n.d.). Although this partnership is specific to technology leadership, Nate clarified that “the great thing about Blackspace is it's not necessarily niche in terms of what student organizations to work with because they all kind of fit into our goal.”

**A Reframing of the Black College Student Narrative.** To help promote Blackspace and educate potential users and supporters on its benefits, the Blackspace team relies on self-produced still images and videos to present counter-narratives that speak to authentic Black student experiences, which they post on social media platforms. Bobby stated that “Twitter and Instagram have been big mechanisms of impact” for the team, as they serve as tools of resistance by giving them autonomous control of the pro-Black messages they disseminate. The social media posts tie back to a Blackspace goal to empower Black college students, which they achieve by sharing information and positive messages. The Instagram video screenshots in Figure 9 represent a Blackspace counter-narrative about what it should mean and how it should feel to be a Black student attending an HWI. The video describes Blackspace’s purpose by asking the viewer to imagine a world where Black students are unfettered and free to live their dreams. The
narrator, in part, states, “It’s time to stop the world from rigging our dreams. You have the right to a successful life. We have the right to live those dreams. You have the right not to be an anomaly.” The Blackspace team also uses social media to demonstrate the harm done to Black students that have resulted from enacted educational policies and procedures. Figures 10–13 present Blackspace perspectives on Proposition 209, the school-to-prison pipeline, the Black Lives Matter movement, and defunding local police departments. Their posts tend to reposition the narrative on topics like these in a clarifying, data-driven manner. Taking a stance that may be antithetical to UNC’s views on any one of these topics could easily land the Blackspace team in hot water had they used a university-managed platform, but by leveraging third-party platforms like Instagram, they are able to tell the stories they want in a way that feels authentic to them and the audiences with whom they connect.

**Figure 9**

*Stills of an Instagram Video Post Describing Blackspace’s Purpose*
blackSpace · Following  ・・・

blackSpace · Jack students should not be faced with systemic obstacles preventing them from achieving their dreams. You have the right to a fair shot, and Blackbook is making strides towards that goal.

Help us in this journey to providing Black students with a platform. Consider donating to our Kickstarter, link in bio.

#BlackJack

22w

chase.aw  ➤
22w 1 like · reply

1,177 views
November 16, 2020

Add a comment...  Post

blackSpace · Following  ・・・

blackSpace · Jack students should not be faced with systemic obstacles preventing them from achieving their dreams. You have the right to a fair shot, and Blackbook is making strides towards that goal.

Help us in this journey to providing Black students with a platform. Consider donating to our Kickstarter, link in bio.

#BlackSpace

22w

chase.aw  ➤
22w 1 like · reply

1,177 views
November 16, 2020

Add a comment...  Post
Figure 10

Two Panels of a Blackspace Instagram Post on Proposition 209
Figure 11

Still of a Blackspace Instagram Video Post Discussing the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Figure 12

Still of a Blackspace Instagram Video Post About the Black Lives Matter Movement
Blackspace Instagram Post on Defunding the Police

The Blackspace team also use digital counter-stories to support their activist efforts. As described by Bobby, their social media activism demonstrates the
intersectionality of being Black and a college student, as they are inextricably linked and thereby make them subject matter experts:

Going back to Layla’s point is that us as students … we always have to be aware and cognizant of the larger things that are happening in the world. And an example of that would definitely be the Black Lives Matter movement, or certain petitions that might need to be signed. But also, information like [UNC and its sister schools] dropping SAT and ACT requirements, all these different things are campaigns of ours that we feel we can speak on.

The team uses the Blackspace brand in social media to galvanize Black students at UNC and the Black community at large, as some of their messages speak to both audiences. The four panels of Figure 14 represent multiple ways to participate in the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Figure 14**

*Blackspace’s Black Lives Matter Instagram Posts*
JUSTICE FOR BREONNA TAYLOR
(PETITION LINK IN BIO)

JUSTICE FOR GEORGE FLOYD
(PETITION LINK IN BIO)
Note. This multi-panel Instagram post encouraged UNC students and the community at large to continue supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. The first panel serves as an introductory page. The second panel’s message is in support of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman who was killed by Louisville, KY police. The third one calls for justice for George Floyd, a Black man who was murdered by a Minneapolis, MN police officer, and the fourth asks supporters to sign a petition that calls for the ban of rubber bullets on large crowds.

**FUBU and Elevating the Black Student Experience**

As previously mentioned, FUBU is the acronym for “for us, by us.” It was popularized in the 1990s after a group of Black entrepreneurs created the FUBU clothing line for Black people as a counter to the exclusionary mainstream fashion industry (Irizarry, 2017). Knight (2012) characterized FUBU as a positive representation of Black empowerment, and Blackspace embodies that representation as a digital space created
with the specific purpose of elevating the Black college student experience. Nate shared, “… Creating this Black community, that's the whole purpose of [this] is empowering one another.” As Bobby put it, the idea of using “our Blackspace brand is something that we hope to have as a staple in order to put that footprint on the community.”

**By us.** To properly explain what the team felt “for us, by us” meant to them and how they applied it to the creation of Blackspace, I will start with the “BU” of FUBU—by us. Oxford dictionary defines cultural production as “the social processes involved in the generation and circulation of cultural forms, practices, values, and shared understandings” and partially defines an activist as “one who works to make change happen” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). I think of the Blackspace team as composed of activists who are also culture producers, and as activist culture producers, this group of Black students came together to purposely change the “distorted conversations of equity” that dominate the culture at UNC, and “driven by [their] experience and inspired by the rich legacy of Black excellence at UNC, [they] set out to change this narrative” (Blackspace, n.d.). Bobby discussed how the team’s goal is to generate content that speaks to the positivist nature of FUBU. He said, “We feel that our mission in designing [Blackspace] would be to emphasize aspects of the culture we want to curate on the platform.”

