Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege
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Special Issue: All #BlackLivesMatter!

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The journal of *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege* presents a special issue in response to the murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest of the summer of 2020 that followed.

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Spearheaded by the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Travon Martin, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was born. Black womxn activists—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti, and Patrice Cullors Khan—employed social media as a tool of engagement and connection to share their pain and discontent for yet another Black person who had fallen victim to state violence at the hands of citizen vigilantism. Since its inception in 2013, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has become the premier organizing and activism medium for Black youth, particularly in teaching and learning spaces that center critical analysis of whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy.

In 2019, four hundred years after the first Africans arrived on the shores of Jamestown, VA, Nana Akufo-Addo, President of the Republic of Ghana, launched the *Year of Return,* an initiative intended to encourage African diasporans, specifically descendants of those who survived the *Maafa* (the African Holocaust) to return to Africa, to Ghana, to visit, invest and ultimately repatriate. This event, produced and engaged in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter, provided various mediums for diasporans to amplify and expand their interpretation of Black liberation, and hence, how the pursuit of such is viewed through various academic, social, and community-based initiatives.

In response to the murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest of the summer of 2020 that followed, this *All #BlackLivesMatter* Special Issue of *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege* seeks to address the diversity of those who identify as Black and honor the lived experiences and social identities of said persons. Additionally, this collection has been curated to support expanding institutional conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion to intersectionality, justice, and the implementation of anti-oppressive frameworks as tools to transform systems and institutions.

A special thank you to Bonyi Bofor Akosua Kalesa Queen Mother Shemariah J. Arki, EdD, assistant professor and director of the Center for Pan African Culture at Kent State University for her editorial contributions.

Eddie Moore Jr., PhD
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Not Your Noire: I'm Not Going to Spend My Life Just Being Your Colour

Reggie Nyamekye

Abstract

Black people continue to move and operate in spaces where they are perceived as simply a colour that has neither been respected nor appreciated for years. Black people are often not seen past their skin colour to honour their value as humans. Through real-life experiences, this piece shares problematic narratives that ought to be dismantled.

Keywords: beyond Blackness, storytelling, poetry, racialized experiences, narratives

Reggie Nyamekye is an advocate, storyteller, poet, photographer, researcher, creative enthusiast, dreamer, and lover of humanitarian causes. Reggie will easily join any movement to positively impact, courageously empower, and do better for society.

Imagine a very cold winter night, and Ayeyi, a young Black woman, walks into a restaurant with her Christmas shopping bags. The host meets her at the restaurant entrance and says, "Sorry, no public washrooms here," before she can tell him she's only there to eat. Shocked for a minute but not surprised, she pries inside and doesn't see anyone like herself. Everyone's skin is as white as the snow outside. Her offense—standing out like a chocolate fondue against their snow.

Picture Ayeyi again, but this time she is doing her grocery shopping. The cashier asked to look into her little sack pack to ensure she did not have any items in there that she needed to pay for. She opened it up for the cashier to see because she was more amused than annoyed since she had nothing to hide. However, she could not entertain the fact that the cashier had not asked the person in front of her—who had a bag filled with things—whether they had any items hiding in there. You see, the cashier was white, and so was the person in front of Ayeyi. They were both white, and Ayeyi was Black. There was no other explanation because when Ayeyi went to speak to the manager about it, the manager apologized to her and said they had no policy where cashiers had to ask to look into someone's bag.

Ayeyi's experiences as an "other" were not her firsts, and they weren't going to be her last. Still, they seem very tiny compared to the stories of many Black people held in shackles, lynched, doused in gasoline and burned to death, or treated like contagious animals just because the colour of their skin was not white enough. In many instances, we have seen all too well boys and men shot to death or desperately beg to breathe just because they were born a colour that has been strangled and suffocated since slavery; Black.

One time in Ayeyi's Indigenous studies class, a white heterosexual male student asked the class, "What if colonialism was an accident and Christopher Columbus just got lost trying to find his way somewhere else?" *Just imagine,* she thought to herself. *What people eagerly raise their hands and say, "Please colonize us, please let us be your slaves." What people? No people. No one. No one says that.*

Imagine that Ayeyi is asked to speak on behalf of all Black people at a meeting, despite socially locating herself as someone from a small town in a certain African country. It is assumed that having melanin skin that appears baked by golden rays-of-the-sun meant she was the monolithic representative of all her people. Ayeyi wanted to say to them, *No, I am not your* Noire (French language for "Black"). *I'm not going to spend my life just being a colour to you*. Instead, to avoid being seen as an angry Black woman, she said firmly, "To acknowledge the struggles of Black people, we must be careful in this so-called diverse setting to not consciously or unconsciously promote tokenization under the false ideology of inclusion and amplifying voices of Black people."

When journaling in her diary, Ayeyi wrote,

> *The Blackness of my skin is like chocolate clay, on any given day, a thorough delight to marvel in. That Black is not darkness; it is not just a colour. It does not conform; it is a maverick existence of space, vast like the brazen length of the River Nile, breathtaking like laughter in a rolling calabash. Blackness is mesmerizing, like beats of movements at an African festival; Blackness is excellence, it is joy, it is*

magic, it is the essence of humanity.
Black lives should matter.

Ayeyi further wrote,

Colours are everywhere,
And privilege is in lighter colours,
Diversity is used everywhere;
But diversity is not welcomed just anywhere.
It is as though for co-existence,
We must be "blindfolded"
When we first interact
Like, learn to be colour blind.
She wanted to be seen as a person.
The essence of all that she was,
Could not be subscribed to just a colour.
She was so much more than that,
All of her, her greatness was beyond a colour.
Her life mattered, like all other lives of people who looked like her.
And people needed to treat her as a human before anything else.

Ayeyi's stories are based on real-life encounters in spaces and places that have continued to discriminate, dismiss Black people by default of their Blackness, and such thinking must be dismantled.

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#BlackLivesMatter News Coverage: Examining Racial Projects and Hegemonic Imagery

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Abstract

This study examines the theoretical concept of racial projects and how social institutions carry them out to support or challenge racial formation in a given society. In particular, it examines how news media outlets create divergent racial projects surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter movement while drawing on shared racial imagery existing in society through a qualitative content analysis of 83 news articles published in 2018 by *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, which are liberal and conservative news outlets, respectively. I outline how these organizations construct contradictory controlling images and advance two different racial projects in response to this contemporary racial justice movement. *Slate* ultimately advances a controlling image of prejudiced police to support a racial project I call *advancing anti-racism*. In contrast, *TheBlaze* deploys a controlling image of problematic protesters to support their racial project of *reproducing white supremacy*. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these racial projects for the racial formation of the United States and the theoretical importance of racial projects carried out by social institutions and organizations more broadly.

Keywords: race, social movements, #BlackLivesMatter, controlling images, racial projects

Simone Durham is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Maryland. Her research broadly covers the intersections of race, social psychology, and social movements. Currently, most of her research focuses on the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The social fabric of the United States' society has long been shaped by the issues of race and racism. In response to the perceived successes of the Civil Rights Movement, and even more so after the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, some argued that we now live in a post-racial society. However, sociological scholarship outlines how race still shapes social structures, identities, and interactions in the contemporary era. *Racial formation theory* (Omi & Winant, 2015) is a structural theory of race and racism that conceptualizes racial formation as an ongoing structural process, partially carried out through racial projects. This study is designed to answer two questions regarding racial projects in society: First, how are racial projects carried out by social institutions (in this study, media outlets) to support or challenge the racial formation of a society? Second, how are racial projects with divergent stances created by drawing on similar hegemonic imagery? To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis to investigate how racial projects are created by politically polarized news outlets in their coverage of *#BlackLivesMatter* (#BLM), a racial justice movement.[1]

In this paper, I outline how racial formation theory, specifically the concepts of racial projects and racial hegemony, can help us understand how racial meaning is created to shape the racial structure in America's society. I will also discuss why looking at a racial justice movement such as #BlackLivesMatter as a case is an ideal point of analysis and why it is important to center race theory rather than social movement theory in this analysis. Ultimately, I find that the sources in my sample create divergent racial projects by deploying contrary controlling images of problematic protesters and prejudiced police. These controlling images are primary mechanisms used to support opposing racial projects concerning American race relations, which I call *advancing anti-racism* and *reproducing white supremacy*. Based on these findings, I argue that no matter their audience or political stance, social institutions such as media outlets engage in racial projects by drawing on existing hegemonic ideas surrounding an effort to shape society's racial, social structure.

Guiding Frameworks and Concepts

Racial Projects and Social Movements

Racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) is a structural theory of race and racism that acknowledges race as a master category operating on a structural level to shape social outcomes. Racial ideologies, racial hegemonies, and racial projects are all a part of the overall process of racial formation that structures the racial hierarchy and race relations in a society. *Racial projects* are the interpretations, representations, and explanations of racial phenomena and the meaning we assign to them. They are taken on by actors on all societal levels, from individuals to whole institutions, to influence the distribution of resources across racial groups in a given society. They contribute to both the *racial hegemony*—pervasive, taken for granted, common-sense understandings of race—that guides microlevel interaction and the organization of institutionalized racial structures on meso and macro scales. These projects help create, maintain, contest, and destroy racial structures and hierarchies over time (Omi & Winant, 2015). Organizations and institutions play a crucial role in the racial formation process. *Racial hierarchy* is created and perpetuated between organizations at the macro-institutional level, within organizations at the meso level,

and among individual members of organizations and institutions at the macrolevel. As a result, organizations and institutions that take on racial projects act as racialized organizations by enhancing or diminishing racial groups' agency and shaping and legitimating the distribution of resources across racial groups (Ray, 2019).

Social movements are political projects that aim to produce some social change in the way a given society is organized. Movements (as cumulative actors, rather than looking at individual actors within movements) constitute racialized organizations to the extent that they take on racial projects that influence the distribution of resources and life chances across racial groups. #BlackLivesMatter fits this description because racial equality and the treatment of Black people are directly stated as its concerns. Responses to the movement by other institutions or organizations are also racial projects if they are efforts to affect the racial hierarchy or racial discourse in society. Understanding these racial projects and the ways they may affect the racial organization of society will give us a deeper understanding of the dynamics of racial justice movements (Bracey, 2016). This study examines news media organizations and interrogates how characterizations of the movement in news articles act as efforts to influence the racial discourse and structure of the United States.

Controlling Images and Racial Hegemony

Racial hegemony highlights the gradual shift in our racial hierarchy throughout American history, from a foundation of domination to one of racial common sense generally accepted in society, including those victimized by these understandings (Omi & Winant, 2015). The hegemonic narratives written or communicated through media may influence our common understandings of race, guiding social interaction and the creation of racial structures that organize society. This may include our taken-for-granted narratives surrounding racial justice movements or their participants. Controlling images serve as supporting mechanisms in particular racial projects and the creation of racial hegemony, including in news media. These images consist of stereotypes that normalize inequality in people's daily lives with particular social identities (Collins, 2000). This normalization contributes to our common-sense understandings of different groups of people and their social standing in society. For example, controlling images of Black men as thugs or criminals (Dow, 2016; Rome, 2004; Welch, 2007) is often used in news media narratives to rationalize instances of police brutality. Racialized controlling images deployed in the media influence the way people of different backgrounds relate to and interact with one another through their incorporation into racial hegemony. Controlling images to characterize the movement and those who participate in it in a particular light may be used to support racial projects to either discredit or legitimize the movement, which then influences the perspectives of American citizens. This study recognizes the power of controlling images in creating hegemonic narratives and seeks to uncover how they contribute to racial projects taken on by social institutions or organizations. While news media coverage of #BlackLivesMatter is used as a case study here, the framework of this study could be used to examine the creation of competing racial projects by various organizations and institutions that likely shape public opinion and social discourse on a range of racialized topics, influencing the social and political development of the United States.

Centering Race Theory to Study Racial Justice Movements

While the primary theoretical focus of this study is an extension of our understanding of racial formation processes, the framing used here has important implications for the study of social movements, particularly racial justice movements. Throughout history, social movements have served as mechanisms of social change, particularly in pursuing justice and civil rights for vulnerable populations such as marginalized racial groups. Scholars define *social movements* as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels to promote or resist change within the group, society, or world order of which it is a part (McAdam & Snow, 1997). Studies in the social movements literature generally center on examinations of movement emergence, processes of recruitment and participation (micromobilization), and movement dynamics (operation, functions, and outcomes). Despite the known importance of these social structures for oppressed racial groups and the recognition of race or ethnicity as an axis of domination essential to understanding social movements (Oliver, 2017), studies of social movements generally fail to integrate sociostructural frameworks that center race in their analyses.

While studying social movement emergence, mobilization, and dynamics is important, I argue that to take race seriously in social movements research, we must also understand the social structures and environment in which racial and ethnic movements operate. This means going beyond studying movements directly to examine contexts in which minority movements are fighting for change. *Political process theory* (McAdam, 1999), a dominant social movements framework, was developed to examine the Civil Rights Movement and examine contextual factors external to them. However, it fails to critically theorize race or the societal racial structure in which it took place (Bracey, 2016). Centering race and interrogating power structures built on race in the study of social movements is an important yet underutilized way to ensure that knowledge production does not reproduce structural inequality (Watkins Liu, 2018). By using #BlackLivesMatter as a case and using racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) as a framework for understanding racial justice movements and their social context, this paper aims to provide an explicitly race-conscious analysis of news coverage and the ways it shapes social organization in society.

The Case of #BlackLivesMatter

Although the Civil Rights Movement happened more than 50 years ago, 97% of Americans polled still identify racism as an ongoing issue in our society to some degree—58% of whom consider it a big problem (Neal, 2017). One of the most notable contemporary responses to this ongoing issue has been the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which some consider the 21st-century iteration of the Civil Rights Movement (Day, 2015). #BlackLivesMatter as a movement started as a social media hashtag project by three Black female activists (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of a young and innocent Black boy named Trayvon Martin (Howard University, n.d.). "Black Lives Matter" as a phrase or slogan pertains to many things: a hashtag, social movement, global network, and call to action.

Holistically, #Black Lives Matter can be described as:

> an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise … [and] an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. (Black Lives Matter, n.d.)

Cumulatively, this ideology consists of thirteen principles,[2] aimed toward leadership development and the empowerment of the Black community (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, though, #BlackLivesMatter is a decentralized movement and set of networks (i.e., Black Lives Matter Inc., Black Lives Matter) without official leaders, although some activists may stand out or be more well-known than others (Cutolo, 2021). As a result, perceptions of the movement may be influenced by the behavior and statements of many, including the organizations that strive to carry out the principles of the movement.

Descriptive survey data shows that support for the movement is polarized, with Black people, Democrats, and younger age cohorts more likely to support the movement. These divisions make it important for us to consider what forces may be shaping these opinions. While the movement, its participants, and its supporters engage in the significant use of social media to spread their message and awareness of issues facing Black Americans, news media coverage of #BlackLivesMatter is largely outside the movement's control. Given the influential power of the media (Beaubien & Wyeth, 1994; McCombs, 2013; Nacos et al., 2011), news coverage of #BlackLivesMatter may contribute to the polarization of public opinion on the movement across racial, political, and age-based lines (Easley, 2017; Horowitz & Livingston, 2016; Pew, 2016). However, these narratives have been explored very little in academic research up to this point. Most academic research on #BlackLivesMatter has primarily focused on how people use social media to participate in the movement (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Brown et al., 2017; Carney, 2016; Choudhury et al., 2016; Ince et al., 2017; Ray et al., 2017). Another large portion of the literature on #BlackLivesMatter consists of historical accounts and memoirs from activists who participate in the movement rather than scholarly research (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018; Lebron, 2017; Lowery, 2016; Ransby, 2017; Taylor, 2016).

This study aims to extend our understanding of racial formation processes by examining politically polarized media outlets' advance divergent narratives about the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a case study for understanding how institutions and organizations engage in racial projects. Furthermore, the analysis points to the role of racialized organizations, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), in the racial formation of society, specifically to racial justice movements. When narratives are written by politically polarized news sources, such as *Slate* and *TheBlaze,* which are examined here, they may create competing discourses of racial hegemony adopted by the different audiences they reach. However, to shape racial hegemony and discourse, these sources draw on existing hegemonic ideas to frame their perspectives and connect with their audience. This analysis demonstrates that the sources in the sample (*Slate* and *TheBlaze*) center their coverage of "Black Lives Matter" around themes of politics, policing, prejudice, and protest. However, despite shared themes, they create significantly different narratives about the

#BlackLivesMatter movement, partially through the deployment of contrary controlling images of protesters, and police that support opposing racial projects concerning American race relations. These racial projects are called *advancing anti-racism* and *reproducing white supremacy*, taken on by *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, respectively.

Methodology

To investigate the way social institutions and organizations engage in racial projects that shape the racial formation of society, I performed a content analysis of news articles on the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a case study. In this content analysis, I used a *critical discourse analysis* approach to examine the way discourse (in this case, media discourse) (re)produces or challenges systems of racial power and dominance (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993). For my sample, I chose two politically opposing news sources—this allowed me to highlight the importance of the shared hegemonic discourse these sources draw upon even in creating divergent racial projects through news coverage of #BlackLivesMatter.

Data Collection

Articles were collected through purposive, theoretical sampling from two small online news sources from opposite ends of the political spectrum: *Slate* and *TheBlaze*. The former has a staunchly liberal audience, while the latter caters to those on the conservative end of the political spectrum (Engel, 2014). I conducted searches for articles in the online archives of each source using the terms "black lives matter," "#blacklivesmatter," and "BLM." The use of all three search terms allowed for the most comprehensive evaluation of "Black Lives Matter" as both a movement, organization, and general social phenomenon. I ordered 10 pages of search results by date from *Slate* and then selected articles for the sample. Because *TheBlaze*'s search engine does not have the same filter capabilities, I reviewed the list of results from the search and only pulled out articles written in 2018. Only including articles from 2018 creates an analysis that reflects the political and social climate #BlackLivesMatter operated within during this specific time period.

Articles were included in the final sample if their content covered race relations or sociopolitical topics on a societal level,[4] regardless of whether #BlackLivesMatter was explicitly mentioned or was a main topic of the article. The sample was further refined by excluding articles that appeared in the search results but were wholly unrelated to #BlackLivesMatter or sociopolitical issues and articles that mention #BlackLivesMatter in the context of or in relation to fictional media.[5] For each source, I collected the entire sample of articles available in each search that met these characteristics. This process resulted in a total sample of 83 articles, 31 from *Slate* and 52 from *TheBlaze*. While the majority (74%) of articles in the sample from *Slate* directly mention "Black Lives Matter," the opposite was true for the sample from *TheBlaze*. This implies that the racial project taken by *TheBlaze* rests upon a much broader foundation of information than *Slate.* Only text content (including tweets from Twitter users placed within the articles) was analyzed. Photos, videos, and captions were excluded. I used a word processor application to copy and store the articles in two documents organized by source. In addition to the body of the articles, their titles, authors, dates of publication, and URLs at the time of

collection were also included. Analysis was completed directly in these documents.

Data Analysis

Analysis for this study was performed primarily through thematic coding in line with established conventions of qualitative research (Charmaz, 1983, 2008). This analytic procedure consisted of two coding schemes. In my initial coding, each article was analyzed line-by-line, using open coding to identify recurring topics and content. In the second round, I used focused coding by integrating related initial codes into thematic categories. These categories are discussed in the analysis to explain the linguistic differences in the content of #BlackLivesMatter news coverage across the two sources. Due to my theoretical framework, I paid particular attention to issues of race, and the use of potential controlling images in descriptions of #BlackLivesMatter or people deemed to be associated with the movement, its affiliated organizations, or the phenomenon as a whole. However, in my analysis, I did not use predetermined themes in relation to this topic to avoid overlooking unexpected themes in the data. In an iterative process, I also returned to previously coded articles for additional coding if a theme arose that had not yet emerged when that article was coded.

Findings

Thematic analysis of articles from *Slate* and *TheBlaze* revealed that the two news organizations provide significantly different narratives about #BlackLivesMatter. By drawing on existing hegemonic knowledge about race, politics, and the movement, they construct contrary controlling images that help them connect with their audiences and potentially influence their perceptions of this racial justice movement. *Slate* advances a controlling image of *prejudiced police* by identifying police brutality as a form of racial discrimination and, therefore, a social problem to be addressed. In contrast, *TheBlaze* deploys a controlling image of *problematic protesters* by painting #BlackLivesMatter participants as engaging in unjustified behavior in order to delegitimize the movement's actions and goals. These differences culminate in two competing hegemonic narratives about the movement communicated to the outlets' respective audiences. The first is *advancing anti-racism*—a liberal and supportive project taken on by the *Slate* that joins #BlackLivesMatter in interrogating America's existing racial hierarchy. Second, *TheBlaze*'s project is *reproducing white supremacy,* which delegitimizes #BlackLivesMatter, downplays racial injustice, and aims to maintain the extant racial hierarchy in the United States. The sections below describe the content that typifies each racialized media organization's approach to supporting their racial project. To follow, I discuss the meaning and implications of these divergent narratives in the discussion section.

TheBlaze Sees Problematic Protesters, While *Slate* Sees Protests as Justified

Articles published by *TheBlaze* deploy a controlling image of problematic protesters by repeatedly characterizing #BlackLivesMatter protesters and demonstrators as disruptive to society. This disruption was showcased in various contexts, painting #BlackLivesMatter as disruptive in both public and private spaces. For example, *TheBlaze* called attention to how protests of police brutality inconvenienced citizens, rather than focusing on the reason for the protest:

> Sacramento police shot and killed an unarmed [B]lack man on Sunday in his grandparents' backyard while responding to a call about break-ins. Video was released Wednesday, and by Thursday, protests had disrupted the entire city. …Protesters angry about the killing took to the streets Thursday, first mobilizing outside city hall with chants of "Come outside." Later, the crowds moved to Interstate 5, shutting down all traffic on the highway during rush hour. The protest eventually made its way to the Golden 1 Center, home of the Sacramento Kings basketball team. …Before the game, protesters locked arms outside the arena and blocked thousands of patrons from entering. The start of the game was delayed, but the NBA opted not to cancel. For the safety of patrons, the Kings closed the doors of the arena to fans who hadn't already gotten inside, offering refunds to those who were forced to miss the game. (Colen, 2018a)

In this excerpt, the writer described a trail of disturbance that #BlackLivesMatter protesters created over time in Sacramento. While they note that these actions were in response to the police killing of an unarmed Black man, they are far more focused on the disruption they created for residents of the city. First, they characterized the protesters as disrupting "the entire city" (Colen, 2018a). Given that Sacramento covers 100 square miles and has a population of over half a million people, this is a stretch. They also highlighted that #BlackLivesMatter protesters blocked traffic during rush hour, heightening the sense of disruption since this is a significantly busier time. Lastly, the writer characterized #BlackLivesMatter as a disruption to not only Kings' fans but to the NBA organization itself. Not only did they keep fans out of the arena by blocking the doors, but they financially disrupted the organization by forcing them to shut the doors and provide refunds to fans who ended up blocked from attending.

The controlling image of protesters in this politically conservative outlet is not restricted to #BlackLivesMatter protests of police brutality. *TheBlaze* articles make the point that Black Lives Matter as an organization threatens to disrupt other social contexts as well, such as in the institution of education:

> After a video recently surfaced of controversial University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax saying she didn't believe she knew of a black student graduating in the top quarter of the class, the tenured prof kept her job—but was barred from teaching first-year students as a result of her remarks. But for the leader of Black Lives Matter Pennsylvania [BLM Chapter] Penn Law isn't going far enough. In fact, Asa Khalif said he told the school it must fire Wax or face major disruptions on the Philadelphia campus—including disrupting classes and organizing protests—that could commence as soon as Friday. (Urbanski, 2018a)

This article excerpt highlights that the controlling image of Black Lives Matter protesters is more comprehensive than their protests of police brutality. The writer described the threat of disruption to a college campus in response to the actions of university personnel perceived as racist. While they noted the reason for these potential protests was "controversial" behavior, they abstained from calling this out as racism or diving deeper into its effects on Black students and did not justify the protests as a necessary or appropriate response to those racist actions.

To take this controlling image of #BlackLivesMatter as a societal disruption even further, articles from this source noted that #BlackLivesMatter activists even disrupt the private lives of individual citizens rather than just disrupting public spaces:

> [#BlackLivesMatter] activists on Saturday crashed the wedding of one of the police officers linked to the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark. …[P]rotesters showed up on the day of the unnamed officer's wedding, barging into a room where the groom was gathered with his groomsmen just hours ahead of his nuptials. …Sacramento Police Sgt. Vance Chandler … said that he couldn't fathom a purpose behind disturbing a man on his wedding day. (Taylor, 2018)

Here, the writer described #BlackLivesMatter protestors as inappropriately disrupting the wedding day of a police officer. Instead of recognizing that this disruption to the officer's private life may be similar to (but much less drastic than) the disruption to the private life of Stephon Clark's family, they described this act as unfathomable. In all three of these examples, *TheBlaze* painted #BlackLivesMatter and its protests as societal nuisances and disruptions preventing social order in society.

Instead of characterizing protesters as disruptive, *Slate* articles advanced a more positive (or at least neutral) image of #BlackLivesMatter protesters. Their articles countered the controlling image of problematic protesters advanced in *TheBlaze* by highlighting that similar, or even more disruptive, white collective action is not received or characterized the same way in society:

> The media often uses a racist double-standard to evaluate the behavior of white sports fans as compared with that of [B]lack civil rights protesters. White people flipping over cars? Boys will be boys. Black people blocking traffic? There's a riot going on. …The question we should be asking now is not why sports rioters are not more severely punished, but how we can convince police departments to show that same good faith and tolerance toward groups like [#BlackLivesMatter] or anti-Trump protesters. There is no different handbook at work here. Good-natured crowd control isn't reserved for sports, but for white people—it was on display, for example, at the 2017 Women's Marches, where officers greeted marchers in uniform, not in riot gear. (Grabar, 2018)

Here, the *Slate* writer described how the actions of Black civil rights protestors are evaluated differently than white protestors of other issues, including when compared to white sports fans who cause significant physical damage in celebration of a favorite team. They also promoted the idea that the issue is not how these different groups behave but how police respond to the different groups and that this difference is based on race and white privilege.

In addition to pointing out differential treatment of their participants, *Slate* articles also combat the controlling image of problematic protesters by contextualizing, explaining, and supporting the actions of #BlackLivesMatter protesters:

> The [#BlackLivesMatter] protests that brought new attention to the problems of police violence and systemic racism in 2014 and 2015 saw similar action from

> teenagers and other young people. (Bouie, 2018)

The excerpt above comes from an article that promoted an argument in favor of enfranchising teenagers across the nation so that they could participate in politics through voting in addition to protesting. As a part of this argument, they used youth participation in #BlackLivesMatter protests as a supporting reason. This paints participation in #BlackLivesMatter protests not as disruptive but as a worthy and progressive political cause. *Slate* articles also justified #BlackLivesMatter's actions directly, such as in the excerpt below:

> Thousands of protesters marched in Chicago on Saturday to call attention to gun-related deaths and the need for jobs, education, and infrastructure in the city. The protesters shut down all northbound lanes on I-94 for about an hour. The marchers, organized by ChicagoStrong and led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Michael Pfleger, chanted "Stop the killing." In the past year, 501 of Chicago's 578 homicides have been shootings, according to the Chicago Tribune's homicide tracker; most of the victims are [B]lack men in the city's South and West sides. (Pollard, 2018)

Here the writer described #BlackLivesMatter protests as against a variety of social ills facing the Black community in Chicago, including violence in the form of police brutality and otherwise. So, instead of quickly noting the reason for the protests, they justify that action by providing evidence as to why it is valid, specifically in homicide statistics and recognition that Black men are disproportionately affected by this issue. The culmination of these tactics exemplifies a very different narrative surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter protests (as a movement) in *Slate* compared to in *TheBlaze*.

Slate Sees Prejudiced Police, While *TheBlaze* Sees Police Violence as Justified

In addition to advancing different narratives about #BlackLivesMatter's impact on society and citizens, the two sources also differ in their positions on #BlackLivesMatter and its main cause: disproportionate police violence against the Black community. *Slate* describes police violence as prejudice and discrimination in the form of brutality or excessive use of force, in line with the narrative of #BlackLivesMatter. As a result, they characterize police violence as protest-worthy rather than as justified use of force. To get this point across to readers, they deploy a controlling image of prejudiced police by consistently contextualizing police violence as a broader pattern rather than as isolated instances. For example:

> In another instance of violence that left Black Lives Matter activists crying out against racism in policing, a white officer in the city of Asheville, North Carolina, punched, choked, and used a stun gun on an unarmed [B]lack man he was pursuing for allegedly jaywalking. (Olmstead, 2018)

> Rose's death is part of a pattern of predominantly white police officers fatally shooting unarmed [B]lack people in the U.S. In recent years, there have been several high-profile cases of [B]lack men being shot in the back by police officers. (Werthan, 2018)

In the two excerpts above (from separate articles), the incidents described are cited as part of a larger pattern through language like "*another* instance" and "*several* high-profile

cases" [emphasis added]. Contextualizing incidents of police brutality as part of a pattern delegitimize these incidents because they are no longer viewed in a vacuum. This justifies the protest action by #BlackLivesMatter (and others) in response to individual incidents of police brutality.

In other content, the *Slate* does not just state that incidents of police brutality are part of a larger pattern worthy of protest; they support this assertion with statistical data on the frequency of police shootings and the comparably low rate of arrests and convictions for those murders:

> Few police officers who shoot civilians ever face a trial. Research estimates that there are approximately 1,000 police shootings each year in the U.S. However, between 2005 and April 2017, only 80 officers were arrested for manslaughter or murder for police shootings. Of those, only 35 percent were convicted. Slager's conviction broke from that pattern, but it is unclear whether Rosfeld will face similar consequences for shooting Rose. The Rose family's attorney, Lee Merritt, said the family is "going through the highs and lows that is common to this kind of situation from disbelief to anger to determination to get justice." A preliminary hearing is set for July 6. (Werthan, 2018)

By juxtaposing these rates, they highlight that not only are the killings protest-worthy, but the lack of accountability for those who commit them is protest-worthy as well.

In contrast, *TheBlaze* articles used language to describe instances of police violence that justify or rationalize police behavior. As a result, they advance a narrative of police violence as a legitimate use of force rather than brutality. The excerpt below focused on what the officers thought led to their use of force rather than the factual conditions of the events in question:

> Vance Chandler, a department spokesman, said … "Prior to the shooting, the involved officers saw the suspect facing them, advance forward with his arms extended, and holding an object in his hands. At the time of the shooting, the officers believed the suspect was pointing a firearm at them," the department said in a news release. "Fearing for their safety," the officers fired multiple rounds at Clark at 9:26 p.m., hitting him several times, the department said. "After an exhaustive search, scene investigators did not locate any firearms." (Pruet, 2018)

While the writer acknowledged that the victim of the police shooting was unarmed, this was not the focus of the narrative they advanced about the incident. Instead, they describe what led the officers to shoot the victim, focusing on the officers' stated belief that the victim did have a weapon and that they were in imminent danger. They also described police efforts to find the nonexistent weapon as "exhaustive." While they were incorrect and unsuccessful, the use of this adjective still speaks to their characterization of police as putting out a great deal of effort in their job, which could be viewed as an effort to legitimize their actions.

This writing pattern is consistent across instances of police violence in *TheBlaze* coverage. This outlet describes the perceived conditions that led to officers' actions, justifying their behavior in a way that makes these incidents a less worthy cause for

concern and protest.

> After receiving 911 calls about a man threatening people with a gun Wednesday, New York City police officers fatally shot a mentally ill man who was unarmed but had been pointing a silver pipe at passers-by as if it was a gun. …Police received three 911 calls from people reporting that a man with a silver gun was pointing it at others and threatening them. Five officers responded to the calls, and when they arrived on the scene, Vassell "took a two-handed shooting stance and pointed an object at the approaching officers," according to NYPD Chief Terence Monahan." (Colen, 2018b)

In the excerpt above, the writer described the unarmed victim as a perceived threat that warranted the officers' actions. To support this position, the writer also noted that they received not one but three 911 calls from citizens, making the threat seem legitimate enough that the victim's death was not a result of police prejudice but of probable cause.

Even in instances where they recognize the position of #BlackLivesMatter protesters or other racial justice groups, *TheBlaze* journalists take the same position. This is exemplified by the following excerpt about the deaths of two Black men in Portland and the reaction of Portland Equity in Action (PEA) to the incidents.

> Members call the deaths of Terrell Johnson, a man shot and killed by a Portland police officer last year, and Larnell Bruce, a man run down outside a Gresham 7-Eleven in 2016, unjust. Johnson died May 10, 2017, after police [said] he threatened people with a knife at the Flavel Street Max station. A grand jury ruled deadly force by the officer was justified. Bruce died in August 2016 after a fight with a man and his girlfriend in the 18700 block of East Burnside Street. Bruce ran from the scene but was chased down by the couple and run over by a 1991 Jeep Wrangler, according to police. (Urbanski, 2018b)

Following the summary of PEA's position on the matter, they took a different angle in their description of those events provided information to the contrary. In both cases, they emphasized that the victims were engaged in violent behavior and that in one case, the deadly force used by the police was found justified, while in the other, the victim was actually killed by someone other than the police. This position downplays the role of police behavior in facilitating events, regardless of who pulled the trigger or why they may have been pursuing the victims as suspects.

Controlling Images and Racial Projects

The divergent narratives surrounding protest and police violence taken on by these sources contribute to opposing racial projects. The way this source draws on hegemonic knowledge of policing and race relations delegitimizes the need for the movement (#BlackLivesMatter) in general by discussing police violence not as a systemic issue but as isolated incidents. By highlighting factors in individual cases to justify officer decisions to use deadly force, *TheBlaze* obscures police brutality as a pattern of race-based maltreatment and discrimination. Following this source's logic, #BlackLivesMatter is not a necessary social movement, and those who participate in #BlackLivesMatter protests do not have legitimate grievances and are disruptive to society. Therefore, *TheBlaze* polices and delegitimizes #BlackLivesMatter through

consistently deploying the problematic protesters controlling image. This delegitimization supports a racial project aimed at reproducing white supremacy in America, based largely in conservative politics, and aimed toward preventing substantial change to race relations. This racial project justifies the existing racial hierarchy in America, which keeps whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom—one that #BlackLivesMatter is attempting to disrupt or dismantle.

Conversely, *Slate* characterizes the #BlackLivesMatter protests as legitimate political action needed to address the pattern of negative social outcomes endured by Black Americans. Instead of policing protest behavior, they are critical of police behavior and repeatedly advance a controlling image of prejudiced police who engage in racially prejudiced police brutality. They explicitly situate these incidents of police violence in a larger narrative of racial injustice that disproportionately affects Black Americans. *Slate*'s articles attempt to provide supporting evidence for the need for #BlackLivesMatter as a racial protest movement by contextualizing police brutality rather than examining incidents in a vacuum. While they do not hide the fact that some of #BlackLivesMatter's actions (and Black Lives Matter as an organization) may be disruptive, their efforts to justify these actions point to their engagement in a racial project that highlights the racial injustice of the existing hierarchy in the United States and aspires to an anti-racist America. This racial project is based on liberal politics and supports the #BlackLivesMatter movement by interrogating America's existing racial hierarchy and highlighting racial inequality. By identifying racial bias so that it can be eradicated in the long run, their racial project aims to create a more equal and just playing field across racial groups in the United States.