As Black student tech entrepreneurs (see Figure 15), the team believes their expression of FUBU is unique, particularly in the delivery of the tool. Bobby shared how they saw a gap and sought to fill it:

In conversations with Chris and Nate and Damien, we always kind of just talked about how can you unify all the good work that Black students are doing through
organizations, and there wasn't one type of connecting factor, other than what Layla is talking about with GroupMe.

**Figure 15**

*Blackspace Instagram Technology FUBU Post*

![Blackspace Instagram Technology FUBU Post](image)

**For Us.** Each of the Blackspace team members acknowledged how the tool and its features were specifically designed for students like them, representing the “for us” of FUBU. Layla shared, “To have a project introduced to me where it was just for Black people, for my community that helped congregate all our resources …” Damien continued Layla’s sentiment when describing what it was like to go from attending a racially diverse high school to a historically white university:

There were a lot more rooms where I was the only person of color than I'd ever experienced, and it became apparent really quickly how necessary finding other resources and other—anything that can organize more people that look like me in
certain ... whatever conversation I needed to have. It wasn't going to last if I was going to be the only Black person for four years.

An example of the type of conversations Damien referred to is a virtual space the Blackspace team created by way of a Zoom panel discussion that focused on the state of the Black student at UNC (see Figure 16). The panel addressed what it meant to live during the time of dual pandemics, or as described in Chapter 4, the COVID context.

Figure 16

*Instagram Post Promoting a “Black @ UNC” Event"

Musa and Chris discussed specific Blackspace features designed to support Black students. Musa talked about the importance of being able to communicate with other Black students in real time: “Broadcast messages on the platform itself will play a role that if there is anything that needs to be brought to the [Black] community's attention with urgency where it will have its easiest point of access, it's there.” Chris emphasized
the benefits of the platform for incoming Black students and described it as “a guide for new students who come in and actually have some sense of what's going on at [UNC], rather than just being thrown in and having to figure it out.”

Nate and Bobby focused on the tool being a digital manifestation of FUBU as a counter-discourse (Knight, 2012) dedicated to the positivity and upliftment of Black students in a Black space. Nate described Blackspace as “a general-Black or pro-Black empowering information [tool] …. The Blackspace app is that it's impacting, not just the individual, but the community as well. A strengthened community. I think trickles down to helping that individual experience.” For Bobby, it is,

Almost a combining point for what Nate and Musa were saying, and Damien, is the idea of positioning ourselves through the Blackspace brand as the garner of information and the messenger to the Black community, we could create a unified voice for Black students ….

**Elevating the Black Student Experience.** One of the main themes that arose from our conversations was the strong desire for the team to create a tool specifically designed to elevate the Black student experience on UNC’s campus. To do that, they first identified the realities of the Black collegiate experience and then determined how they would address the related problems. Several issues were mentioned, including the previously discussed lack of institutional support of Black students, and their low enrollment numbers (as represented in Figure 17). Nate envisioned a digital space that could tackle the difficulties of what he saw as a universal Black student experience:

I began to think, “What if I had this tool?” Or “How would this change my experience?” And I know my experience is not unique compared to a lot of other
Black students, especially in the [University of Northern California] environment . . . With that low student percentage that you make up, it's very difficult to find one another in the university space itself and . . . specific opportunities and scholarships made for our people, or just . . . empowering that academic experience.

Figure 17

_Blackspace Instagram Video Post Outlining the UNC Black Student Experience_

The uniqueness of the Black student experience at an HWI and the value of peer support played significant roles in helping to define what the platform was designed to achieve, as explained by Damien:

A lot of the stuff we've been talking about, especially since getting into college—about the Black student experience and how unique that's been and a lot of the stuff we've had to learn and pick up and help each other with—seemed to fold right into this project.
For Bobby, it came down to continuing to leverage technology to elevate the Black student experience: “We as Black [students have] been using those tools to really empower our voice and our collective unity, struggle, and resilience.” Nate discussed wanting to redefine the Black student experience for his current peers and the ones he has yet to know by stating, “It's a passion project that's definitely instilled within me wanting to improve the current student body as well as future generations. So it's easier … a better experience than it is, than it was for me, at least.”

Elevating the Black student experience was a focal point of their social media communications. The team wanted Black UNC students to know that help would soon be on the way and created Instagram videos and related posts that focused on reinventing what the Black student experience could look like (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18**

*Still of a Blackspace Instagram Video Post About Elevating the Black Student Experience*
As previously discussed, one of the ways the team is tackling the negative Black student environment at UNC is by taking on one of their chief complaints, which is not having access to university-related information that they deem important. Damien talked about how Blackspace was born out of necessity because Black UNC students do not have sufficient access to tools and resources:

Another one of the main issues we're trying to combat with Blackspace is, it's almost… without knowing where you're going it's almost impossible to find a lot of this information. It's really hard to navigate the cluster of information available out there.

Tactical solutions to addressing the resource problem include a listing of Black faculty, a Black student organization registry, and Damien also discussed the benefits of having access to important dates (see a mockup in Figure 19). He shared, “We plan to implement a calendar feature to have alerts to let you know anything coming up like scholarship deadlines or events, or anything that would help your experience.”

**Figure 19**

*Sample Blackspace Calendar Feature*
The team elevates the Black student experience by tackling sizeable problems in a tactical manner, as demonstrated by Bobby’s discussion about the tool’s forthcoming user guide:

For example, maybe in the user tutorial and user guide it encourages students to post their dissertations. Or … that they want a job or a career field that they want to get into. [Blackspace] will, in many ways, be oriented towards the conversations and energy that we want. Or not that we want, but that we foresee as the most productive to enabling community and academic and professional excellence.