Discussion

This content analysis study examined news media coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in polarized new media as a case study for understanding how social institutions carry out racial projects to support or challenge the racial formation of a society. In particular, the analysis illuminates how social institutions or organizations can create racial projects with divergent stances while drawing on similar hegemonic imagery. Within the 83 articles collected from *Slate* and *TheBlaze*, I found that news organizations support divergent racial projects despite drawing on shared content and themes of politics, policing, prejudice, and protest. Three primary mechanisms facilitate the creation of divergent narratives while drawing on the hegemonic knowledge prevalent in society surrounding these themes. First, the distribution of topical themes and subthemes between sources provides different levels of emphasis on particular issues and supports different bodies of knowledge about #BlackLivesMatter. Second, each source deploys different controlling images; while *Slate* deploys a controlling image of prejudiced police, *TheBlaze* uses a controlling image of problematic protesters. These controlling images police the behaviors of different groups, which is policed reflects a larger political agenda or racial project either in support of or against the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Lastly, *Slate* and *TheBlaze* privilege different voices in the narration of instances of police brutality, creating a further divergence between the hegemonic narratives and bodies of knowledge transmitted to their audiences. In culmination, these mechanisms highlight the existence of two competing hegemonic narratives and racial

projects. First is *Slate*, which legitimizes #BlackLivesMatter and supports a liberal racial project to deconstruct the existing racial hierarchy in America based on discrimination toward Blacks. I have called this racial project by *Slate* as advancing anti-racism. Second is the narrative and racial project taken on by *TheBlaze*, reproducing white supremacy, which delegitimizes the movement and supports the existing racial hierarchy in the United States.

Contributions

This study has three main contributions to our theoretical understandings of racial formation and social movements. First, this study is a step toward remedying a common issue in analyses of racial justice movements: the lack of concepts and theoretical frameworks that prioritize and critically consider race and race relations. To do so, I used racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015) as a framework to understand racial projects in support of or against racial justice movements as part of the racialized societal landscape in which they operate. This centers race in the analysis in a way that dominant theoretical paradigms in the social movements' literature, such as political process theory, often fail to do. Similarly, I center the Collins's (2000) concept of controlling images in my analysis of how these news organizations interpret and disseminate knowledge about #BlackLivesMatter rather than using concepts such as framing (Snow & Benford, 1992; Snow et al., 1986) from the social movements' literature. This approach explicitly focuses on the power dynamics inherent to race as a construct rather than a more abstract approach to meaning-making processes that may not pay as much attention to these factors. Bracey (2016) and Watkins Liu (2018) emphasize that we cannot truly understand the dynamics of social movements aimed at racial justice through a white racial frame, commonly used by traditional social movements theories. Because race is a master category and structural force in society (Omi & Winant, 2015), it must be given more primacy in analyses of racial justice activism.

By examining news media organizations as actors that engage in racial projects, this study extends the literature on the role of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) in processes of racial formation. As social actors, institutions or organizations create racial projects with the potential to constrain or facilitate the agency of marginalized racial groups and shape the distributions of resources across racial groups. *Slate*'s racial project works to enhance the agency of #BlackLivesMatter by legitimating the movement and supporting the need for a redistribution of resources that provides more equity for the Black community. In contrast, *TheBlaze*'s racial project attempts to prevent any redistribution of resources across racial lines by delegitimizing #BlackLivesMatter and constraining the movement's ability to create change. By attending to the activity of organizations and institutions outside of the social movement sector, we can better understand how various institutions shape racial formation even if their efforts to do so are not as explicit as racial justice movements.

This study's third contribution highlights the functions of hegemony in constraining the way social organizations and institutions disseminate narratives associated with racial projects. Regardless of their stances, the shared focuses between the two sources analyzed here demonstrate how organizations must draw on similar bodies of hegemonic knowledge to communicate with their audiences and be perceived as

legitimate. However, in their use of controlling images and linguistic approaches, they are able to use that shared extant hegemony to produce divergent racial projects aimed at producing new hegemonic narratives that have the potential to shape the racial formation of society. While we may still be in an age of media hegemony (Block, 2013), the United States has also moved into an age of concern over fake news. As a result, many people may be turning to more specialized news outlets, like the two analyzed in this study, that better match their own social and political perspectives. It seems more appropriate for the future scholarship of this nature to pay attention to the existence of multiple media hegemonies rather than assuming that media create a singular and dominant hegemony.

Limitations

Differential search engine capabilities and algorithm-based limits and biases are two main challenges of search algorithms (Rainie & Anderson, 2017) that impacted the construction of the sample for this study. Whether the search results are based on the technology and math involved in computer search algorithms or the way articles are organized and tagged by people working at the respective news outlets, people who search for information on #BlackLivesMatter are likely to be exposed to these articles. As a result, this exposure ties the issues discussed in the articles to #BlackLivesMatter as part of a larger racial project and hegemonic narrative. If only articles that explicitly mentioned or focused on #BlackLivesMatter were included in the sample, relevant information about the coverage impacting readers' perceptions of the movement would have been obscured. Due to these factors, search results were reviewed to determine their related topic, and only articles that fit certain parameters were collected and included in the final sample.

Future Study

While the unique cases of *Slate* and *TheBlaze* provide an interesting window through which to examine racial projects in media, these sources may not be representative of news coverage even among smaller outlets. For this reason, future research on racial projects in media (about #BlackLivesMatter and otherwise) should investigate other sources and racial projects taken on by the Black Lives Matter organization or other types of organizations, charities, and institutions. In addition, future studies should also examine whether these patterns remain consistent over larger periods of time. While the themes and patterns I observed were consistent throughout the year-long period of articles my sample covered, looking back at news coverage of the movement in its earlier development may not reveal the same themes. This may also be true of coverage of Black Lives Matter and #BlackLivesMatter in the future, given that it is still ongoing.

In addition, future studies should also examine whether these patterns remain consistent over larger spans of time. While the themes and patterns I observed were consistent throughout the year-long period of articles my sample covered, narratives written about the movement may change over time. These changes are important in the context of how the media outlets impact racial formation through the racial projects they take on through their coverage of race-based social movements. Therefore, future research should examine such potential shifts in messaging over time by analyzing coverage at other points in time, both earlier in the movement's development and in its future stages, given that it is still ongoing.

Conclusion

Through thematic analysis of one year of news coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter movement from two separate news organizations, I provide a case study of how social institutions and organizations engage in racial projects to shape the racial formation of society. I find that even though these sources largely discuss the same issues and events, they differ in their use of controlling images and advance divergent racial projects in response to #BlackLivesMatter. While it may seem evident that news organizations produce narratives in line with their political leanings, this study illuminates through what processes this is achieved. To the extent that people rely on the news or organizations for information on #BlackLivesMatter (among other topics), they are likely receiving a very specific set of messages about #BlackLivesMatter as a movement based on the racial projects taken on by those sources and organizations. However, by drawing on hegemonic knowledge to connect with their audience, both legitimize their racial projects and hegemonic narratives they disseminate to shape society's racial formation. If we interpret what we read in the news as legitimate and these narratives become hegemonic, taken for granted knowledge among those who consume them, this will only continue to polarize the American public on racial issues. More importantly, these divergent racial projects taken on by the news sources themselves comprise and contribute to larger racial projects in our society. The project taken on by *Slate*, advancing anti-racism, aligns with the project taken on by #BlackLivesMatter itself and supports the idea that racial inequity is still a rampant problem in America. Meanwhile, the racial project taken on by *TheBlaze*, reproducing white supremacy, exemplifies the ongoing attempts of conservatives and whites to downplay racial injustice and maintain their privileged position in the existing United States racial hierarchy. Unfortunately, the existence of these competing hegemonies in news media suggests that America's racist structure and its foundation will not be changing anytime soon unless the racial project associated with *Slate* and #BlackLivesMatter triumphs over that of *TheBlaze* and white supremacy.

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Footnotes

[1] For consistency purposes in the *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege*'s special issue "All #BlackLivesMatter!" Special Issue Editor Sheramiah Arki defines "Black Lives Matter" verbiage as follow: *#BlackLivesMatter* (#BLM) with the hashtag to refer to the movement at large that started with the hashtag project in 2013; *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) without the hashtag to signify the charity organization and its affiliating chapters and resulting network[6]; and in quotation marks "Black Lives Matter" as the umbrella term or slogan (Howard University, n.d.; S. Mayer, personal communication, February 7, 2022).

[2] The 13 principles that make up the ideology of #BlackLivesMatter include: diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirmation, unapologetic Blackness, collective value, empathy, loving engagement, transgender affirmation, Black villages, Black families, Black women, and an intergenerational approach. Retrieved from https://www.dcareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter/13-guiding-principles

[3] Definitions of what was included in these four categorical themes are included in both the methods and results sections.

[4] Articles talking about the experiences of a singular person were not included unless they were explicitly linked to #BlackLivesMatter within the article.

[5] Exceptions were made when the articles compared media representations to real-life sociopolitical issues rather than simply analyzing what happened in the fictional media in question.

[6] For more information on the Black Lives Matter organization and its racial project initiatives, go to https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Black Student Union: High School Poets Continue the Conversation

Special Poetry Compilation by *ONYX* Club

Overview

Gonzaga College High School celebrated its 2020 Black History Month through month-long programming hosted by a Black Student Union, ONYX Club. Four student poets read their original work at the annual Black History Month Assembly at Gongaza College High School to introduce keynote speaker Dr. Eddie Moore. Dr. Moore then provided a thought-provoking talk on the long and ongoing fight for civil rights and justice, culminating with an invitation to participate in an action plan to continue the conversation and work toward a more inclusive community. In response to this invitation, Mr. Devon Leary, Gonzaga's Director of Diversity, encouraged the student poets to contribute their work to the journal.

Featured Poems:

"A Letter to White America" by Kevin Donalson, Class of 2021

"I am Sable … After Phillis Wheatley" by Drew Duff, Class of 2021

"Reluctant to Love" by Kadari Machen, Class of 2022

"Prayer for Change" by Richard Scott, Class of 2022

"2020" by Richard Scott, Class of 2022

The following five creative pieces are poetry authored by four student poets of Color in the Gonzaga Poets and Writers Club and Black Student Union, *ONYX*, at Gonzaga College High School. These creative pieces were published, in part, to show how #BlackLivesMatter includes our youth, but also to inspire other student task forces and diversity leaders in secondary schools to make a similar commitment to fostering the creative expression of young men of Color as they reflect upon the fight for social justice.

A Letter to White America
Kevin Donalson

Feel my pain.

Feel the pain of a nine-year-old,
Watching someone who eats the same snacks as you,
And plays the same sport as you,
And wears the same clothes as you,
Lay dead in a blood-stained hoodie because he looks just like me.

You say you love me, then criticize me for kneeling,
Blackmail me for fighting back,
And kill me for being peaceful.
Do you love me when it's convenient?
Am I a pawn in an eternal game? I can't win.
Used as the missing piece of the puzzle
When deafening proclamations of
"I'm not racist" hang in the air,
While you conceal the inability to accept me like a deathbed secret?

I'm tired of being scared.
We are tired of being scared.

The whispers of my dead unarmed brothers and sisters assault my ears,
Relaying maddening chills down my spine,
While visions of a dead son,
Drenched with lawless
Law induced blood,
Blanketing the cold, hard bed of pavement
Intrude upon my mother's thoughts,
And my father dances with the heinous idea of burying his only son.

But listen now, White America.
Listen with love.

My peoples four hundred years are over,
And it's time for me to leave the kitchen,
And sit at the table,
Where you will bask in amazement at my beauty.

My people have sung, and we are truly America.

Sincerely,

A thug.

I Am Sable … After Phillis Wheatley
Drew Duff

I am sable
like the beautiful midnight sky
flaunting the skin, I was once clowned for
admiring the melanin, I once doubted.

I am sable
just as my ancestors once were
before the lashes of oppression scarred them to the bone
before the tides of freedom carried them ashore.

I am sable
yet to be liberated
still facing despair because of the color of my skin
with the noose of bigotry squeezing tighter around my neck.

I am sable

Reluctant to Love
Kadari Machen

Who are we?
Are we thugs, gangsters, outlaws?
Or are we heroes ...
Always fighting for a country that doesn't love us back?

A country that has yet to face its history,
A country that is destined to repeat its mistakes ...
If nothing changes.

We are commonly created,
One country, one body, with many parts,
When one part is in pain, the whole body suffers.

We are needed more than ever,
In a nation split by race and hatred.

Hatred for the other side,
Believing that their opinions must be lies.
Hatred for the opposition,
Saying it must be wrong if it's not my opinion.

Hatred for opposing views,
Claiming I can't agree, I must refuse.
So quick to hate,
But so reluctant to love.

Reluctant to love the black on my skin.
Resistant to acknowledge the pain we've been through.
What if we were quicker to listen and slower to judge?
Maybe we could get a little closer to each other—and a lot better at love.

Prayer for Change
Richard Scott

I pray for healing in Ferguson
I pray for healing in Minneapolis
I pray for healing in New York
I pray for healing in Baltimore

I pray that we will continue to run for Ahmaud
I pray that we will blast our music for Jordan
I pray that we will continue to kneel with Kap
I pray that the police stop killing us

I pray that 911 is a beacon of safety, not death
I pray the next time my hands are raised; it's in a classroom
I pray that the voices of the unheard are amplified
I pray that the color of my skin won't get me killed

I pray that Martin's dream doesn't become a nightmare
I pray that Rosa's bravery isn't blinded by cowards
I pray that Maya's words are never erased
I pray for change

2020
Richard Scott

Channels quickly turn to CNN
As the numbers of each state increase
As red hopes for another four again
And blue hopes the antics cease

Each side holds its breath as the night advances
And their lifesaver or life-changer is chosen when they wake
And the whole country ponders red's slim chances
And days later, blue takes the cake

Eyebrows furrow in fury
And breaths are taken in relief
Red can't accept the verdict of the jury
As they watch the dethroning of their Commander-In-Chief

That night, doubt fills my head as I close my eyes
Yet, I feel relief as we prepare to dismiss our greatest threat
Even though the grass isn't always greener on the other side,
How much browner can it get?

This is the start of a future we have been trying to arrange
But I wonder, in these next four years, will we ever get the change?

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Advocating for Mental Health Equity: Reflections on the Multi-Layered Pandemic Experiences of Black College Students

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Abstract

The hydra of racism was ever-present in 2020. Historical inequities, which have long plagued major pillars of our society such as health, justice, and education, were exacerbated by COVID-19—which, when conjoined with the manifestations of institutionalized white supremacy and colonialism, served to disproportionately affect Black lives. However, there remains deeper consideration of the combined impact these intersecting, nationwide emergencies of COVID-19 and racial injustice have on Black college student mental health. This is particularly concerning given that college students are a vulnerable population for experiencing increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Black college students deserve to express an authentic sense of self in route to actualizing their success, and the intentional consideration of their mental health and well-being is vital to achieving this. Our reflection synthesizes the interrelation of these national topics to further contextualize the importance of valuing the psychological and emotional dimensions of Black college students' lived experiences as we aim towards broader progress regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. We discuss implications for institutional leadership, such as considerations for improving mental health service utilization and the use of interdisciplinary research avenues tying together tenets of education and mindfulness approaches.

Keywords: mental health, education, pandemic, racial injustice, anti-racism, HBCUs

Dr. Jay P. Jefferson is a data analyst for the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at Florida International University (FIU). Before this, he completed a postdoctoral position in STEM education at FIU with research focused on student success and experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as promoting the excellence of women and minorities within the STEM disciplines. Dr. Trina L. Fletcher is an Assistant Professor of Engineering and Computing Education and a Faculty Fellow for the Division of DEI at FIU. She specializes in asset-based DEI research and continuous process improvement within STEM, engineering, and computing education. Dr. Brittany N. Boyd is a data analyst in the Center for Predictive Analytics at Morgan State University. Her research includes using qualitative and quantitative methodology to examine the experiences of primary through post-secondary education students and conduct program evaluations, with a focus on the impact of intervention programs and other support systems on the advancement and retention of underrepresented students.

Writers such as Danielle Legros Georges (2020) have likened the racism in our country to a multi-headed hydra due to the ubiquitous nature of its presence on all our pillars of society, whether they be our healthcare, criminal justice, or educational systems. Historically, the serpent-like hydra is described as engaging in a broad offensive, attacking from multiple angles with various heads, giving it a formidable reach in the damage it creates. Additionally, this monster of Greek mythology has been used to describe how counterintuitive strategies to overcome one issue can inevitably serve to worsen the situation, much like Hercules had found out when chopping off one head, only to find out two more had taken its place. The spread of the novel 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19), and counterintuitive leadership decisions taken in response to this spread, evoked the imagery of the hydra via underscoring the insidious prevalence of racism in influencing healthcare access and risk factors for Black Americans—symptoms of the deeply rooted causal mechanisms of prejudice that have become embedded in as well as have structured society for centuries. However, despite the national discourse of health equity following COVID-19, less attention is given to the effect of these intersecting systemic issues on Black college students' mental health and well-being. This is particularly troubling as current trends in the mental health of Black college students remain largely unexplored despite so many of the nationwide emergencies that disproportionately affect Black families and communities. These include the continued acts of police brutality and civil rights violations against Black Americans, as well as the more recent inequities in vaccine distributions across the United States (Samuels, 2021).

Moreover, recent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts implemented at colleges and universities around the country have aimed to resolve several key issues within higher education. However, an unwavering commitment to how students can thrive on campus after their acceptance and enrollment is essential, as progressive efforts towards institutional reform remain mere platitudes and may become indicative of the counterintuitive strategies noted above that may multiply the many heads of the hydra of racism. To make this commitment sustainable, we must ensure we are taking an intentional investment in mental health services and the access thereof so that Black students have the resources they need to rise above and persist through a multi-layered national crisis.

To begin, a global pandemic is not the only major phenomenon that has influenced mental health. As a result, this year is not one in which the events that occurred (and their overlapping inter-relationships) can be easily unpacked, nor can the consequences of these events on the shared and lived experiences of all Black lives. For example, and as of this writing, we are approximately a year from the initial onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, yet it was not long before early findings dispelled the myth of coronavirus as the "the great equalizer" that posed an equal threat to anyone from every walk of life (Liu & Modir, 2020; Zakaria, 2020). In other words, the long-standing inequity stemming from structural racism in medicine (e.g., limited access to healthcare, disproportionate employment in at-risk jobs, greater vulnerability due to pre-existing conditions) is a concerning yet ultimately an unsurprising feature of the United States medical healthcare infrastructure. These are, in part, primary mechanisms that contributed largely to why coronavirus has disproportionately affected Black communities (Duque, 2020). However, these

racialized and systemic issues in healthcare unraveled against a backdrop of racial injustice that gripped national discourse and underscored the concerted impact of a viral pandemic hitting alongside a separate and ongoing social pandemic (Laurencin & Walker, 2020).