Another way the team works to improve UNC’s Black student experience is by employing counter-stories to debunk negative stereotypes. Digital spaces like the
Blackspace website and Instagram, which serve as complements to the Blackspace platform, help change negative narratives about Black college students. Damien stated, “I think that would be a big narrative that we would hope to shift is that Black students that come eventually get their degree ….” One of the team’s primary vehicles for changing false narratives is a digital publication they produce called Blackspace Magazine, which is accompanied by the tagline “Real students. Real stories.” Posted on the Blackspace website (see Figure 20), the video magazine draws upon the diverse stories of their peers to contest and reframe dominant narratives that stereotype, dismiss, and devalue them (Morales, 2021). These counter-stories assert Black intelligence, center the culture and perspectives of Black students, and affirm the diversity within the Black student community (Morales, 2021), all of which reflect a positive Black student experience. Creating a digital counter-space like Blackspace Magazine elevates Black collegians in a way that supports the FUBU model of Black student empowerment. While describing the talents and gifts his Black UNC peers possess, Bobby shared, “They're doing a lot of work, and that work needs to be highlighted in a place where you know it's safe.”

**Figure 20**

*Blackspace Magazine Stories on the Website*
The “why” behind the Blackspace team wanting to elevate the Black college student experience is as equally important as the “how,” and the team sees creating a digital Black student space as a form of resistance activism that puts them at the forefront of the conversation around how to affect change for Black students who attend an HWI. Bobby summed up why he and the team want to control their own narrative:

Activism in social media is counter-space rooted in Black culture and Black people, and we want to take power of that, in a sense, and we want to take advantage of that because there are so many times in which the credit or the kind of the, the support for our individual efforts can be overshadowed by the noise in social media. Having a solely Black platform would kind of streamline change in our eyes.

**The Future of Blackspace**

As for the future of Blackspace, the team felt comfortable sharing some of the ideas they hope to implement. They most certainly expect it to outlive their tenure as
students; many initiatives do not continue past the efforts of its founders, which Bobby talked about:

A lot of times when we're given the resources to design things or do things it's almost enough to a certain point and then we don't have the bandwidth to [continue] and that's the goal. We want to create something that’s long lived.

The future goals the team have for Blackspace are varied, yet connected, in terms of how each help to expand its reach. Expanded activism organizing is a goal Nate has for the platform and sees using it,

For major events and protests going on in locations near you. Something we can incorporate into the application would be a feature almost like billboards you get on your phone for like kidnappings, or other events such as that. But it can literally be a vibration or something like that on your phone and you get a notification letting you know that there is [an event] within … some given range of … your location. You can set up that notification so you can decide if you want to participate. Or if you are busy at the time, it [serves as] awareness.”

When it comes to looking out for students beyond the UNC campus, Nate said the team is interested in “focusing on the goal of hitting California universities when it comes to the credibility and then when it comes to those other communications within our suite of tools, maybe that could be a national idea or [reach] a national audience.” Layla and Damien shared that the team also envisions Blackspace having a positive impact on the Black experience that goes beyond creating a supportive digital space for students. Layla spoke of a future goal of Blackspace serving as a national unifier to “build connections with not only the student community but the [Northern California] community as well
and supporting Black business and elevating the Black dollar, etcetera. So … a platform to collect resources—everything Black, essentially.” Damien said, “I think it's still safe to say that we plan on this eventually impacting the Black American experience and in many more ways than just education.” I doubt Nate noticed that I got a little emotional when he said, “It just really struck us that this could be a chance for us to do something … and bring about a change … and hopefully make it better for those who come after us in the next generation.” Taking on a task that is monumental in scope, grounded in love, and will have lasting effects, brought to mind some of the lyrics from Stevie Wonder’s (1976) iconic song, As:

So make sure when you say you're in it, but not of it

You're not helping to make this earth a place sometimes called Hell

Change your words into truth and then change that truth into love

And maybe our children's grandchildren

And their great-grandchildren will tell
Chapter VI: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

These are the places on campus where you don't have to watch your back, in a sense. “Come here. Drink some tea. Sit down, read, talk, people are here to listen.” I felt very welcomed and supported.

— Musa, UNC student and Blackspace member

We have a good time amongst ourselves. Well, everybody else doesn't see that .... We want you all to see that because we need to be here. And we need to be, you know, visible. We need to be strong, and we can't deviate from that, and we can't let them build that narrative.

— Bobby, UNC student and Blackspace member

Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semillas. (They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.)

— Mexican proverb

Figure 21

Two Pieces from the “They Forgot We Were Seeds” Exhibit by Terry Robin Jones
As referred to in Chapter 1, Black people create third spaces to find community, share information and get advice (Gill, 2010; Gilkes, 1998; Lacy, 2004; Mills, 2013). Focusing on Black college students who attend historically white institutions, the goal of my research study was to explore how they also turn third spaces into Black spaces where resources are shared, counter-knowledge is produced, and activism is supported. With few studies that explore how Black collegians use digital tools to connect, organize and share information (Davis III et al., 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017), and because of the minimal support that Black college students receive from the institutions of higher education they attend (Parker et al., 2016), I wanted to advance the research on Black collegiate peer spaces and present additional reflections on how fugitive acts of resistance in the name of self-reliance help them navigate the colleges and universities they attend.
I conducted a qualitative research study and partnered with a group of college students, referred to as the Blackspace team, who identify as Black and attend a historically white top-tier university in Northern California. A focus group and individual interviews were the vehicles that allowed them to share their feelings about racism on campus and what drove them to create a digital support tool specifically designed for their peers. An analysis of our conversations revealed two main themes: (a) Black students who attend HWIs feel that they cannot be just students; and (b) with little institutional support, they in turn rely on each other as a form of resistance.