That is, within this same year, we have witnessed the continued trend of unjust murders of Black Americans, such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, by white law enforcement, which further galvanized #BlackLivesMatter globally and continues to impact the sociopolitical landscape of the country and beyond as the largest movement in United States history (Buchanan et al., 2020). Furthermore, advocates and allies attending protests against racial injustice and racist policy across the country have represented the voices of a younger generation of Americans (Barroso & Minkin, 2020) who are inspired by the original grassroots organizing efforts led by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opel Tometi in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer (Garza, 2014).[1] Since its inception, The Black Lives Matter Global Network has become a primary outlet and inspiration for college students to engage in sociopolitical advocacy (Hope et al., 2016) and empowered community leadership and mobilization on university campuses (White, 2016).

Additionally, these dual pandemics unfolded simultaneously to a historic United States election that marked an end of an administration that enabled divisiveness and aimed to casually normalize the individual, cultural, and structural racism that served to ultimately reinforce the health disparities observed for Black Americans following the spread of COVID-19 (Rutledge, 2020; Alltucker, 2021). At the intersection of these major events in modern American history is the importance of health equity, particularly within the domain of mental health and well-being for Black communities. Our personal reflection aims to join the growing number of voices that champion and support efforts to promote positive mental health in the Black community (Mushonga, 2020; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020), and we do so by discussing the ramifications of this topic within education.

Higher Education and the Black College Student Experience

We begin with the topic of one's identity and its expression within a given campus environment. This is because a complex relationship exists between how individuals of diverse identities interact with one another to either encourage or inhibit a welcoming culture and climate, particularly for those that are historically marginalized. The norms, practices, and beliefs of the individuals at each college and university are the very foundation that determines the warmth of the institution's unique campus environment. Ideally, every student would be able to express an authentic self within educational spaces and across their academic journey, unburdened by the legitimate fear that their existence alone is offensive to others and can lead to potentially life-threatening situations as a result. However, this is unfortunately not the case. The discriminatory practices and processes which exert their power over the personal agency and well-being of Black students occur early (i.e., during K-12) and persist through the entire spectrum of the educational system (Harvey, 1984; Patterson, 2019).

Moreover, many white students are afforded the privilege not to have society impose upon them the need to reflect so

intensely, nor consistently, on their racial identity (if at all). Over time, divergence in educational experiences not only leads to educational inequities but inequities in one's opportunity to embrace and express authenticity within their lived experiences. For example, Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019, p. 412) explored the dichotomy present in academic spaces between being "authentically me" or the "unchosen me," the latter a competing identity determined by the projections cast from and decided by others. The interpretation of the latter speaks to the damage done when an institution is entrenched within its own structural racism and how norms, beliefs, and practices held by those who attend the institutions can yield a relentless demand on Black students to conform to white standards, narratives, expectations, and experiences (Corces-Zimmerman, 2018; Patterson, 2019). These patterns are observed in various departments as well, with attention given to the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields whereby consistent experiences with overt and covert racism and microaggressions may lead to feelings of racial battle fatigue (McGee & Bentley, 2017).

Black students have the right to bring their full, unapologetic selves to the classroom just as their white counterparts have done for centuries, free of the fear of prejudice and consequence. The fact that this is not the case can be attributed to how educational systems represent yet another racialized feedback loop of American society (i.e., another head of the hydra of racism). This feedback loop is characterized by the initial conditions which founded the system (embedded in and thus representing the history of American racism) and its self-reinforcing effect on maintaining racialized outcomes that disproportionately affect the academic experiences of Black students, which contributes to further psychological distress (Harvey, 1984; Masko, 2014). Educators and administrators have a responsibility to improve tolerance and combat the racism that can infiltrate the climate of schools (Masko, 2014). If not addressed, Black students in openly oppressive educational environments are undoubtedly at risk of the deleterious effects on their well-being (Harvey, 1984; Masko, 2014). For example, opposition in response to renaming a study hall not to include reference to an American slaveowner sends a disheartening message to Black students about what values are being prioritized by others who also attend their institution (Patterson, 2019). Examples such as this highlight the importance of increased scrutiny of educational systems where complicit relationships with the prevailing power structures are more covert. The wave of condemnations of racial injustice and police brutality from universities and organizations came swiftly following the murder of George Floyd, but not all condemnations carry equal weight. For some, simply recapitulating how "violence is bad" and "diversity is good" was sufficient to serve as a sympathetic appeal. However, without intentional commitment to these statements, an institution could be viewed as more concerned with "reputation management" rather than any dedicated efforts toward racial justice (Gibson et al., 2020, p. 3). The intentionality behind these dedications and commitments within higher education, on- and off-campus, are necessary requirements if institutions are to stand with and support all Black lives. Furthermore, students, faculty, staff, and administrators need to hold each other accountable for these causes by asking each other, "What does this look like?" That is, what may it look like to stand with marginalized groups, reassess strategies, and highlight issues surrounding diversity?

These are critical reflections in helping to improve educational experiences for Black students and consequently the development of their positive well-being.

Considering the importance of culture, climate, and support systems on Black college student success before 2020, understanding and researching the impact of the dual pandemic on the mental health and well-being of this population is imperative. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) provide an excellent opportunity for access to this population. Additionally, HBCUs are the cornerstone for many Black communities and play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining the Black middle class in the United States (Stewart et al., 2008). When considering access to healthcare and advanced medical education of Black Americans, several undergraduate-focused HBCUs and graduate-level institutions, such as Morehouse School of Medicine and Howard University College of Medicine, have played a central role in cultivating positive perceptions of healthcare and conversations about mental health in the Black community. Most importantly, when considering the topic of this section, the level of racism, discrimination, and lack of support that exists on predominately white institutions (PWIs), for example, is greatly reduced, if not non-existent, on HBCU campuses (Williams & Palmer, 2019). These findings are attributed to HBCUs, traditionally and fundamentally, being educational environments that include greater student contact, communication, and assistance. These factors attribute to HBCU's historical success in producing a significant percentage of Black graduates, especially within certain academic areas such as STEM (Toldson, 2018). The high-touch student support and a sense of belonging displayed at HBCUs through faculty and peer mentoring, a myriad of supplemental programming (e.g., workshops, social clubs, student-focused organizations), and special events lead to a heightened sense of community for students, faculty, and staff (Brown et al., 2005; Gasman & Nguyen, 2016; Mfume, 2015). However, even with the increased support and inclusive environments, Black students' mental health and well-being on HBCU campuses have been impacted by the dual pandemic just as Black students on non-HBCUs campuses (Charles & Dobson, 2020; Galvin, 2020).

To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted HBCU campuses, our recent research within STEM education has served as a major impetus in how we have processed the connections between these combined social forces and their influence on mental health and well-being. As part of a National Science Foundation (NSF) RAPID grant, data collection is in its final stages. It includes survey responses investigating how COVID-19 has impacted HBCU STEM students, faculty, and staff's success and persistence referred to as HBCU stakeholders. With limited contact to students, funding, and resources, COVID-19 has introduced a new set of challenges and crises for HBCU stakeholders, especially decision-making processes for administrators and those majoring in or working closely to STEM academic areas, who have higher requirements linked to labs, hardware (i.e., laptops), software, and internet access. Preliminary findings suggest that the transition to virtual learning and remote work increased overall stress and anxiety levels for faculty and students. In fact, 59% of faculty (n = 73) and 86% of students (n = 170) reported that the change to learning outside of the classroom increased their levels of stress and anxiety in their personal lives. These data only provide a cursory glance of the totality of factors and

experiences potentially underlying these trends, so in the next section below, we aim to unpack the relationships we believe require further consideration.

Dual Pandemic: Impact of Mental Health for Black College Students

> The way in which Black bodies live in the United States is the direct result of colonialism's construction of policies and practices that create structural determinants of health, and by consequence, health inequities. (Barlow, 2018, p. 896)

As of August 31st, 2020, *CBS News* (2020) had reported that 164 Black men and women had been killed by law enforcement, with at least one Black man or woman killed each week. By early December 2020, nearly 48,000 Black Americans had died of COVID-19 with 116 deaths per 100,000 people, the highest rate among any racial/ethnic group (The Atlantic Monthly Group, n.d.). These are truly intersecting national issues (Jean, 2020) unequivocally tied together because racism is undoubtedly a determinant of mental health (Paradies et al., 2015). Furthermore, we should focus on how the multi-layered, complex relationship between these dual pandemics compounds the negative determinants of mental health for Black students and faculty on college campuses.

First, we will take a broader view of the events that have shaped 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of Color overall, and it has collided with the long-term and embedded manifestations of American racism towards the Black community. The policies and practices referenced by Barlow (2018) above further reinforce these inequities in health. These inequities were exacerbated when the Trump administration minimized the severity of the virus and did little to increase the availability of testing in communities of need (Rutledge, 2020). Further, Rutledge (2020) cited occasions when the Trump administration discounted the expertise of public health officials, which led to misinformation and confusion about the spread and prevention of the virus. The lack of testing and misinformation contributed to the disproportionate spread of COVID-19 among communities of Color, which experience vulnerability based on various intersecting factors, including financial constraints, housing discrimination, denser inner cities, food deserts, and overall environmental racism (Duque, 2020).

Furthermore, barriers to seeking healthcare include the affordability of required healthcare services, as well as stigma and the cultural insensitivity experienced in healthcare spaces (Waite & Nardi, 2020). The latter is tied to a long-standing mistrust of certain aspects of healthcare rooted in a "history of mistreatment, unethical experimentation, and criminal neglect towards Black Americans" (Egede & Walker, 2020, p. e77[3]). Moreover, trends in mental health symptoms demonstrate that Black Americans are disproportionately "vulnerable to negative mental health consequences during large-scale national crises" (Novacek et al., 2020, p. 449). This is consistent with Czeisler et al.'s (2020) recent findings in which 44% of Black respondents in their COVID-19 study reported experiencing at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom. Approximately 30% said that COVID-19 prompted symptoms of a trauma- and stressor-related disorder. Additionally, about 15% reported experiencing suicidal ideation in the 30 days before participating in this

study during the Summer of 2020 (Czeisler et al., 2020). Similarly, Fisher et al. (2020) found that the intersecting risk factors between COVID-19 and structural racism are significant and lead to negative mental health consequences for Black young adults, primarily through eliminating the protective factor of employment, which has historically served as a source of resilience within this population.

While we have emerging information on how COVID-19 and societal inequities have affected mental health outcomes for young adults, the implications of these findings on Black college students are largely unknown. This is particularly alarming, given that college students have been widely recognized as a group at elevated risk of suicide and depression. Before COVID-19, Black students faced the troubling experiences of minority status stress due to pervasive and systematic factors, and disproportionately more than other minority student groups (McClain et al., 2016). These experiences include discrimination, micro-aggressions, stereotype threat, as well as a diminished sense of belonging, and they all have major negative implications for students' mental health. Furthermore, Busby et al. (2019) reported that of the Black college students that were considered at elevated risk for suicide, approximately 66% were not receiving any form of mental health counseling or services. Suggested barriers that impaired access to receiving needed services included challenges recognizing ongoing problems, limited time, as well as fear and stigma (Busby et al., 2019). Moreover, we still do not know the extent to which mental health services have become even less accessible because of the rapid and unexpected transformation to higher education in response to COVID-19.

Mental health services utilization has been considered low among Black college students (Henderson, 2007). The underlying causes are tied to similar issues of mistrust and stigma that characterize overall health inequity. De-stigmatization via narrative shifts in recognizing personal challenges (i.e., not as admissions of weakness, but instead an important step towards finding personal growth, healing, and strength) and encouraging constructive conversation around these challenges to unpack their influence is vital. However, one such problem is that access to communication does not always lead to appropriate pathways to support, even if a student is aware and open to the available mental health services provided on their campus. This is because one of, if not the most important, factors in determining the success of counseling is the connection between therapist and client. Issues of retention are not isolated to education alone. When clients do not feel seen or heard with authentic recognition and understanding given to their lived experiences, drop-out from mental health services is understandably likely to follow. Prioritizing greater access to Black mental health professionals is a critical and intentional step towards addressing Black college student mental health. This can allow students to enter a vulnerable space with someone who may share similar experiences, thus providing the nuanced insight necessary to unpack and heal those experiences. Additionally, like the programmatic training endorsed for white faculty to aid them in demonstrating cultural awareness and consideration (Simmons & Lord, 2019), white healthcare professionals should receive training to mitigate the potential influences of bias and ignorance in support of their Black clients. This can serve as a possible avenue in matching students with therapists that can demonstrate cultural competencies due to their training and productive work with diverse student

populations.

Outside of one-on-one counseling practices are social support circles that help provide a safe and welcoming environment for students to explore and discuss the daily impact of racial injustice. The evidence-based Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECs) from The Community Healing Network is a fantastic example. Barlow (2018) details her experiences leading a retreat available to Black college students at a Maryland institution, wherein *Emotional Emancipation Circles* are described as "spaces in which Black people work together to overcome, heal from, and overturn the lies of white superiority and Black inferiority: the root causes of the devaluing of Black lives" (The Community Healing Network, as cited in Barlow, 2018, p. 901). The author further mentions that these support circles are "necessary spaces for Black liberation, mental health, and well-being" (p. 901). At this leadership retreat, organized and implemented by students, Barlow (2018) facilitated a social support space that incorporated learning modules designed to engage participants in areas of "African culture, history and movements, and imperatives and ethics;" as well as a healing space for students to share their personal narratives in a practice ultimately targeted at the "liberation of young Black minds by addressing their humanity" (pp. 900–901). In allowing students an opportunity to dismantle the lie of Black inferiority through the lens of their personal stories, EECs can facilitate the reversal of intergenerational trauma and restore an optimal sense of mental health and well-being (Barlow, 2018). Universities and colleges looking to demonstrate their commitment and solidarity with Black college students should work with experienced facilitators and Black (and trained ally) medical health care professionals to bring these opportunities for personal healing and social support to their campuses.

Improving mental health service utilization and Black mental health professional representation on campus, in addition to implementing best practices, such as EECs, are points outlined in this section that are particularly relevant for PWIs. Black students may experience increased levels of judgment, hostility, discrimination, and microaggressions at PWIs, potentially resulting from the prejudice and stereotypes about minorities commonly present in white space (Blosser, 2020). This may be compounded further for Black STEM students, as the respective STEM departments can operate as smaller-scale environments, which exacerbate atmospheres of exclusion. This is noteworthy for Black female STEM students, particularly in engineering, in which experiences with alienation (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018), racial stigmatization (Leath & Chavous, 2018), hypervisibility (Blosser, 2020), and stereotype threat (McKoy et al., 2020) are documented in the literature. All of which reflect barriers to experiencing positive well-being and authenticity on campus. Additionally, the prejudice and discrimination driving these classroom and campus experiences also contribute to the continued under-representation of Black women in engineering and STEM more broadly (Fletcher et al., 2021). The following section reflects the intersection of different frameworks and approaches to provide education researchers and leaders insight into championing mental health equity and academic success for Black college students amidst dual pandemics.

Moving Forward

Emerging tenets of education and mental health research align well with one another and may benefit from a formal union in future work exploring mental health among Black college students. For example, recent research has increasingly highlighted the importance of taking an asset-based approach to investigating inequities in STEM education for Black women, allowing their underrepresentation in these disciplines to persist (Fletcher et al., 2017; Morton, 2020; Ong et al., 2020). An asset-based approach shifts the narrative away from perceived deficits in an individual or group of students to fix their disadvantaged situations and instead places the onus of responsibility onto institutions in dismantling the barriers that stymie student success. Thus, this philosophy in framing research is crucial in challenging and further revealing biased systems. Similarly, Mushonga (2020) has recently espoused taking a strength-based approach to evaluating the mental health of Black college students, shifting the narrative towards the healthy and protective aspects of coping that allow one to flourish (i.e., exhibit positive mental health; Keyes, 2002).

Additionally, Mushonga and Henneberger (2020) built upon the strength-based approach in evaluating positive mental health among Black college students. The authors' findings revealed that protective factors such as aspects of racial identity, self-esteem, and spirituality contribute significantly to the degree to which students can flourish. This is in line with previous research demonstrating the positive and protective impact of racial (and gender identity) in allowing STEM students to persist and engage with their academic experiences (Morton & Parsons, 2018), as well as overcome identity pressures and discrimination via self-definition and self-valuing (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Similarly, Novacek et al. (2020) underscored the role that "Africultural coping tenets and spiritual and collective coping" have in promoting effective coping models (p. 450). This encouragement is borne out of the research conducted by Utsey et al. (2007), who demonstrated the role spirituality plays in improving quality of life outcomes for African Americans by mediating the effectiveness of culture-specific coping strategies in response to adversity. Taking together, reflecting on how racial identity and spirituality contribute to Black college students' positive well-being may help critically sharpen cultural competencies among campus counseling professionals.

Furthermore, Mushonga and Henneberger (2020) demonstrated that Black college students do not represent a monolith regarding well-being and that protective factors vary between traditional and nontraditional Black students. Identifying such protective factors provides a promising path towards improving the existing services provided and mapping mental health's negative and positive dimensions (Mushonga, 2020; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). These studies represent a powerful step towards incorporating a robust approach to mental health into research on education that may inspire readers. However, while the benefit of focusing on ones' strengths and fortitude in combating poor mental health and illness are known (Seligman, 2008), we want to caution balance in emphasizing positive qualities. Such as resilience and persistence among Black students, not dismiss the very biased and real structural and systemic issues within society that necessitate these coping traits. It is important not to evoke potential stereotypes, such as the "Strong Black Woman,"—which perpetuate narratives that may adversely affect well-being and self-

esteem (Carter & Rossi, 2020; Stanton et al., 2017; Watson & Hunter, 2016). A positive example of such balance can be found in the work of McGee and Bentley. They tactfully note the resilience of the Black STEM graduate students interviewed in their study that acknowledged the sheer perseverance in the face of their challenging circumstances. The authors respectfully highlighted this resilience not to ignore or deflect the systemic factors that: (a) imposed those challenges in these students' lives to begin with and (b) still require continued reform so that equity may be achieved for the students interviewed (2017).