This final chapter begins with answering the study’s research questions initially posed in Chapter 1 through a synthesis of its key findings and situates them within the context of the scant literature on how anti-Blackness in higher education drives Black college students to create their own counter-spaces. I use the collegiate Black space model and how it was leveraged by the Blackspace team as an example. The findings gleaned in the previous two chapters also help fill gaps in the existing research that were articulated in Chapter 1. I then reflect on the implications of the study for the Blackspace team as participants, myself as a researcher, and Black college students who attend HWIs. I conclude with considerations for future research and practice in the field of higher education.

Discussion

Black College Students’ Expectations

The first of three research questions posed in this study was, “What do Black college students expect of the HWI they attend in terms of supporting them academically, socially, and emotionally?” Each of the Blackspace team members described their
expectations, or lack thereof, related to receiving institutional support from UNC when asked whether their school was living up to its expectations to support Black students academically. With answers ranging from “absolutely not” to “I didn't expect to be a college student, not knowing just how to even do my day-to-day activities,” what the Blackspace team shared represents the ways in which they feel UNC failed to live up to their expectations. Existing research speaks to colleges and universities not being structured to provide the support that Black students need (Allen, 1992; Parker, Puig, Johnson & Anthony, Jr., 2016). However, I did not find scholarship that addressed Black students’ expectations for institutional support and their reactions to not receiving it, and this study helps to add to a scarcity of research on these topics.

Chris’ exposure to “closeted racists,” Musa’s Blackness falling under scrutiny, white students not wanting to share space with Layla, and Nate feeling as though he and his Black peers are not having the same experience as others are examples of the race-based hinderances, frustrations, and emotional injuries that Black students experience while attending an HWI, all of which factor into a lack of support (Bonner, 2010; Fidler and Godwin, 1994; Strayhorn, 2010). Adding to the cannon of research that speaks to Black college students and their exposure to microaggressions, my study provides a multifaceted exploration of the anti-Black harm done by students, faculty, and an institution itself.

The members of the Blackspace team shared their feelings about representation as a Black student on a historically white campus, and as a small demographic on campus, the weight of that representation could at times feel oppressive. For them, academic excellence is a necessary component of enduring the college experience at a top-tier
university. However, some felt that their achievements did not equate to being viewed as equals by their white peers or faculty, which meant having to work harder in and out of the classroom. While commenting on the Black student experience, Bobby spoke about the undue burden they are faced with: “Going back to Layla’s point is that us as students, we can never come into the space being solely students.” Expectations for UNC’s socialization process “where academic environments reinforce and reward different talents” (Weidman, 2006, p. 254) looked different to the Blackspace team than it did for other students, especially related to them being integrated into the learning environments of a higher education setting. Uniquely framed as what it is like “being an academic while Black” at UNC, my research adds to the conversation of how Black students are forced into existing normative structures of collegiate socialization (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020).

Because of their Blackness, the students in my study had a heavy burden placed on them. It had cumulative psychological effects and impacted their mental health, represented by Damien’s example of the collegiate double standard of students receiving emotional support tools and resources at the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, but not being provided with the same level of assistance during the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests after numerous high-profile murders of Black people at the hands of police officers and anti-Black vigilantes. The COVID context—the phenomenon of Black students having to deal with the inequalities of dual anti-Black pandemics—helped illuminate the stressors that factor into Black students’ mental health, which Bobby felt was not being addressed: “When you even think about Black mental health … nobody’s really talking about that.” My study helps add to the scant research
that contextually examines the mental health issues that Black college students experience specifically because they are Black.

Numerous studies explored the negative experiences of Black students who attend HWIs, with researchers like Strayhorn (2008) and Parker et al. (2011) focusing on the role of same sex peer support and Black male persistence. This singular exploration of men warranted further exploration of the impact peer support has on both Black female and male students. Being able to incorporate Layla’s feelings and opinions on issues related to the Black student experience and peer support at an HWI as a Black woman helps to slightly balance the male-skewed focus when addressing these topics.

**Black College Students’ Motivations**

The second research question posed was, “In what ways do Black students use digital peer spaces to provide support (due to a lack of HWI support) and what motivates them to seek alternatives?” The Blackspace team are first and foremost students and have a particular collective experience that is rooted in a history of anti-Black racism. They are not seen as being the same as everyone else, as their presence in a historically white institution that has earned the reputation of being a top-tier university can come with the assumption that their attendance is not truly earned and therefore not truly warranted. The students who participated in my study were keenly aware of being seen differently by both students and faculty. They recognized that during their academic tenure at UNC they would have to work harder than their peers and could not fully relax and let their guard down. Institutional racism is a phenomenon that Black college students encounter while they persist in the environment of white academics, and also white faculty who are products of a racist macro-society, have embedded themselves in the racist micro-society
of higher education, and find it challenging to adjust to Black faces in their classrooms (Anderson, 1988). Covert and overt ostracism by white students and faculty based on anti-Black perceptions encourages Black students like the Blackspace team to form their own spaces (Anderson, 1988). Anti-Black words and deeds, coupled with a lack of institutional support (Brooms, 2018) served as the prime motivators for them to create a tool that serves as a form of resistance to counter institutional oppression. To contribute to the extant literature on this topic, I examined how Black college students use digital tools to connect, organize and share information (Davis III et al., 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). My study also helps shed additional light on how Black students use counter-spaces that transform their collegiate experience in the name of self-preservation.

**Black College Students’ Actions**

Black life-making cannot just highlight education violence to show moments of resistance; it must also start to define a future beyond the logics that make the past and present circumstances possible (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 724).