Further Reflections

Within the United States and beyond, it is imperative that we continue to research, learn, accept, and intentionally address issues facing Black college students, especially when it comes to overall mental health and well-being. Jenée Johnson (2020), a leader at the forefront of the mindfulness movement, has stated that "you can't heal what you don't reveal." This is not only true within the scope and spaces of seeking self-actualization but also a sobering reflection on the continued need to root out racism and prejudice. This way, we can continue to identify and name the many heads of the hydra of racism, thus dismantling their combined insidious influences from the shadows of our institutions. These sentiments align with Cross' (2020) recent call to action within engineering education. The author eloquently synthesizes the principal effects of institutionalized white supremacy, which allows for the emergence of racism as the manifestation of the United States' founding initial conditions. Cross (2020) asserts that anti-racism is a solution to dismantling inherently racist processes. However, as Johnson suggests above, anti-racism can serve as a necessary step towards healing this country and considering the impacts on mental health that have disproportionate relevance within Black communities.

A stellar resource in dismantling racist power is Dr. Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 bestseller *How to Be an Antiracist*, which is an empowering read in developing one's commitment to, and identity as an anti-racist. At the heart of Kendi's work is an unpacking of a very simple feedback loop that flawlessly ties together explanations of how racist power operates at various levels of organization. Furthermore, this loop is characterized by how racist power is driven out of self-interest. Thus, requiring that racist policy be implemented at the societal level to maintain power dynamics within a constructed racialized hierarchy. However, this would require that racist ideas be crafted, refined, and marketed throughout history by individuals and among individuals to justify the institutionalized racist policies that keep racist powers in place (Kendi, 2019). This relationship between maintaining and sharing racist ideas and their link to the manifestation of racist policies and power structures is explored through Kendi's juxtaposition of personal stories from his lived experiences with historical explanations and origins of racist issues across a broad spectrum of societal institutions.

A perspective central to this work is the consistent encouragement by the author that the opposite processes may hold true as well. That is, anti-racism—as a collection of powerful anti-racist policies—can restructure society in a way that provides equity to all persons, including within the intersecting areas of criminal justice, health, and education. One relevant example is Kendi's (2019) discussion of standardized testing as a reflection of the effective and

long-standing racist policy that ultimately "degrades Black minds and legally excludes Black bodies" with consideration to how statistical instruments, such as test scores, are used to support "achievement gap" rhetoric and the racist belief some may hold that "disparities in academic achievement accurately reflect disparities in intelligence among racial groups" (p. 101). In this example, the author explores systemic inequity in education to pivot to a fully realized anti-racist reinterpretation of this racial issue. He does this by reorienting the readers to reflect on the "opportunity gaps" perpetuated by racist policies, such as systemic underfunding of predominately Black districts and the schools found therein (p. 103).

While Kendi (2019) exercises vulnerability in taking a critical approach to his self-examination and self-reflection, DiAngelo (2012) provides a thorough account of why white people may resist such vulnerability and accountability and continue to stay silent about racism. DiAngelo challenges these notions to compel readers to no longer remain complicit. This and other readings (see DiAngelo's 2018 book entitled *White Fragility*) may also prove most useful in taking a confident anti-racist position within society. These practices in self-reflection are necessary for whites and non-Black Persons of Color (POC), as co-conspirators, to provide constructive support for Black communities in combating racial injustice. The self-awareness component underscores the need for introspection and a deeper reflection of one's behavior. This is simply because condemning others for their prejudice while maintaining the denial of biased influences in one's actions, thoughts, and beliefs are not a fruitful avenue to pursue (Samuels, 2017; Music, 2020). In other words, we must reveal what requires healing not just at the higher levels of organization, such as universities, but within ourselves (Samuels, 2017). Such exploration of one's humanity—coupled with the rejection of one's potential personal biases and the denial that fuels them—can be a useful exercise in narrowing any empathy deficits and developing one's sense of anti-racist identity (Denevi & Pastan, 2006), as well as strive towards a more equitable society that honors and celebrates all Black lives.

Thus, the education of non-Black co-conspirators is a key component towards rooting out and rejecting institutionalized white supremacy (Jean, 2020). There is no room for neutrality in combating racial injustice. Like the characters in John Carpenter's 1988 cult classic, "They Live," we are faced with taking a clear position: to advocate for change through the dismantling of structural biases and their manifestations or collude with the hegemonic powers that seek to oppress those who resist it. In the film, an anonymous and malicious alien hegemony has directed the development and perpetuation of capitalist exploitation by manipulating consumer behavior and leveraging an already existing oppressive economic system. All the while, the citizens of this fictional society remain oblivious (or are intimately involved in the conspiracy). However, through an inexplicably mysterious pair of sunglasses, the protagonist gains full awareness of how society has been affected by, yet purposely perpetuates, the hidden and predatory practices of capitalist marketing.

Additionally, the identities of these alien infiltrators are only revealed through this special lens. If only a stylish pair of sunglasses could provide readers with a clear and unfiltered lens through which they may peel back the layers and see the totality

of how race, as a construct, has been used for centuries to consolidate power. Furthermore, readers would be able to see how in modern society, racism still represents a "powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas" (Kendi, 2019, p. 20). However, while the two main protagonists were armed with knowledge, awareness, and a cool pair of shades in dismantling the oppressive powers within the film, such insight gained from adopting an anti-racist position is not so easily achieved and requires a great deal of "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination" (p. 23). In doing so, one may see an entirely different reality from what they may be accustomed to, revealing previously hidden inequities that have always existed but maybe now approached more intentionally through a broad coalition of co-conspirators. While largely stemming from economic inequity and commercialization, this film analogy hopefully contextualizes part of what makes anti-racism a verb. That is, being anti-racist requires a critical act of self-awareness disavowing instantiations of racism, witnessed or otherwise, in one's life. In doing so, readers may collectively band together to destroy the hydra of racism, eliminating each head with freedom of the fear of replication.

Conclusion

Our society is a complex system, requiring truly interdisciplinary solutions within the scope of its challenges. This necessitates taking a dynamic approach to further unraveling what biases, with intended and unintended consequences, remain hidden and lurking within our major institutions and ourselves. To this end, it is recommended that we continue to combine the lessons of mindfulness, counseling practices, and many of the various branches of the psychological discipline concerned with mental health to unpack the deleterious impact of national inequity trends on student outcomes and well-being.

Specific focus should be given to Black students as they navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and grapple with the social justice issues that persist throughout the United States. While the landscape of Black student mental health remains largely unexplored, there is an urgent need to gain insight and provide support systems for students' mental health and well-being. As Black students continue to face uncomfortable situations due to their racial identity inside and outside the classroom, allies at all levels (e.g., non-Black school leaders, instructors) need to commit to equity and inclusion while combating racism. This piece intends to motivate and encourage prioritizing mental health and well-being as a principal component of increasing efforts dedicated to DEI in all higher education. Additionally, this aim is particularly relevant within the STEM disciplines. Leadership is committed to improving enrollment, retention, and persistence of Black students both within these fields and at their institutions. In doing so, strategic approaches to dynamically combating racism across a multiplicity of educational spaces may prove effective rather than unintentionally exacerbating issues of discrimination and bias by neglecting how national-level events shape the lived experiences and well-being of Black students on campus.

We also realize that to reach the student, we can start with their community (e.g., physical location, groups of people they identify with) and push for a change in the cultural climate. In communities and organizations that house, support, employ,

and educate Black people, equitable access to holistic mental health and intentional increased inclusion of well-being practices are needed, if not available. Also, we should ensure that existing programs and initiatives are adequately resourced and prioritized, when present. When considering higher education institutions, whether PWIs, HBCUs, or other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), there is an immense opportunity to showcase an institutional commitment to DEI. These institutions should focus on increasing Black college students' acceptance and well-being related to their persistence. Additionally, higher education institutions can serve as safe havens to ensure that their Black students know that they belong, can bring their authentic selves to the institutions, and be included. As some of the oldest standing bodies within communities, higher education institutions have an opportunity to expand their work through the communities they serve. Hopefully, then, we will see the change we wish to see in the world.

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Footnote

[1] For a history of the #BlackLivesMatter movement go to https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Fostering Inclusion for Black Faculty

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Abstract

In the midst of a global pandemic, people have been rallying across the world to protest the continual state-sanctioned violence against and the structural inequalities faced by Black people in the United States. In response to this, many non-Black academics within higher education have circulated reading lists and written statements at a dizzying rate. While reading lists are a good starting point, we encourage allyship in the form of praxis. This article offers concrete ways for faculty to engage in praxis to dismantle systems of oppression within higher education. We detail the unique challenges Black faculty experience within higher education and suggest specific ways non-Black faculty can support Black faculty at every stage of their career. Using data from interviews conducted with diverse faculty members, we suggest several action-oriented steps to address how organizational practices, policies, and culture in higher education may be altered to create more equitable and inclusive environments for Black faculty.

Keywords: praxis, higher education, race and work, intersectionality

Ember Skye Kanelee is a social activist and doctoral candidate in sociology who works collaboratively with others within and outside of higher education to examine how inequalities manifest within organizations at the micro and macro levels of analysis. Her work focuses on praxis-centered solutions driven by rigorous research and data collection. Joya Misra, PhD, is a professor in sociology and the School of Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her work focuses on mediating inequalities within institutions, such as universities, and at the societal level. Ethel L. Mickey, PhD, is a sociologist and postdoctoral research associate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with the UMass ADVANCE Program. Her research centers on analyses of power and oppression in the innovation ecosystem, contributing to understanding how and why to include women and BIPOC individuals in knowledge production.

In the midst of a global pandemic, people have been participating in rallies across the world in direct response (Buchanan et al., 2020) to the murders of Black people in the United States through state-sanctioned violence. Many non-Black academics, often collaborating with professional organizations and academic groups, have compiled and circulated materials about anti-Black violence at a dizzying rate (Johnson, 2020).

While creating reading lists and joining book groups are good starting points (Adam et al., 2020) and appear to be changing public perceptions of racism (Mumford, 2015), taking informed action is a critical next step if we aim for true change. According to Karl Marx, *praxis*, the practice of theory in action, is essential to creating change (Petrovic, 2006). How can we engage in praxis that dismantles systems of oppression within higher education? How can organizational practices, policies, and culture in higher education be altered towards equity and inclusion of Black faculty at every step of their career?

Adia Harvey Wingfield's concept of *systematic gendered racism* (2009) describes the overlap of gender and race, resulting in different outcomes for individuals. Within academia, systematic gendered racism results in using a white-dominant framework at work, which obscures the issues Black academics experience.[1] Navigating systematic gendered racism within academia is exhausting (Daut, 2019) for Black academics, often more so for Black women academics, who regularly engage in the hidden labor (Matthew, 2016) of mentoring undergraduate and graduate students from minority backgrounds. Black faculty face numerous obstacles (Perry, 2016) in their path to advancement. Although Black people make up more than 13% of the United States' population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), Black faculty comprise (DOE, 2019) approximately only 6% of all full-time faculty, which drops to 2% for Black women.

As researchers, we have conducted interviews with STEM faculty across race and gender groups about their career experiences, focusing on challenges and possible interventions. Our research team consisted of three women: one East Asian American researcher, one South Asian American researcher, and one white researcher. As non-Black researchers, we cannot know fully what Black faculty experience. In this action-oriented article aimed at dismantling privilege within higher education, we draw upon interviews with Black STEM faculty to center and share their experiences and identify strategies to support them as a form of our praxis.

Our research suggests that Black faculty members feel more invisible and devalued for their work than their peers. Black STEM women also struggle to find collaborators who treat them with respect. Black faculty describe needing to develop a solid foundation of trust with colleagues to ensure that their ideas and contributions will be valued and credited fairly in their research collaborations and departmental life.

Yet, it should not be Black faculty members' responsibility to develop that trust. Non-Black faculty can implement several action items—praxis—to create more inclusive environments. Some of these suggestions come directly from the Black faculty in our sample, other items reflect stories from Black faculty whose colleagues have created more inclusive spaces, and others come from our responses to the experiences we have heard. We aim to offer concrete actions beyond reading lists,

recognizing that the items below are just the first step on a steep staircase that we, as non-Black academics, must climb to address inequalities within our departments and organizations.

Treat your colleagues with respect and recognize them as whole individuals *always*, not just when anti-Black violence makes headlines. Your Black colleagues have rich lives both inside and outside of academia. Make space for your colleagues to talk about their experiences without making these conversations about yourself. Make time to take them out for coffee or lunch, allowing for one-on-one conversations that build personal connections and trust. Ask your Black colleagues about their research, teaching, and their broader lives.

With that said, if your Black colleagues are not enthusiastic about engaging with you, do not push the conversation—they do not owe you their friendship. Respect academic communities built by faculty of Color for faculty of Color, like writing groups or mutual mentoring groups (Ong et al., 2018). All relationships take time and effort; do not assume your relationship with Black faculty will flourish after one coffee break. Value your colleagues and their work. Pronounce their names correctly, respect personal boundaries around physical contact (not everyone welcomes hugs or handshakes), and never touch their hair—yes, this still happens (Williams & Gibney, 2014).

Racism and microaggressions are constant (McCoy, 2020), not only when anti-Black violence makes the news. Avoid using your time with colleagues of Color to process your own emotions, as this places an unnecessary burden on Black faculty to perform emotional labor. Bringing up news about violence against Black people with Black colleagues can be obtuse and potentially triggering. Expressing your surprise at something all too familiar for Black colleagues who have experienced racism their whole lives can be hurtful.

Take constructive feedback from Black colleagues seriously: apologize gracefully and commit to doing better. Non-Black academics must recognize their contributions to racism. Even those who seek to be allies sometimes get things wrong; it takes time to build trust. Effective allyship takes continual work, commitment, and introspection. Recognize mistakes without letting emotions get in the way and move forward thoughtfully to avoid repeating mistakes. If you are given feedback from a Black colleague that you have done something problematic, acknowledge it, thank them, and engage in self-reflection to avoid repeating your error. Calling in your behavior is an act of trust from the person doing the call-in.[2] Shutting down or acting defensively makes that person less likely to feel comfortable pointing out moments when you can do better. When non-Black people respond to concerns with anger, fear, and guilt (DiAngelo, 2018), it perpetuates white supremacy and makes it difficult to create meaningful change or relationships.

Hire Black faculty across levels and actively mentor them towards promotion. Be intentional in hiring junior and senior Black faculty to create a critical mass, such as through cluster hires, to help prevent tokenism and inequitable divisions of labor. Recognize the excellence of these colleagues and how their expertise might inform your work. At the same time, offer to read draft grant proposals, papers, book chapters, and op-eds and support their teaching, mentoring, and service work.

Provide Black colleagues with both formal and informal networking opportunities (Gasman & Nguyen, 2019). If you come across resources pertaining to your colleagues' research, pass the information along. If you have a contact in their subfield, make the introduction.

Read, engage with, and cite your Black colleagues. Read the work of Black colleagues and bring it into conversation with your work, citing them consistently to avoid appropriating their intellectual labor. Assess how faculty scholarship in non-generalist venues is evaluated in tenure and promotion reviews and recognize the intellectual rigor of so-called specialist or subfield journals. The *#CiteBlackWomen* campaign notes that "As Black women, we are often overlooked, sidelined, and undervalued. Although we are intellectually prolific, we are rarely the ones that make up the canon."[3] Engaging with the scholarship of Black colleagues enriches and deepens research traditions and widens the canon in important ways.

Collaborate equitably with colleagues while avoiding predatory collaboration. Consider possible connection points between your research and that of your Black colleagues. Do not pressure colleagues to collaborate but look for potential opportunities. When collaborating with Black colleagues, explicitly discuss and document the division of labor and authorship, recognizing the importance of crediting their role and insights. Develop inclusive and equitable collaborations that credit each person's contributions fairly (Misra et al., 2017).[4]

Refuse to participate in panels that are not diverse without overburdening Black faculty. Black faculty often find themselves overrepresented within service roles, which may be undervalued, while they are underrepresented in opportunities to discuss their research, which tend to be more highly valued. At both the departmental or campus level or the disciplinary level, explain to organizers that you only serve on panels that are diverse by race and gender (Tulshyan, 2019). If there are too few Black faculty in your department or on campus to serve on particular panels, suggest hiring more Black faculty in the area as a solution. In organizing panels, add a statement acknowledging your commitment to diversity.

Ensure that teaching in your department centers on folks of Color. Do not expect Black colleagues to cover diversity for the department. Encourage all faculty to diversify the curriculum (Sathy & Hogan, 2019), course offerings, and syllabi[5], ensuring that all students see themselves in the courses they take. Ensure that Black faculty have opportunities to teach courses they would like to teach, recognizing the impact on students of having faculty of Color offering required courses and not just electives. At the same time, recognize that Black faculty often face negative teaching evaluations (Smith & Hawkins, 2011) from students with anti-Black sentiments and develop more holistic forms of evaluating teaching, such as peer review models.[6]

Make invisible service work visible. Provide faculty with transparent information[7] about advising and mentoring responsibilities, departmental and university committee roles, and other service tasks, including who is serving in what roles. Have explicit discussions (Jager et al., 2019) about how much time different commitments require and how service is valued in your department. Rebalance service to ensure Black faculty, especially Black women (Turner, 2002), do not have a higher service

load, taking into account informal service performed by Black faculty (Jacobs et al., 2002), including mentoring students of Color, inclusion efforts, and community-engaged work. Recognize and value this work by including it in faculty reviews.

Value community-engaged work. When faculty members carry out community-engaged work, they recognize the value and importance of that work (Johnson, 2020). Black faculty may be more likely to work with broader communities and should not have the time spent on that work count against them in personnel processes. Publicize and reward the faculty's work translating their research and engaging with wider communities (McCall et al., 2016).

Ensure all voices are heard in departmental decision-making. Create intentional spaces in meetings for sharing perspectives and ideas without fear of retaliation, such as closed votes or anonymous feedback polls through smartphone apps. Polling and open-ended feedback surveys allow for transparent communication without identifying specific people (Eyre, 2020). Practice active listening and affirm ideas while properly crediting them. Ask Black faculty for their input on items that are not directly related to equity and diversity.

Nominate a colleague of Color for an award or leadership position that is not directly related to diversity. There are many different awards and leadership opportunities at campus and disciplinary levels. Regularly nominate Black faculty members for awards and opportunities related to their research, teaching, or interests (Collins, 2011). If Black faculty members are interested in leadership opportunities related to diversity—support them. But do not assume that these are the only kinds of opportunities for Black faculty.

Learn the institutionalized history of racism on your campus. Commit to learning the role of race in the history of your institution. Is your university, campus buildings, or campus awards named after slave owners or colonizers? Bring this history into your classroom, department meetings, or conversations with colleagues, and act to unmake. Advocate by acknowledging this history as part of developing a more inclusive campus environment.

Take reflexivity training and bystander training with a social justice lens. Ask that your department and organization provide training on these topics.[8] Ensure the people conducting the training recognize anti-Black racism and are appropriately compensated for their expertise. Provide training often and consistently, encouraging white colleagues to attend.

Take responsibility for creating an inclusive environment. Research existing resources on your campus and within your professional associations regarding support for faculty of Color. Compile a list and visibly post resources on your department and association websites and bulletin boards in common areas. In meetings, track how much time and space white people take up. Hold inclusive Zoom meetings by selecting a moderator at every meeting to call on people raising their virtual hand (Hogan & Sathy, 2020). Point out when white colleagues interrupt or dominate conversations.

Addressing inequality in academia is a never-ending process involving consistent,

ongoing action. It is critical to note: Black academics are not a monolith with one singular experience. Take intersectionality into consideration when thinking through action items to address how systemic racism intersects with gender, sexuality, and nationality to affect Black women, Black queer, and Black migrant academics in different ways; recognizing, for example, that a queer Black foreign-born woman may have different experiences than a Black U.S.-born straight cis man, even within the same field or department.

This list is by no means exhaustive but represents a starting point towards further inclusive action. Investigating and unlearning how racism seeps into our institutions and consciousnesses is uncomfortable but necessary. We must all learn to internalize critique gracefully and without defensiveness.

Black faculty have long developed ways to cope with marginalization within academia. It is past time for non-Black faculty members to work to create more inclusive environments. It can be risky to call out anti-Black racism in our workplaces and organizations, but all non-Black faculty need to step up, take those risks, and actively be a part of the solution through praxis. Only active effort can create an environment in which Black faculty can thrive.

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Footnotes

[1] The authors intentionally capitalize the "Black" throughout this article, while keeping "white" lowercase. They acknowledge the contested, cross-disciplinary dialogue regarding this choice, and yet argue that whiteness does not represent a shared identity of culture and history in the same way as Blackness. They claim this sentiment is echoed and supported by many mainstream media outlets including Columbia Journalism Review, the Associated Press, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and The New York Times.

[2] For more information on Call In vs Call Out culture, see the following resource from Dr. Loretta Ross: https://www.speakoutnow.org/content/speakout-ed-talks-calling-calling-out-culture-compassionate-accountability-these-times

[3] https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/

[4] See the following resource for examples of research collaboration best practices: https://www.umass.edu/advance/sites/default/files/inline-files/UMass%20ADVANCE%20Research%20Collaboration%20Best%20Practices.pdf

[5] https://researchguides.library.tufts.edu/c.php?g=954214&p=7079725

[6] http://cet.usc.edu/resources/instructor-course-evaluation/

[7] https://facultyworkloadandrewardsproject.umd.edu/index.html

[8] https://advance.fiu.edu/programs/bystander-leadership/index.html

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Invisible Girl

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University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Abstract

The student-author wrote this narrative to reflect a personal literacy assignment in their freshman English course at college. The project asked the students to describe how a certain event has impacted their lives or changed them somehow. They were also tasked to tie in reading, writing, and language themes and explain their role in the story. The author chose to narrate how their high school years, spent in a predominantly white institution (PWI), affected their perception of self, language, and processing of events occurring around them. Trying to exist and learn as a Black student in a white-dominated space profoundly impacted their life.

Keywords: education, PWI, language, identity, privilege, code-switching, appropriation

The author of this piece is a second-year Black student at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. They have a strong interest in the study of society, history, and human dynamics, particularly with a focus on race, gender, and sexuality. They enjoy using creative and narrative writing styles to express their own identity and perspectives of social issues.

If you asked me now to recount my adjustment to boarding school in the eighth grade, I wouldn't be able to tell you much. It's hazy, but I do remember that I called those first couple weeks—"The Dark Days." Five years later, I believe while it was an easy physical transition, it was more challenging mentally. I caught on quickly with laundry and waking up at 6:45 a.m. every day, but I had more trouble finding community. This small girls' school in the Baltimore suburbs was an alien world compared to what I was used to. Growing up in Prince George's County, a relatively ethnically diverse area in Maryland, I was surrounded by people who looked, talked, and acted like me. I was accustomed to laughing with friends as we played soccer or basketball, joking around with family during cook-outs, and playing Pokémon with my siblings. When I arrived at the school, I had never heard of their popular sports before: lacrosse and field hockey. Laughter was harder to come by, and the students were more obsessed with *Vampire Diaries*, Coachella, and Vineyard Vines, which I knew nothing about.

It was a blistering August day when my parents dropped me off at what would be my home for the next five years. Backpack laden with hastily packed clothes, I took in sky blue balloons tied to light poles, indigo signs directing families to "Check-in this way!", brilliant smiles, and name-tags scribbled with Sharpies of every color, while Orientation Leaders scurried around carrying luggage or directing tours. Between that and the sheer size of the campus, I felt dizzy. Nevertheless, when I drifted off to sleep that first night, I was left thinking, *Wow, everyone is so nice here! I can't wait to meet them all.* I had been too overwhelmed to notice how I didn't see any other Black girls that day. All I knew was that I was pretty excited for this next phase in my life.

While I wasn't too far away, school and home gradually came to feel like two completely separate worlds. I shifted from visiting my family every two weeks and calling my mom every night, to instead diving into classwork and creating a new social life at school. Whenever I hung up the phone with my mother, I subconsciously shifted to being my "school self." I dropped my double negatives along with eliminating slang words like "dope," "ain't," and "bruh." Even if it were singular words or phrases, I was terrified of slipping up and having someone think I was stupid or be confused about what I was saying. "Dat," "nuthin," "errbody," and "gon" elongated into "that," "nothing," "everybody," and "going." Even "nah" became "no." This code-switching impacted my behavior in addition to self-perception—one version of myself lived at home, while the other lived at and attended school every day. As the edges of my identity smoothed out, that latter variant became a 2D version of myself.

While I shrank further down, it seemed that many of those around me only took up more and more space. During overnight fall trips, many white girls would enter the buses with messy buns locked in place with Grab & Gos, but exit with three, four, five, or more braids on their heads. Apparently, they would ask some of the Black girls if we could do braids for them. Then there was standing in the cafeteria while an international friend asked me, "Why do all the Black girls sit together?" with a hint of animosity in her voice. I was shocked: *As an international student, how couldn't she see that we sought the same community as she had in a white-dominated school?* It was infuriating at first, especially to observe others freely steal the very elements of my culture that I could be punished for and that

I suppressed. Over time, however, I expected the appropriated braids that came with those trips. As well as the hostile glances tossed our way whenever I ate with my Black friends in the cafeteria, especially when we became one decibel "too loud."

It faded to dim irritation, and bit by bit, I became used to the loneliness too. However, as I grappled with my racial identity within a predominantly white institution (PWI), the racial dynamics within the country were intensifying. I entered school not long after the Freddie Gray riots. By my sophomore year, it seemed like increasing cases of police brutality made headlines. At one point, I was so on edge that news of another shooting triggered an anxiety attack. Despite the head of diversity hosting emergency meetings, there was never any follow-up. Nothing was done on the administrative level to address current events or hold a conversation about racism. So, another piece of me faded away due to a lack of that support. I've only recently fully realized the mental effects of my time at high school. Still, the psychological effects strained me at the time. When my college counselor prohibited me from doing a course overload because I "couldn't handle it," I sat beside her quietly. Many of my non-Black friends were allowed to balance seven or eight classes. *Why couldn't I?* I was left feeling a bit more invisible, a bit more incapable.

Even my mom took notice. On drives back to school from weekend visits, she would peer at me in the rearview mirror: "Are you sure you're okay?" or "You're not the same as when I dropped you off all that time ago." Then, I thought: *Yes, I've just grown up a bit.* But despite that, I could feel myself transitioning from "home me" to "school me" as familiar landmarks whizzed by. It was almost like it became harder to breathe as I got closer to the school. Whenever I would ask to visit, my mom would say, "Yes, maybe you need some time home," with a knowing look.

Something else I noticed was that my peers co-opted the same language I tried to erase. As "internet slang" (what I knew as *African American Vernacular English*, or AAVE) became more mainstream, words like "sis," "period," and "snapped" flew around the hallways like little hummingbirds, snatching at my hair. Often these words would become bent out of shape, misused to form sentences that didn't make sense to my ears. These words and language were central to my identity, but I heard them be used like seasoning in day-to-day conversations for humor or entertainment. If I used them normally, people thought I was trying to be funny. What was trendy to everyone else has a deep-rooted history of survival in Black culture and colonization. The irony of watching white people appropriate this language after some 500 years was not lost on me. Language is alive and must be understood fully, not used blindly. Language gives you a voice to advocate, support, protest, speak up, assert your ideas and opinions on how you want to see the world transformed. I hated that I had lost my own.

By the time I graduated, the country and my school were in the middle of reckoning with decades of racial relations. In the midst of the June 2020 protests, a very good friend told me: "It scares me to see how your whole attitude changed once this event happened. It shows through your texts, and I've never seen this in you in the past five years." It felt like a slap in the face. *Had I silenced myself so much that I had never spoken out against police brutality or racial discrimination?* That couldn't be right; I was enraged every time this made headlines, even when my head couldn't reach the

countertop as I listened to news of Trayvon Martin's murder. *Did I just keep these feelings to myself? Have I bottled them up inside with my culture's language?* I vowed never to be as silent as I must have been during those five years ever again. I would fully embrace who I was and reconnect with my lost language. I would not tolerate being treated as invisible or having imperative issues within my community be pushed aside.

I began eighth grade shortly after the murder of Freddie Gray and graduated during that of George Floyd. Instead of Baltimore being on fire, it was Minneapolis. As I write this, it is Kenosha and Rochester. Living full-time at a PWI against the backdrop of police brutality affected the formation of my critical years as I made decisions about my future. This internal conflict fundamentally affected how I perceived myself and presented myself to the world. I felt pressured to hide my language and identity to be seen as equal in the classroom, so I dialed myself down, zipped myself up. But in times of necessity, I found it challenging to find my voice. Five years and many perspectives later, I'm trying hard not to make the same mistakes I had in the past. Even so, I question: *Should I even be put in a situation where I felt I had to do that to survive? Should anyone?* Now, I proudly own my voice and am committed to pursuing what I truly believe in: a truly inclusive, equitable world. I am also authentically me and embody the values dear to my heart. My voice and language are tied deeply to my identity—I promise myself never to stamp them out again.

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

We Cannot Address What We Do Not Acknowledge: An Autoethnography in 2020

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Abstract

In a collaborative autoethnographic process, we three Black female engineering professors explore how our status as junior faculty women of Color and the social-institutional factors in U.S. higher education affected our experiences in the year 2020. Based on experiences as graduate students and later as faculty and leaders, we trace the development of empowering and transforming navigational strategies we utilized to survive and thrive at our respective public U.S. institutions—within the context of social unrest that exploded during the year 2020. We discuss how the cultivation of our *collective* yet unique perspective and strength can be a valuable resource for women of Color to advance engineering education research agendas and leverage their vital position in the academy. African American female engineering faculty are a rare find among the pool of engineering faculty nationally. To move the field of engineering forward, we must unleash and unshackle the untapped power of the Black female engineering professors.

Keywords: Black women, intersectionality, multiple identities, collaborative autoethnography, engineering faculty

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In 2020, the world experienced life-changing events that greatly impacted the viability of communities of Color. Not only were we facing a global pandemic that disproportionately affected communities of Color, but we also faced a second pandemic of racism. During a non-mandated lockdown, we were exposed to the abuse and public murder of Black people that led to civil unrest in the United States but sparked a movement felt throughout the world. An election year described as the most critical election of our time became a choice between continuing down the current path versus charting a new course.

While in the pandemic, the civil unrest unfolded, sparked by several instances that were as equally public as they were reprehensible and led to a months-long movement of public outcry. In April, a video was released showing the killing of Ahmed Aubrey from February 23rd, 2020. The video had previously been suppressed, and authorities in the community had not charged the perpetrators with any crime. On May 8th, thousands of people throughout the country protested by running or walking 2.23 miles to honor the date on which Mr. Aubrey was killed. On May 26th, the first protest in response to the killing of George Floyd began. Mr. Floyd was killed a day earlier when Minneapolis police responded to a call about a counterfeit $20 bill being passed at a convenience store. He died after a short encounter with police after an officer placed a knee on the back of Mr. Floyd's neck, a practice that has been outlawed in several states, restricting his breathing for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Two days later, a march to bring justice for Breonna Taylor happened in Louisville, KY. On March 13th, Ms. Taylor was shot and killed after local police executed a "no-knock warrant" on her residence, although reports indicate that the suspect in question did not live at the residence and was already in police custody. She was shot and killed by police when her boyfriend shot at what he thought were individuals breaking into their home, and they returned fire.

These examples are a non-comprehensive list of events that happened in our country, but through it all, academics were expected to work and produce outcomes in an environment that had already been transformed due to COVID-19. In this paper, we explore the civil unrest's impact has had on three Black women academics in engineering who are already working to keep pace with their white[1] male counterparts performing at higher levels during the pandemic (Staniscuaski et al., 2020). To better understand the impact of major events on this population—Black female engineering faculty—this work aims to conduct an autoethnographic study to gain insight into their experiences through the authors' self-reflections. Through a list of guided questions linked to the major events, the shared experiences will be connected back to these events' cultural and social understandings both within and outside of higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Womanist Theory

Womanism, or womanist theory, is a social theoretical perspective grounded in the experiences and history of Women of Color (WOC), with a historical focus on Black women (Rousseau, 2013). Gender must be understood as it intersects with multiple identities regarding race, power, and privilege (Jones, 2009). Work by prominent scholar Patricia Hill Collins emphasized the importance of womanist theory in scholarship and often referred to the theory as *Black feminist thought*. She

asserted Black feminist thought to illustrate the importance of knowledge in empowering oppressed people and portrayed WOC as self-defined, self-reliant individuals that constantly confront oppression based on race, gender, and class (Collins, 1989). This paper explores our experiences as academic Black women in a year of civil unrest. The womanist theory is an important framework in understanding our experiences because it provides a theoretical framing to explain the lived experience of being a double minority within the sociocultural dynamics of power and privilege in every aspect of our lives or higher education (Cross, 2020).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, first coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1990, describes how race, class, gender, and other characteristics overlap or intersect (Crenshaw, 1990). Originally, intersectionality was developed to highlight discrimination in the law, and it describes how discrimination manifests differently when people exist within multiple marginalized identities. Collins described intersectionality as an analytical tool to understand the human experience within the six core themes of social inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 30). Other social science scholars encourage using intersectionality as a guiding framework and perspective in educational research (Davis et al., 2015). Intersectionality further evolved when Jones and colleagues explicitly connected the intersectional approach to research exploring multiple identities, which is discussed in more detail in the next section (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Multiple Identities of Women of Color

Multiple identities is a conceptual framework that provides a way to examine how individuals' demographics (e.g., race, class, gender, ethnicity, and age) and cultural, social, and personal identities intersect. This approach emphasizes that a person's experience is not simply an additive sum of individual identities (e.g., African American + female + engineering); instead, all identity dimensions impact an experience simultaneously in more complex ways (Cross, 2020). The initial conceptual *model of multiple dimensions of identity* (MMDI) was developed to address multiple traditionally oppressed identity dimensions such as race and gender (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Multiple identities was reconceptualized after researchers studied lesbian students (Abes et al., 2007), Black students (Stewart, 2008, 2009), and Black female students in STEM (Tate & Linn, 2005; McGee & Bentley, 2017) as well as Black female academics (Marbley et al., 2011). Key in this research is that Black women in academia are balancing multiple identities and are continually experiencing intersections of their various identities (e.g., racial, gender, professional) while simultaneously growing in those identities while also working to carve out a space in academia where they can be seen, welcomed and more importantly, valued.

Method

In this collaborative autoethnography, we leverage intersectionality and multiple identities to interrogate our experiences as Women of Color in the U.S. Academy of education. We consider how social injustice in 2020 in the United States informs and complicates the negotiation of our multiple identities as work for advancement within a United States research-intensive predominantly white teaching university. The following research question guides the study: How do three Black women

engineering faculty describe their identity and experiences as impacted by the social unrest of 2020?

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology for research and writing that seeks to describe (Costello et al., 2016) and systematically analyze personal experience to connect this autobiographical story to a wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Ellis et al., 2011). In other words, autoethnographers use personal experience as a lens to collect, analyze, and interpret their autobiographical data to illuminate the connection between themselves and cultural experience. As a methodology, autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* (i.e., researchers collect autobiographical data about their personal experiences and sociocultural surroundings) and *ethnography* (i.e., data are analyzed and interpreted through an ethnographic process to gain a sociocultural understanding of personal experiences). The autoethnographic method includes documenting or writing about epiphanies, or critical "aha" moments or events perceived to have transformed their lives or thinking (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis et al. (2011) also distinguish autoethnography from an autobiography by its methodological goal—whether or not it illuminates how epiphanies emerge from being part of a culture and possesses a particular identity associated with a culture. Other authors suggest that autoethnography has the goal of social change and was primarily developed by the personal autobiographical narrative to explore women's multiple identities and Black studies (Jones, 2009; Drechsler Sharp et al., 2012). Also, critical race scholarship suggests that personal narratives allow researchers to draw on resistance theories by illustrating how people are not simply acted upon by an oppressive system but also reveals how people negotiate and struggle with racist structures and make sense of their interactions (Solórzano et al., 2001).