The third and final research question in my study was, “How do new counter-spaces (e.g., technologies) currently play a role in Black college students supporting each other?” I posed this question with the intent of uncovering how Black college students were addressing old problems with new solutions. As I previously mentioned, I believe that the reasons why Black students who attend HWIs support one another have not changed over the years, but the ways that they show up for each other have. The agency of digital counter-spaces was evidenced by the Blackspace team “purposefully [applying] technology to navigate often unwelcoming, contentious, and racially adversarial
educational environments” (Hotchkins, 2017, p. 277) to empower their Black peers and elevate the Black student experience at UNC.

Mwangi et al. (2018) conducted a study that looked at how Black students at two elite universities used social media as “counter-spaces of direct expression, positive coping, counter-hegemony, and community building” (p. 159). They also urged researchers to explore how Black students engage in social media to support their activist efforts at other universities. Mwangi et al. (2018) believe that “understanding how cultural legacy and societal structure shapes social activism, racial injustice, and institutional climate on campuses is an area ripe for future research (Mwangi et al., 2018, p. 159). My dissertation answers the call to do just that, as little research exists on how digital media supports the activist efforts of Black collegians (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Schofield Clark, 2016).

The collegiate Black space as a concept can be used as an analytical tool to understand and help inform research on the construction and use of Black spaces from a college student’s point of view. When conceptualizing the collegiate Black space, I wanted to test if it was a concept that could truly be applied to the support spaces Black students create by looking at a group of undergraduates at UNC who value the need to elevate the Black student experience enough to build a tool that would allow them to do so. After completing my findings chapters, I conducted a separate assessment of the data by re-reviewing what the Blackspace team shared and viewed the findings through the collegiate Black space lens.
As stated in Chapter 1, the collegiate Black space represents three achievements of Black student agency: support, knowledge production, and organizing for activism.

The heuristic below outlines how the Blackspace team employs them:

![Heuristic Diagram]

As activist culture producers, Black students like the Blackspace team are practicing life-making by fighting the greater anti-Black culture that is UNC by creating a culture specifically for themselves, as evidenced in the heuristic above. Reimagining their circumstances is a “disruptive direct action as a legitimate form of discourse [that positions them] at the vanguard of resistance and transformation in higher education” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 721). Black students continue to receive minimal support from the institutions of higher education they attend (Parker et al., 2016), and there is now a study that brings together uses of digital counter-spaces that serve as self-reliant support systems, knowledge production vehicles, and mediums for organizing and collective resistance.
Implications

Implications for the Blackspace Team and Me

I am a marketer by trade, and although my career did not originally take the path of one in higher education, I am intimately familiar with the importance placed on what it means to be a Black student at an HWI who has received support and given it in return. It is an invaluable asset that lends itself to the feeling of knowing that the road to earning a degree at any level is bumpy, but having Black peers who share in the unique experience make the bumps a little smoother, and craggy edges a little less sharp.

When I first embarked on this research journey, I had two goals to achieve. The first was to better understand the world of higher education. Although I knew it all too well as a college student, it was new to me as an emerging scholar and researcher, and I wanted to understand the theories behind institutional power and privilege from a collegiate perspective. My second goal was to use my study to inform whether there was a need for the design of a technology platform that would allow Black students to create connections so they can share information and resources with each other to help level the collegiate playing field. A few months before I began the data collection process, I was introduced to the Blackspace team. Once it became clear to me that they were already successfully executing what was still a rudimentary idea in my head, my second goal shifted: I would use my research to tell their story. They were as excited to be the focus of my dissertation as I was to partner with them.

The Blackspace team and I had an instant connection. Getting to know them prior to our formal discussions was critical to the success of our focus group and one-on-one interviews, as it allowed us to feel comfortable with one another once the Zoom cameras
were rolling. From the moment I initially spoke with Bobby and Nate, I knew our discussions would be special. Being in marketing, I had the opportunity to observe numerous focus groups and paid close attention to how moderators interacted with participants. I wanted to emulate the skill they employed that put their participants at ease, but more importantly, I wanted to do it with the authenticity of someone who could relate to and empathize with them. I believed that with the proper planning and a solid set of questions to pose, I could expect to have an equally solid set of answers to analyze. What I did not expect was to be the recipient of such raw and candid responses, which I could attribute, in part, to the open and honest relationship we had developed.

Because the Blackspace team and I formed a bond, almost every conversation quickly turned into therapy gatherings, which we realized were desperately needed. The lack of fugitive spaces for Black college students at HWIs where they can be their authentic selves without having to self-censor, code switch, filter, or clarify, spoke volumes to the ways in which the Blackspace team shared such thoughtful and personal responses to questions about race and racism in higher education. Our Zoom meetings were protected spaces. They were cherished spaces. They were check-ins and sometimes support sessions. They were whatever we needed at the time and given that George Floyd had been murdered less than two months prior our focus group, we needed a lot. At the beginning of some conversations, we joked about how much we were looking forward to what would no doubt turn into a therapy chat, and sometimes the discussions were sensitive and emotional. We had a lot to get off our chests. Despite the varied uses of our time together, one constant remained true—we created Black spaces.
Although nothing that was said during the focus group and interviews was considered off limits and everything discussed was on the record, there were statements made and opinions shared that will stay between the Blackspace team and me because of the mutual respect we have for each other and my desire to keep a few of our comments “in the family.” “Because [I] cannot, will not, share certain accounts, [I] sometimes trace[d] the perimeter” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 811) of certain reflections, which I view as an act of refusal. As Tuck and Yang (2014) articulated, “Analytic practices of refusal involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation and supply a rationale for blocking the settler colonial gaze [of those who want] those stories” (p. 812).

Our discussions also gave us opportunities to reflect on the positives, joys, and successes of being a Black student at a historically white university. As Bobby mentioned during one of our sessions, one of the best things about being in college is being Black, and Nate spoke about the importance of the word “Black” leading the term “college student.” I wholeheartedly concur with both sentiments.