Additionally, autoethnography typically highlights a single isolated voice that negates the unique synergy and coherence created by the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon (Chang et al., 2014). As a result, we selected collaborative autoethnography as our method of inquiry. Interestingly, there is minimal scholarship about collective autoethnographic works in general (Hernandez et al., 2015) or in the engineering education community (see Sochacka et al., 2016). Therefore, our paper contributes to specifically normalizing this methodology in STEM fields and engineering.

Collaborative Autoethnography

In this project, we employed *collaborative autoethnography* (CAE) that "combines the benefits of autoethnography (addressing the connectivity between self and society), multi-participant studies (involving voices of multiple participant-researchers), and *collaborative work* (drawing upon interactive and corroborative energy of researchers)" (Chang et al., 2014, p. 376). According to Chang et al. (2012), the autobiographical data in a CAE is collected by two or more researchers related to a shared social phenomenon and analyzed to interpret the meanings of their personal experiences within their sociocultural contexts. The group exploration of CAE requires that each researcher-participant contribute to the collective interpretation of the epiphanies with her voice concurrently within the iterative process of connecting each self-examination (Hernandez et al.,

2015; Chang et al., 2014).

Participants

The participants of the study (n = 3) were the author-researchers: Kelly Cross (K. C.), Whitney Gaskins (W. G.), and Brooke Colely (B. C.), each of whom identified as pre-tenure Black female engineering faculty. The participants worked in small ($N \approx$ 1,000), medium ($N \approx$ 6,000), and large ($N \approx$ 20,000) engineering schools of research-intensive universities in various regions of the United States. The participants were between ages 35–45 years and had a family with at least one child. Each participant was the only Black female faculty member in their respective departments spanning 3–6 years with myriad experiences teaching engineering and/or engineering education courses, conducting qualitative research, and was near or approaching their mid-tenure review. One participant, W. G., had administrative experience and all members of the group had experience working on diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM. Each participant has won a national award to recognize their academic excellence or leadership and have successfully secured funding to support their research.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted three phases of autobiographical data collection and analysis. First, we negotiated the wording and focus of the questions in which we would individually respond. Sample questions included: "What experiences or significant moments of social injustice in 2020 impacted you?" and "How has my experience as a Black female faculty member in STEM shaped who I am, or my multiple identities gave the social injustice in 2020?" Next, we individually wrote recollections about critical incidents relevant to the prompts based on the guiding research questions and then met to discuss the coding to ensure consistency across coding approaches. In the second phase, we each individually coded our responses and identified themes of epiphanies and significant events that impacted us. In the third phase, we discussed the individual coding results and negotiated a shared understanding of common themes across all three participants. After creating a list of the commonalities in our autobiographical data, we prioritized the list to determine which themes we could address in this paper with the necessary detail and integrity.

All data collection and analysis were documented in shared word documents or online platforms, including Google Docs. We met multiple times to discuss the process of concurrently collecting individual data.

Trustworthiness

The methodological integrity and quality in any research are important, and multiple authors have offered criteria to judge the process and product of an autoethnographic study (Anderson, 2006). In this study, we also chose to address the standards of autoethnographic research proposed by Chang (2016, p. 448). In this study, we compare the standard to our approach to ensure quality (see Appendix).

Findings

The autoethnography analysis revealed four salient themes shared across the Black female engineering faculty: the prominence of their Black identity in society and STEM, the constant struggle it is to be at the intersection of Blackness and gender, the adaptations in their behaviors in context to the current moment, and the impacts on and

costs to their mental health and wellness. The findings of this paper will be presented in this section embedded with a discussion situated in the relevant literature.

Black "Trumps" All: We are Black Before Anything Else

The three women participants described themselves very differently when asked to define their multiple identities at this unique period of social injustice highlighted. One woman, K. C., described herself as a "Black female Queer Engineering Professor who uses every platform I have access to, for advocating for the underserved and marginalized in engineering." Another participant, W. G., described herself as "a double-minority, Black and female." The last participant described herself as "a Black Lesbian mother who is also an Assistant Professor of Engineering at a large public university in the southwest United States." Despite the nuanced differences they may have existed in how the women described their identities, conveyed through their stories was a theme that no matter what, they were still a Black female, and their safety was in constant compromise.

It is a "dangerous lifestyle" to live Black in America from which there is no perceived degree of exemption. The women of this study shared a petrifying awareness that the most salient and modulating characteristic of their identity was that of their race. Being Black came with an automatic attachment to perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences that impacted their navigation of not just society but their academic environments. The impious attacks on Black and Brown lives forced the world to acknowledge the racism that had persisted far too long, just lacking the evidence necessary for it not to be ignored. While innocent lives have been lost at the hands of minimized "bad apples," the constant condemnation of Black people being guilty by virtue of the color of their skin remains unaddressed. As expressed by the participants, such is paralleled in the academic environment where the experiences of Black students, staff, and faculty are often met with "silence and inaction." W. G. exacted that, "Even though I feel as if I have overcome some pretty large and significant challenges, I still possess a great deal of fear for navigating my space as a Black person." There is common powerlessness that invalidates all the effort, preparation, and investing these women executed to solidify the future for themselves and their families that is demonstrated as K. C. reflected:

> I recognize that my education, my family status, nor my tax bracket matters when a white cop feels he is empowered to diminish or snuff out my life to preserve his white dominance and the devaluing of Black lives.

There is a bold recognition of the power and privilege a white cop has over a Black life that is not mitigated by any of the intentional aspects one can control to increase the likeliness of a certain lifestyle, education, and socioeconomic status. All participants shared a similar account. W. G. described her position clearly in expressing, "I recognize that I exist in a place of privilege. Being a professor and administrator affords me opportunities to succeed. Unfortunately, neither of these titles outweighs my positionality as a Black woman."

Participant B. C. shared an almost identical quote:

> We carry ourselves and the students that look like us as protection to "weather"

> an environment that wasn't designed for us. Being a faculty member with the duality of being both a Black faculty in engineering and a Black citizen in society, the current injustices inhibit me from navigating one environment without connection to the other. I am Black *at all times,* and I navigate all environments with people recognizing that identity.

The fact that such explicit words are congruent perceptions across three extremely different profiles of Black women in academia speaks to the awareness of the constant negotiation that it is to be Black in white spaces. Being a faculty woman of Color creates a strong reliance on the ecological systems involved. At the intersection of race and gender, women constantly navigate their own identities in several microcosms embedded into larger systems. As an example, each woman in this study has a family. Their families live in neighborhoods where they interact with a given culture. They then come to work and submerge themselves into the culture of their academic department. This culture is embedded into a larger university structure which may or may not align with a greater culture of that region or state. The state's culture then falls onto a national map where it is superimposed with the larger culture of society, and in the current, at a time where the sociopolitical tensions are alarmingly high.

Additionally, the murders and injustices against Black women enhanced the fear and resonation with the women faculty. Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor were mentioned across these women's accounts, each explicitly stating the heightened awareness that as women, they were in as much imminent danger as Black men as K. C. explained, "after Sandra Bland, I realized it is not just Black men, even women of [C]olor are subject to a death sentence because of their brown skin." B. C. captured this as well in the statement:

> With the death of Sandra Bland, it became apparent that police could also use force and abuse power towards women. For me, that epiphany came with knowing that I could be Sandra Bland. When I was in my car, driving alone, I was just another Black woman. There are no credentials in injustice. Degrees do not matter. Publications won't impress the police. Everyone Black was at risk no matter what you had done in your life to position yourself for an honorable life of integrity, commitment, hard work, and improving the lives of others.

Intersectionality posits that race and gender cannot be disentangled and forces consideration of how experiences at this intersection further exacerbate marginalization. To be Black and female simultaneously while navigating all these environments, each with their own subcultures is a constant struggle. McGee and Bentley (2017) stated that the continuous struggle leads to fatigue, stopping Black women from pursuing faculty or STEM careers.

A Constant Battle: We are Always Fighting

"This summer, I felt that all my identities were under attack," K. C. reflected. In the summer of 2020, while the world mourned the horrid murder of George Floyd, K. C. experienced a similar encounter much closer to home in the loss of her 22-year-old nephew. The devastation of these lives taken prematurely left individuals paralyzed with anger, fear, and many other

emotions, but also with a profound reminder of how easily Black life could be stripped and without regard. The juxtaposition of the lives being taken by the day, with 164 Black lives taken by police in the first eight months of 2020 (CBS News, 2020), to the experiences described by these women in navigating their STEM environments is a stark reality of the covert attack that is always facing Black people. K. C. went on to describe how the current state of society left her heartbroken and had a devastating impact on her family. She explained being "sad for her son" and the conversation she dreaded having to have with him:

> My heart was broken as I reflected on his life, and it took me several sleepless nights to reconcile his transition, and his death has had a devastating impact on my biological family. Next, when my 17-year-old son, who is starting college next year, talked to me about the murder of George Floyd and how he had the app to track the COVID cases. I felt sad for my son. I did my best to muster the strength to comfort him and make sense of the heinous crime and awful public health emergency. But I was angry because *we had* to have the talk. The talk every Black family must have to protect our brown-skinned sons. I want him prepared to handle a world that hates him and his beautiful brown skin. Additionally, I remind him that their (American and white supremacist) history does not have to define him.

K. C., at one end of the continuum with a college-bound son, held similar and yet different vantages from W. G., whose son is a toddler, and B. C., whose son is a fourth grader. All these women, Black, female, faculty in STEM, and most important to the context of their greatest fight and fear, mothers of Black boys. W. G. described watching the murder of George Floyd to be "life-altering," taking our communities from "a moment to a movement." The graphic visual was forever embedded in her mind and introduced a "fight" for a place, as she relayed, "it truly made me question my humanity and my place in the world." W. G. also described the constant fear she now holds for two of the most important people in her life:

> Even as important, it made me more fearful for my husband and my son, who must navigate the world as a Black man and future Black man, respectively. My husband could have been George Floyd one day; my son Waylen could be George Floyd. It is a thought that often keeps me up at night and makes me cringe when my husband and son leave the house. It has created a fear that impacts how I live.

An enormous amount of grief and sadness plaguing Black people creates an impossible disaggregation of experiences; people are Black *at all times* and in all environments. It is difficult to witness a murder of a Black man on television one evening and then come into a majority white workspace the next day and attempt to navigate as "okay." This perpetuates the hypervisibility and invisibility these women feel that is a major part of their constant struggle. It is challenging to be seen and yet, not understood. Main et al. (2020) reported that over 90% of the engineering departments lack a Latina or Black woman faculty member. Such underrepresentation adds to the inability for women of Color faculty to show up as their full selves due to the lack of understanding for the unique compounding marginalizing experiences associated with being Black. W. G. spoke to this representation as both a privilege and price:

> Regardless of my accomplishments, I feel judged based on my skin color more than any other metric. As the only Black female faculty member and only Black in administration, I feel the weight of representing and supporting all of the Black staff and students in the college.

A difficult task accompanied these moments of injustice that B. C. regarded, "as a mother of Black boys, I lost an ability to disaggregate my professional from my personal world." The social injustices taking place, though not new to the participants, pushed them to question their work, their place, and the institutional commitments to bringing "real change." And as K. C. made clear, "the social injustice exposed in 2020 makes me feel justified for every word of disdain I write or speak against white supremacy and the associated violence against Brown and Black people in this country and around the world." Undoubtedly, constantly having to be armored for the war on Black—often only acknowledged and experienced by Black people—is toxic and can have a deleterious effect on mental and overall health. Awareness of the cumulative costs of enduring these injustices was pervasive across the participants' accounts.

Paying the Tax: Costs to Mental Health and Wellness

There is a great deal of pressure that comes with being the only Black faculty or administrator in a given academic environment to which many, from lack of experience as people that benefit from inclusion privilege, are oblivious. Throughout the experiences shared by the women was a constant thread of stress, anxiety, fear, obligation, invisibility, and isolation that would harm anyone enduring such a load. W. G. described this weight in her statement, "I know that if I fall, I am not only letting myself down but all those who rely upon me within the college." This sentiment demonstrated a perceived universal cost for individual error. There is no room to "fall" because falling means a loss for everyone "relying" upon the individual. Such pressures further add to the hypervisibility women of color faculty commonly experience in STEM.

There was also the thought of operating with constant fear in all environments with perhaps only variation in the context or consequence. W. G. reflected on her roles and how as a Black woman, there was a horrifying recognition that with each lost life as displayed in the media, it could just as easily have been her:

> The murder of Breonna Taylor was also shocking. While it was not captured for the world to see, as a Black woman, I could truly see myself in Breonna Taylor's shoes. Knowing that a woman sleeping in her bed could have her life cut short based on biased policies is extremely triggering, and it is difficult not to see myself in her shoes. While other experiences make me fear for my husband and son, the Breonna Taylor case makes me fear for my own humanity. It also makes me worry about the students that I support in my roles as a faculty member and the Inclusive Excellence and Community Engagement Leader in my college.

Fear and worry underlined the experiences that left the women in a state of exhaustion. K. C. discussed how she and her spouse experienced harassment in public for wearing masks and being vocal in asking others to wear masks. These constant and compounding feelings created exhaustion and anxiety that easily influenced their

ability to fulfill all their roles. As expanded by K. C.:

> I feel exhausted from the hyper-anxiety in public spaces since experiencing harassment. I am tired of feeling exhausted and being on high alert, but harassment and violence against Black and Brown people have become commonplace over the last few years. Certain groups have been emboldened to express their bigotry in physically aggressive ways. Therefore, I will continue to protect my family as I see fit.

In addition to the prioritization of personal family to preserve mental health and wellness, the faculty all conveyed a sense of obligation to "protect" their academic family in the students present in their programs. B. C. shared, "I know the importance of checking in with students to ascertain the stress and anxiety they are carrying as a result of the injustices that are pervasive in society but ignored in academic environments." There was a common commitment to mentor self-compassion to support emotionally developing Black faculty "to understand the need to play by their own rules, rather than stay subjected to criteria and rules that were not established for our success, but our failure." The women found ways to modify their behaviors to minimize the effects of these experiences on their health and well-being while also aiming to optimize the preservation of their families (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Coping for Survival: Adaptive Behavioral Shifts

In context to the enduring injustices of 2020, performance and productivity were not prioritized by the women participants. In the given moment, meaning-making occurred to process the experiences and influence a healthy plan for navigating through this difficult period. The focus on the many simultaneous fights that these Black women endured as mothers and professionals yielded several epiphanies. These epiphanies ranged from refocusing the issue framing to intentional actions to be both protective and proactive regarding law enforcement.

As a means of coping, the women faculty made several behavioral shifts. Some of these shifts involved lifestyle modifications, such as establishing new safety practices for the family member not to go out alone or after dark. K. C. recalled her family's new practice:

> [N]o single member of my family leaves the house alone, and we avoid leaving the house after dark. If we do have to leave after dark, sometimes I take my firearm with us. Additionally, I added security cameras to monitor our home, and I got my family additional firearm training in case they must defend our home.

Other shifts focused on elevating the community and accountability of the institution and surrounding academic environments and spaces. W. G. explained a hope that "academia as an environment valuing a higher level of critical thinking" would contain a greater number of colleagues valuing inclusion. Each of these women articulated intentional efforts to "motivate," "educate," "lead," and "develop" initiatives to increase awareness, knowledge, action, and accountability for fostering anti-racist environments. This would span "presenting concepts to encourage innovation within the college around the areas of equity and inclusion" to recognizing the importance of "speaking authentically as a Black woman" to make their college better

for all stakeholders. Their plans were fueled by words such as "discomfort," "real change," "push," and "unapologetic," which all convey the sense of responsibility, urgency, obligation, and commitment that impacted these women's navigation of their academic experiences. There was a shared intention to build scholarship and disseminate information to colleagues and the larger academic community.

> As a faculty member, I have less tolerance for sheltered white students challenging my credentials or uninformed colleagues asking me racist questions due to their lack of knowledge. However, I will continue to battle ignorance and systemic inequity deniers with scholarship and professional development workshops.

Often the women catalyzed these efforts because of their criticality, even though they utilized their own individual resources. As K. C. remembered, "I renewed my commitment to developing training to support colleagues struggling with these issues with little or no support or resources."

The participants had heightened productivity in the publishing of editorials, op-eds, and workshops to promote awareness of this information in a way that could shift the greater culture to be more inclusive and responsive, specifically in the current moment, which was something that felt missing as represented in their stories:

> I have been more intentional in elevating my voice in majority environments. I use my voice to help enable others to understand how Black people experience words, actions, and behaviors. I fight to change the system by exposing the injustices in academia through research and mentorship with students to empower them to be agitators instead of settlers. I cannot care more about any of the expectations of me than I do the critical aspects of my life. Life, more than anything, has become clear, its meaning, its significance, its value.

The injustices also highlighted a need for more intentionality in the curriculum about cultural responsiveness and the need to encourage introspection of using power and privilege for good. It became clear that institutions could no longer be complicit in their silence but first had to start with acknowledging racism and its impacts on the experiences of Black faculty, staff, and students. As B. C. stated, "We cannot address what we do not acknowledge," and the enduring injustices against Black and Brown people must be accounted for in creating inclusive academic environments, particularly in STEM and other environments where people from racial and ethnic groups are so dismally underrepresented.