**Implications for the Blackspace Team.** I feel it necessary to begin this section by noting that the Blackspace team personifies Black peer support. Our formal and informal collective conversations were filled with them affirming each other; cosigning, a Black colloquialism for validating (Tshabalala, 2016); providing emotional uplift; and an exuded pride when they talked about their fellow teammates. With the hard work they put in being students at a top-tier university and the challenges they experience delving into uncharted territory of creating Blackspace, the team use their bonds of friendship to sustain each other because they are a fictive family. It has been beautiful to witness.
Being the focus of a dissertation gave the members of Blackspace an opportunity to see their work through another’s eyes. Our conversations provided validation for their efforts from someone who understands and shares their vision. After the formalities of our focus group and interviews, I was asked to be a “focus group of one,” where I shared feedback on the myriad ways the beta version of the platform succeeded in meeting its goals and suggested minor enhancements. Our official and unofficial discussions helped the team further realize the significance and importance of a project that could have far reaching implications for Black students and their experiences while in college. Nate mentioned during a check-in that the team has been knee-deep in the project and did not fully realize the impact they were making and appreciated being reminded of the good work they do. As participants in a research study, they were allowed to step back and see the proverbial forest for the trees. I hope they now see that their creation is what revolutionary looks like.

Nate also thanked me for the continual reminders of how proud I am of them, an unconscious habit I adopted at the end of each one-on-one interview and beginning of our ad-hoc check-ins. There was also praise directed at me for taking on what they considered to be a little researched topic. Lifting each other up is at the core of authentic positivistic Black spaces and represents the essence of the collegiate Black space. We were elevating our own Black student experience.

Implications for me. My dissertation chair once reminded me that my research would look completely different had I not been introduced to the members of Blackspace. It is a truism that confirms the ramifications of what my study would have reflected
without them. I assuredly believe that it would have been good, but undoubtedly lacking in not only the ability, but also the power to bring a concept to life as it did.

Although my study was not based on Participatory Action Research, I do feel that the Blackspace team were my partners during the data collection process, to the point where the term “data collection” feels too formal and too cold. We were a group of Black students having conversations about our collective and individual experiences related to institutional anti-Blackness in the name of research. My goal was to amplify the voices of Black collegians at HWIs by telling the Blackspace team’s story through my dissertation, and I hope I have done them proud. They will always be considered family, and I will forever be indebted to them, as they have irrevocably changed my life for the better.

**Implications for Black Students at HWIs**

There is a certain level of vulnerability that we all face as human beings when entering new or unfamiliar spaces. For Black students coming into historically white institutions, that vulnerability is exponentially pronounced. Their existence in spaces that were not created for them is challenged, and their abilities and intellect are questioned because they are Black. As they progress—if they choose to stick it out—they are still required to validate themselves and continue to prove their right to be in the hallowed halls of white collegiate spaces. These stressors can at times be exhausting and are part of the reasons why Black students create their own spaces. Sometimes they need to lift each other up. Sometimes they need to remind each other that they are so much more than enough. Sometimes they just need to be.

Black college students are rarely afforded the opportunity to have their stories presented in a research capacity. There is something empowering about reading about the
experiences of others who are like you, as it means someone is paying attention to you. Someone hears you. To the Black students who are reading this, I want you to know that I see you. I want you to feel valued and honored, which is why I documented the collegiate Black space in the academic format of a dissertation, with the hope that it lends credence to the spaces that you create. Please tell the story of your academic journey whenever and however you can because there are those of us like me who are listening. Also remember that the spaces you create, both formal and informal, have merit and weight. Continue to look to your sisters and brothers when you need help. As Chris shared, “That's kind of everything, because that's definitely how I made it through at the end of the day. Every ounce and support counted, and every ounce of support mattered.”

**Implications for Future Research and Future Practice**

**Implications for Future Research.** Because I have few expectations that the leadership who control historically white post-secondary institutions will dismantle white supremacy and white privilege in the foreseeable future, I made a conscious decision to explore how Black students create spaces to support each other, produce counter-stories, and organize activism efforts while navigating these white collegiate environments. So, I believe that the opportunity to research the topic has not, nor will not, diminish anytime soon.

To those who told me during my time as a doctoral student that there is a significant body of research focused on Black student peer support and one more was not necessarily needed, I respectfully disagreed and continue to do so. Research is conducted, in part, to widen the lens related to a specific topic or develop a new theory (McLeod, 2012). Until Black college students no longer face anti-Blackness while attending
historically white schools and as a result feel the need to leverage collegiate Black
spaces, there will be a continued need for critical inquiries that focus on spaces that
counter institutional oppression. The struggle is real and how the struggle is being dealt
with needs to be discussed, particularly in academic spaces. There are many stories to be
told about Black students at HWIs, and mine is just one that fits into a small part of a
much larger conversation.

Further understanding of how peer spaces shape a Black student’s experience
while in college is an area of consideration for future research. Also, given the ability of
technology as a digital medium to provide support, produce counter-stories, and assist
with activism efforts, I also suggest scholars explore how Black students curate and tailor
digital spaces to advocate for and galvanize their peers. Additionally, applying the
collegiate Black space to explorations of Black peer efforts may allow scholars to
conceptualize them in ways that prompt new ideas for an examination of one aspect of a
future research topic, or conduct a holistic exploration of Black peer spaces. Finally, there
are potential opportunities for leveraging the collegiate Black space to explore the
relationship between offline and online Black peer spaces as complements to one another
other when resisting anti-Blackness, as well as gain insights about the benefits and
hinderances of in-person peer spaces compared to their digital counterparts.

**Implications for Future Practice.**

Increasingly, many people claim to be “woke” to the idea of anti-racism;
however, combatting anti-Black racism requires more than broad-sweeping
“diversity, equity and inclusion” rhetoric—a profound change in the mindset,
attitudes, and actions of every individual in society is needed, including you.

(Bowden & Buie, 2021, p. 760)

The goal of this research study was not to present a real-life working example of Black students exercising their agency so it can then be co-opted by the academy and used for its own purposes. The theft of Blackspace as a concept, a tool, or an idea that led to its creation cannot happen. If this dissertation is used to produce future scholarship, please give credit where credit is due—not to just me, but more importantly, to the UNC students who created the gift of autonomous, fugitive support that is Blackspace.

Scores of dissertations and scholarly research articles have suggested ways that historically white institutions can and should implement practices and policies meant to better the academic lives of Black collegians. Despite the inventive and practical implications for practitioners and administrators thoughtfully crafted by those who came before me, as a whole, their suggestions seem to have fallen on the deaf ears of the academy. Therefore, I intend to take a different tact with my propositions. The implications for practice laid out in this section will be undoubtedly considered unnecessarily harsh or unfounded by some. Others may continue to gaslight Black students into believing the problem lies with them not conforming to the normative ways of doing and being at a white institution (Feagin et al., 1996). In other words, “it really is you, not us.” Some will choose to brush these implications aside thinking that the details portrayed in this study are overblown and could not be as bad as described for Black college students or apply to a very small group (Feagin et al., 1996). There may be practitioners and administrators who feel the problem of truly and authentically supporting Black collegians is too big to tackle and continue to do what they have always
done, even if their efforts have not worked in the eyes of the students they serve. For those select few who have read this far and have the desire and fortitude to consider a different approach, I invite you to continue reading and ask that you do so with an open mind.

The institutions of this country do not know me.

— Frederick Douglass

What is the responsibility of a historically white institution if it has not been able to effectively support all of its students equally? Answering this question first requires acknowledgement. Acknowledgement that there is a wrong to be righted and harm has been done. It is essential that the acknowledgement feel, sound, and be genuine. It should not take the form of dog whistle platitudes that subtly mock Black students and paint them as inferior beings who will one day get their just due at the hands of a merciful academy. It should not sound like a canned speech that we have all heard before. It should not be delivered in what reads like a fill-in-the-blank press release that is disseminated when something bad happens to a Black person that is egregious enough to garner the media’s attention. These “weak, predictable institutional responses” (Musaffa, 2017, p. 723) designed to protect your institution’s reputation and bottom-line feel like yet another slap in the face steeped in the rhetoric of pacified marginalization. Yes, HWIs have learned the specific art of pacifying while concurrently marginalizing. You pacify Black students by apologizing, and in what feels like moments later, the same act you just apologized for happens again. Over and over and over yet again. An authentic acknowledgement requires a real admission of liability and a confession to an absence of accountability to Black college students. In short, it should be genuine, not performative.
Responsibility then requires recognition of the Black students who in the interest of self-reliance are creating spaces to counter the institutional anti-Blackness that has been allowed to fester like an open wound. Yes, I used an ugly analogy, but it was necessary to drive home the point that the historically rooted anti-Black experiences the students in my study so eloquently described were equally as ugly. Recognize Black college students’ strength, courage, and resilience in attempting to close that wound. Truly understand what it means to be resilient. Resilience is defined as “the ability of a person to adjust to or recover readily from illness, adversity, major life changes, etc.” (“Resilience,” n.d.). Imagine what it is like to live in a constant state of resiliency. Day in and day out, having to adjust, and more importantly, recover from adversity. I believe that the act of being resilient can be difficult to maintain, but what choice do Black college students have when the institutions they attend do not live up to their end of the bargain? Consider re-reading your institution’s guiding principles and compare them to the realities that Black students on your campus tell you they face. This exercise may help you recognize why and how Black collegians live in the undercommons, a safe place where their strength, courage, and resilience are nourished. Recognize that their power comes from acts of self-reliance, including creating spaces that counter all that you put upon them that caused the need for them to be resilient in the first place.

Lastly, responsibility requires support of Black college students, but in ways that are different than what is in the current higher education playbook, different than the tried and not-so-true. Create situations and opportunities that allow Black collegians to do the work of self-reliant support and allow them to do it autonomously. Create structures for them to succeed. Train your faculty to not inflict harm. Train your students not to inflict
harm. Maybe once your faculty acknowledge their anti-Black blind spots, they will be better equipped to teach equitably and assist equitably, which includes helping white students who need support with how not to be racist. Your institution developed a Title IX program to teach students about the harms of sexual violence. Develop another that focuses on bigotry and teaches the same students about the harms of anti-Blackness and other forms of racism. Employ CRT scholars to develop the curriculum and do not whitewash it to make it more palatable to white students. Black college students have been uncomfortable while attending HWIs for decades. White students can be uncomfortable for a few hours.

“The demand is an example where Black life-making needs to operate, beyond present logics, in the politics of transformation defined as approaches higher education cannot answer in its current state, but only through yielding power” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 724). Support of Black college students also means not doing certain things, as not doing can sometimes be just as important as doing. The Blaspace team took their university out of the equation when they decided to solve the problem of institutional anti-Black racism on their campus, and I contend that there are other Black students attending other colleges who are doing the same. At the very least, do not usurp their power by taking their ideas and spaces and making them your own. Honor and validate Black collegiate spaces, but not fall into the racial capitalism trap of doing so in a manner that financially benefits you. To reiterate a statement that Bobby made, acting as predators who use students’ Blackness as a mechanism to promote diversity is not okay. As tempting as it may be for those who have yet to try it, or easy as it was for those who have—in either case, resist future urges and do not do it.
It is well documented that systems of oppression, including institutions of higher education, are not broken; they are continuing to function as they were originally designed to (Dancy et al., 2018; Feagin, 2013). However, if you are a practitioner or administrator who has read this far and want to be on the right side of the reckoning that is sure to come, first acknowledge harm, then support Black students, and finally let go of the old ways. If you do not, your school could potentially end up being the focus of a dissertation, and for all the wrong reasons. Step aside, and let the Black students thrive.

**Conclusion**

If the University of Northern California lived up to the way it markets itself and its public persona as a true social justice institution, there would not be a need for Blackspace. If colleges and universities truly wanted Black students to exist at a level that is on par with their white counterparts, they would have used the most powerful tools in their arsenal instead of the smallest ones in the box.

As I previously stated, Black collegians like the Blackspace team have taken the academy out of the equation when attempting to solve the perpetual issue of anti-Blackness that lives on college campuses. How they are resolving it has evolved with the advent of digital media, which allows them to leverage and create tools that were not available to previous generations like mine. New tools, but the same result: supporting, learning from, and protecting each other through acts of resistance.

When I think about what I learned while watching Sy Stokes’ “The Black Bruins” (2013) YouTube video about the plight of Black UCLA students, and the anti-Blackness my fellow sisters and brothers experienced there many years ago, and then compare them to the same issues the Blackspace team are experiencing today, it became clear that the
past can be an indicator of the future. There is little indication that there will one day soon be an opportunity for Black students to feel free, be seen as equal, and be respected. In the meantime, they will continue to create spaces that resist institutional oppression and allow them to have a collegiate experience that lives up to what it means to put the power of “for us, by us” into action.

Although the Black college students who participated in my study initially came together to solve a problem related to coalescing their peers in a manner that would allow them to counter the dominant narratives of the university they attend, it was their immense sense of personal and collective responsibility that drove an opportunity to expand practical applications for digital spaces. My research on a Black college student digital platform also underscores the importance of creating peer counter-spaces and provides yet another example of the critical need for Black student support, as evidenced in the following closing quotes:

I think there's a reason why Black students get so close to one another. The college environment is … we're all under this pressure and it's easier carrying it when we're all sharing it together. And I personally I think that's immensely important because again, it's so easy to feel alone …. Having these Black friends around you, having this peer-on-peer support, it helps clear you up internally and again helps you become the best person that you can be or that unburdened person who now can do whatever the fuck they can because you have someone believing in it.

— Nate, UNC student and Blackspace member
You don't have all that outside noise. It's just y'all. It's just us. And I think that's one of the safest and most empowering spaces to have.

— Bobby, UNC student and Blackspace member
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Appendix A1
Focus Group Discussion Guide

Blackspace Discussion Guides:
Focus Group & Individual Interviews

Team BlackSpace
The questions below will be used to guide our discussions (which I’m very much looking forward to), and I ask you to keep the following in mind:
- I’m sharing them ahead of time to give you an idea of the topics that’ll be covered.
- You are not expected to prepare remarks. I don’t want you to be “scripted,” and my intent is to guide a free-flowing conversation where you feel comfortable sharing as much or as little as you like. I also don’t want you to say something because you believe it’s what I want to hear.
- Depending on where our conversation goes, I may ask questions not represented below and/or skip a few altogether.

Focus Group Questions
- Tell me what led you to create an online platform to connect Black students on campus.
  - What made you come together to design it?
- How would you describe BlackSpace?
- What purposes was the platform designed to serve, and how is it meeting those needs?
  - What are the current gaps or what needs aren’t being met?
- Besides the platform itself, what are the other communications make up its suite of tools?
- In what ways, if any, does it serve as a vehicle to counter the dominant narratives of your university?
- How do Black students find out about BlackSpace?
  - If known, what percentage of the Black student population is aware of it and how many use it?
- How is BlackSpace connected to offline tools, resources, and activities?
- What are the Black student organizations on campus that BlackSpace partners with, how were they selected, and what role do they play as partners?
- What excites you about BlackSpace?
- What concerns do you have about maintaining and sustaining it?
- Have you had any detractors and how do you keep them out?
- If something is about to go down on campus or where’s a planned protest,
  - How do you find out about it?
  - How do you use BlackSpace to mobilize and/or galvanize other Black students?

July 2020
Appendix A2
Individual Interview Discussion Guide

- What role does Blackspace play in the Black Lives Matter movement? (I'll ask what #BLM means to you as a college student during our one-on-one conversations.)
- Talk about other digital 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.
  - How do you use them?
  - How do they connect with offline spaces (e.g., the BSU)?

**Individual Interview Questions**

- Let's start with your involvement with Blackspace
  - Why did you get involved?
  - What do you get out of it personally?
  - Is there anything you want me to know about Blackspace that wasn't discussed during the focus group?
- Now we're going to switch gears. In what ways do you expect...UNC...to support you as a Black student?
  - Is the university living up to your expectations?
- In what ways do race and racism impact you as a Black college student?
- Talk about a time when a fellow Black student helped you or had your back, and/or vice versa.
  - What did it feel like?
  - How important to you is support from other Black students?
- When it comes to school resources, whether it be educational, financial or personal,
  - How do you learn about the information?
  - What do you do with it (e.g., do you share it with other Black students)?
- What does the hashtag #blacklivesmatter mean to you as a Black college student?
- I would like you to use your imagination for this last set of questions. Imagine a technology tool specifically designed for Black college students that would:
  - Allow them to communicate with other Black students to share information, resources and learn from each other’s experiences;
  - Connect them with peers to get the advice and support they need that only a fellow Black student can give. For example, dealing with microaggressions (like if a professor or student says something racially insensitive in class), feeling isolated on campus, or being the “only one”;
  - And provide them with the tailored information they need to be successful as a Black student, no matter where they go to school.

Taking monetary constraints out of the picture, what would the technology tool look like and what components would it include? For example, would it be a website, an app on your phone, some form of technology that doesn’t exist yet, or a combo? How would you expect to find out about this resource?