Discussion

Implications for Engineering

Race demonstrated to be the most salient factor of identity impacting the experiences of Black women engineering faculty during the social unrest of 2020. The implications of this work are important and far-reaching for institutions, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, policymakers, and the greater engineering community. A manifestation of the results was that Black women reconciled complex power dynamics in the context of systematic racism and the repercussions of being Black in both their personal and professional environments. As an example, despite facing their own challenges, these women still felt obligated to support others in public and private

spaces. The Black women in this study, while in a constant struggle of their own, were always pouring out and into others via scholarship, mentorship, nurture, despite little equally and oppositely pouring into them. This was largely due to a lack of awareness and familiarity with their experience.

As hypervisibility and invisibility are concurrent and interrelated phenomena (Settles et al., 2019) experienced by the Black women in this study, critical effort to understand their unique experiences is warranted. The onus is on institutions of higher education to better understand the experiences of Black women faculty in engineering. The lived experiences of students of Color have started to be investigated in engineering. However, less known are the experiences of Black engineering faculty, a group that makes up less than 2% of all engineering faculty, and specifically, Black women engineering faculty (ASEE, 2020). As a connection between diverse representation of faculty and student recruitment and broadening participation has been established (Main et al., 2020), it is critical to be intentional in understanding the experiences of faculty. The women of the study lacked spaces and support in their professional environments where they felt confident to show up as their full selves. As faculty play such a critical role in mentoring and supporting students, higher education institutions must be intentional in identifying ways to support Black women faculty to be best positioned for the execution of their roles and responsibilities. Specifically, prioritizing spaces that acknowledge the impacts of navigating engineering at the intersections of race and gender offer multifaceted mentorship, and promote mental health maintenance are particularly important for Black engineering women faculty.

Another implication of the work is the urgency in acknowledgment across roles and levels of those in academic engineering environments of how race impacts systems, policies, power dynamics, and behaviors. The Black women faculty described a sense of obligation to educate the masses of the majority who have benefitted from an inclusion privilege while also supporting the students with similar experiences of marginalization. The women developed workshops and generated scholarship to inform an academic culture that is more inclusive and explicitly more aware of how racial injustice is perpetuated in academic environments with tools, skills, and strategies to promote real change. The women were often developing these materials on their own time and dime, which shifts a significant amount of creating a solution for the marginalized. Higher education institutions should allocate expertise and resources to effectively educate institutional personnel while developing accountability metrics to promote action.

Conclusion

This study exploring data collected from three Black female engineering faculty members during a period of social unrest in 2020 revealed a complex story of intersecting identities for Black women in engineering. The major findings of the study suggest:

1. The events of 2020 heightened each woman's awareness of their racial identity with race taking precedence over both their gender and credentials as academics.
2. Each woman adjusted their navigation of the world anchored in a genuine sense of fear, which was not limited to world events and

becoming the next hashtag but also workspaces unshielded from mental and physical trauma, and anxiety.

3. While there is some anger and animosity within the workspace, each woman felt responsible for bringing change, even when it was not their primary job responsibility.

The study amplified the resilience of Black women and Black women engineering faculty uniquely. Even through their pain and grief, they carry the weight of being productive in their careers and personal lives, oftentimes, in environments that are ignorant to, if not unwelcoming of, their experiences. The women unanimously recognized the deeper implications for Black people, and Black women, in particular, for constantly carrying this load and sense of responsibility. These stories yield insight into the urgent need for institutional change. Institutions must acknowledge the additional labor and better support Black women to protect their mental health while also creating space to allow for fulfilling careers. With this paper, we hope to model that honestly communicating about vulnerability is NOT the absence of strength and integrity.

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Footnote

[1] As evidenced by our previous scholarship, we have intentionally lowercased "white" to champion that white or whiteness is not a proper noun in the sense of ethnic origin.

Table 1

Autoethnographic Research Standards

Criteria	Evidence
Authentic and trustworthy data Does autoethnography use authentic and trustworthy data?	Our authentic data is trustworthy because we followed the data collection process described by autoethnographic experts and documented each step of the reproducible process.
Accountable research process Does the autoethnography follow a reliable research process and show the process clearly?	Every step of our data collection and analysis process is communicated in the methods section and is consistent with qualitative research method standards.
Ethnics towards others and self Does the autoethnography follow ethical steps to protect the rights of self and others presented and implicated in the autoethnography?	Our process was ethical as we discussed each step of the process and supported each other during the difficult discussion about challenges we face individually and collectively in our Black female engineering faculty culture. Also, we negotiated the themes and content addressed in the paper.
Sociocultural analysis and interpretation Does the autoethnography analyze and interpret the sociocultural meaning of the author's personal experiences?	For each theme, we discuss our narratives within the sociocultural context of being Black female engineering faculty and provide our interpretation of the meaning of our experience.
Scholarly contribution Does the autoethnography attempt to make a scholarly contribution with its conclusion and engagement of the existing literature?	We clearly state our scholarly contributions with this work, and when relevant, the existing literature is compared to our emergent themes.

Note. The variables of criteria were adapted from the five evaluative questions in "Autoethnography in Health Research: Growing Pains?" by H. Chang, 2016, *Qualitative Health Research, 26*, 443–451 (doi:10.1177/1049732315627432) to serve as the standard for comparison and measure of this study's trustworthiness and methodological integrity.

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

The Year of Return: Daughter of Africa

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Texas Woman's University

Abstract

The *Year of Return* (2019) marks 400 years since the first ship left the West Coast of Africa with stolen people and forcibly brought them to Jamestown, Virginia, and enslaved them. Many Black and African Americans returned home to Mother Africa that year to experience cultural tourism. I was fortunate to be amongst them. My autoethnographic, detailed sensory experience is the story of my first trip to a local outdoor market in Africa. This was my first trip to the continent of Africa, and it was absolutely life-changing for me. Many of my feelings of displacement translate to America, especially during the 2020 election year.

Keywords: African American, identity, culture, ethnicity

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Medase is Twi, a variant of Akan, a widely spoken language in Ghana for "thank you." These words form in my mouth like the fun of blowing a bubble. They are sweet and light to my tongue. The summer sun is high. It beams down on my back, but my head is held too high to notice. Sweat streams from the nape of my neck down my back as I strut through the market with confidence, avoiding murky puddles and broken stones. My feet move to an invisible rhythm as I keep up with the fast pace of the flow of people. *I'm home.* Vibrant colors catch my eye at every turn. Fabrics and bags hang from makeshift stalls with vendors' wide-tooth smiles, motioning for me to take a closer look. A playful smile spreads to the corners of my mouth as I walk by, mouthing, *Medase!* I turn sharply to the left, and my nose starts to tingle. The aroma of red peppers and piles of various spices piled like sandcastles entice my tastebuds. The flavors are thick in the air.

Oscar, my Ghanaian tour guide's small, round head, tilts to the right, signaling to me that we are about to make another sharp turn. The market is far too busy to speak. As far as my four eyes can see, there is a sea of beautiful, impeccably dressed Black people of all ages. *I belong here.* The heat from my body causes my glasses to fog up at the bottom of the rose gold frames. My feet continue to follow the rhythm of the drum in my heart.

A gorgeous woman in a two-piece dress comes inches away from my face with a huge, round, chestnut-colored basket on her head. Her posture stays perfect as she exchanges cedi with a happy customer. Oscar bends his back like the matrix to avoid being slapped by whatever is in her basket. It has an enormous translucent tail. My feet instinctively hop on the sidewalk, allowing me a closer look into her basket. *This is my place.* It is filled with giant, body-pillow-sized white fish. *Shit,* I laugh to myself, thanking my feet for keeping up with the rhythm. I hop down off the sidewalk and continue on the broken path preparing to make a right ready for the next sensory adventure that awaits.

OH, GOD. HELP ME. The rhythm is gone. My feet are doing an awkward shuffle as my eyes try to avoid contact with everything to my immediate everywhere. *I've lost my sense of direction.* Raw, bloody meat hangs from ceilings and spills out of baskets on the ground with hooves, claws, and scales. Nausea comes over me like a wave from the smell of exposed flesh. A violent lurch immerses from my stomach. My feet continue to move slower in fear of stepping on anything that once lived but is now showcased in the hot sun, uncovered, and surrounded by flies. *I've lost my rhythm, fuck.* I double over quickly as my stomach tries to purge everything that is inside of me. *It's empty. I haven't eaten.* My eyes close briefly while my dripping arms stay as humanly close as possible to my body to avoid touching the meats. The air is thick with the scent of fresh blood. *I can't feel the rhythm.* Everything I'm experiencing is painfully foreign.

My lips slightly part to allow air in and out as we quickly make another sharp right out to the market's main street. Shame follows my every step as I keep my chin down to keep anyone from noticing how much of a misfit I am. A mother sits on the sidewalk with a purple umbrella shading a sleeping child as a hungry one hangs from her round left breast. Her eyes show no signs of being an outsider like me.

We cross the busy street, brushing past bumpers of bright red and cobalt blue cars.

My eyes stay glued to the road to avoid any eye contact with people arriving to shop at *their* usual market. The white van with our driver, Prince, is parked in an easily accessible spot. Oscar politely opens the door for us to enter. Prince looks at us through the rear-view mirror. My hands wrap around the back of the seats as I pull myself into the middle row. I sit quietly by the window, staring down at my wringing hands, wishing that the guilt would squeeze out of them and onto the floor. I imagine a starry jumble of red, white, and blue seeping from my pores. I'm American, and I *hate* it.

I am a complete fraud. How could I be in the Motherland and not be able to stomach the market? What kind of daughter am I? African ***American,*** my brain taunts me with this answer as I try to push down feeling like an unwanted stepchild of a mother I've waited my entire life to meet. *This is unfair. I should know Twi fluently. That market should be* my *market.* My eyes close, and I remember the market from which I am a successor.

My ancestors were sold at the slave market. They worked on the Stroud Plantation in Calvert, Texas. Calvert is 57 miles from Waco, Texas, where my grandparents settled and started their family. Many of my relatives still reside in Calvert and Waco, Texas, to this day. *The country.* Carolyn Lewis, my paternal grandmother, had deep scars on her hands from where she picked cotton as a young girl. In the god-forsaken south, cotton is the popular décor trend. Thanks to two friendly buzzards that claimed Waco as their roadkill, better known as the Gaines, cotton can be found mocking me on wreaths and displayed proudly in vases at every store with home decor. *Fuck fixer-upper.*

Air fills my lungs as I breathe it in through my nose and out through my mouth. I remind myself that *I am here in Ghana. I made it home to Mama Africa. It is still* my *Motherland. I am* ***not*** *a forgotten daughter, maybe displaced but not unknown.*

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference

Blackness and Decay: Black Health Matters, Intersectionality and Gaps in Oral Health, and Tobacco-Related Disparities Research

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Abstract

Black Health Matters is an emerging movement that emphasizes inequalities in health outcomes faced by Black individuals and communities by addressing the layers of discrimination and how this impacts health. This movement is a Black health social justice movement connecting with law, policy, research, and practice. Black populations are often at the forefront of health disparity conversations, as they often suffer the most outstanding health inequities, despite educational attainment and socioeconomic status (SES). The purpose of this study is to explore the Black Health Matters movement theoretically through the lens of intersectionality and oral health and tobacco use because health inequities in Black health are multidimensional and go beyond just race. Health disparity studies usually focus on race or ethnicity, SES, age, and gender differences. Yet, most do not analyze where these categories intersect and how this might affect health outcomes and intervention effectiveness. Black populations are often forgotten (oral health) or specially targeted (tobacco), perpetuating health inequities. It is necessary to acknowledge the existence of intersecting identities and social categories as a step towards understanding and addressing health inequities in a broader context instead of the traditional method of placing individuals and populations in a best-fit box.

Keywords: Black health, oral health, tobacco use, intersectionality, Black Health Matters

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> We must pay attention to gender, but it is difficult to pay attention to gender all by itself. …It emerges differently in women's lives because it hooks onto other markers such as race, class, sexual orientation, and age.
>
> —Sari Knopp Biklen, *School Work: Gender and the Cultural Construction of Teaching*

Black individuals and populations often suffer the most outstanding health inequities in the United States (Negbenebor & Garza, 2018; Office of Minority Health, 2005), despite educational attainment and high social-economic status (SES) (Kuzawa & Gravlee, 2016). Black folx have historically been marginalized in society and many institutions, including the health care system (Bailey et al., 2017; Hardeman et al., 2016; Lillie-Blanton et al., 2000). *Black Health Matters* is a call to action (or movement) to improve health recently derived from the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013 (Crossley, 2016). Originally Black Health Matters was created specifically to address the racial injustice of police brutality and the impact on Black health (Negbenebor & Garza, 2018). Since 2013, Black Health Matters has evolved to include the impact of police brutality on health and the impacts of discrimination, racism, sexism, and classism (Crossley, 2016; McCuskey, 2018).

This initiative has sparked the interest of scholars who study discrimination law, Black feminist movements, Black health, and Black identity, to name a few. Galarneau, a scholar of law and Black feminist movements at Harvard, powerfully evoked Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words to evoke the pressing nature of Black Health Matters: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane" (2018, p. 1). Political activists and Black social justice researchers are also beginning to use this call to action or term of Black Health Matters to promote health equity and human rights for all Black individuals and communities (Crossley, 2016; McCuskey, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the Black Health Matters movement theoretically through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), as inequities in Black health are multidimensional and go beyond just race. I argue that Black Health Matters does not explicitly use an intersectional approach similar to other social movements, and this topic warrants further research. This paper triangulates Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, Dr. Patricia Hill Collins' work on Black feminist thought, and Dr. Lisa Bowleg's scholarship on the intersectionality framework applied to social and behavioral research (i.e., psychology and public health) to argue that an intersectional and more holistic approach is needed in Black health research. The rationale for selecting these scholars is that they are Black women studying intersectionality, and their work is foundational for the study of intersectionality. For instance, when delving deeper into race and gender, recent research has found that mother and child mortality is the highest among Black women (Aizer & Currie, 2014), eliciting a growing urgency to focus on Black mothers. In this paper, I further demonstrate the utility of the intersectional framework in applying it to an understudied aspect of Black health: oral health and tobacco use in Black communities.

Intersectionality Framework

> Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together

> and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.
>
> —Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw

The underpinnings of intersectionality have been discussed for over a century, dating back to Sojourner Truth's famous speech in 1851, where she challenged sexism, patriarchy, and the white feminists use of generic womens' narratives to collectively represent all women and co-opting the stories of Black women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989). This remains an important critique of feminist theory—the sum representation of all women when Black women have vastly different experiences based on their intersecting identities (i.e., sex/gender, race/ethnicity, SES) (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Until 1989, this phenomenon lacked the terminology.

In 1989 Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw developed this framework as a critique of feminist theory and anti-racist politics civil rights communities not acknowledging Black women or those in the unprotected margins by continuing to use a single-issue framework for discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). She described intersectionality as a way of seeing how social problems like racism and sexism overlap, therefore creating multiple levels of social injustice. She illustrates this concept by comparing one's diverse identities with traffic in an intersection (Crenshaw, 1989). She argues that if the frames researchers use do not allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, those in the unprotected margins will continue to be left behind and isolated from our movements and interventions (Crenshaw, 1989).

In Crenshaw's influential article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-racist Politic" (1989), she describes several court cases where Black women are left in the margins because their claims of injustice are not one-sided or put another way, they could not claim double discrimination based on race and sex. This neglect to acknowledge Black women is due to using single-issue frameworks, where an act against women of Color can be either racism or sexism but not both. This rhetoric perpetuates the socially constructed narrative that discrimination against white women is the standard for sex discrimination, while discrimination against Black men is the standard for race discrimination, further marginalizing Black women.

In her 1989 article, Crenshaw primarily focused on race and sex when discussing intersectionality and Black women's experiences. Despite briefly addressing other intersecting identities (i.e., age, sexual orientation, able-bodiness) using the *ceiling analogy*—where those facing the most disadvantages are on the bottom and those with the least are at the top—one critique of this article is the limited inclusion of other intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Since this time, Crenshaw and several other scholars have taken intersectionality further by expanding on the framework and building on this idea of how our intersecting identities impact our outcomes, from experiences in the workforce and higher institutions, down to our health outcomes through the life course (Cho et al., 2013).

As a social activist, Crenshaw's earlier scholarly work focused on intersectionality and addressing injustice. More recently, Dr. Crenshaw actively advocates for the

SayHerName Campaign (2015), which recognizes Black women of all ages (from 7-year-olds to 94-year-olds) who are victims of police violence and anti-Black violence. This intersectional social movement is important. It acknowledges how very few people know the names of Black women killed by police violence, yet many are familiar with the names of Black men (Brown et al., 2017; Williams, 2016). Similar to what Crenshaw describes in her influential article, there are critiques of many anti-racist movements, as Black women are seemingly forgotten. This critique extends to the #BlackLivesMatters movement, as some Black feminists say focuses primarily on police brutality against Black men but not women (McMurtry-Chubb, 2015). Even with some limitations, these recent social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and Black Health Matters are a step closer to spreading awareness that preventable health inequities are social injustices beyond race and sex. The unjust differences in health outcomes are multidimensional, and they involve social, political, environmental, economic, and behavioral factors that are skin deep, not simply surface level (the characteristics you can see).

Dr. Patricia Hill Collins is another noteworthy scholar whose work addresses Black feminism and intersectionality. Like Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Collins' work challenges the traditional framing of issues and delves deeper into intersectionality (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989). Initially, Collins' work focused on expanding the standpoint theory created by feminist theorist Dr. Sandra Harding, further developed by Sociologist Dr. Dorothy E. Smith (Collins, 1986; Harding, 2004). This concept later became central in the intersectionality framework (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Collins, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). *Standpoint theory* is a method for analyzing inter-subjective discourses and refers to how one's perspectives are shaped by social and political experiences (D. E. Smith, 1974). This analytical approach was foundational for Collin's groundbreaking article, "Learning from the Outsider Within" (1986). This article discusses her standpoint by reflecting on race, gender, and social class status through her journey across and within different institutions (Collins, 1986). She, like Smith, challenged major assumptions in sociology and other fields, acknowledging the role of power in dominant social constructs (Collins, 1986, 1998a; D. E. Smith, 1974). Collins has consistently provided counter narratives to inaccurate framing issues within her discipline, for example the framing of "the Black family" (Collins, 1998b).

In 1990 Collins published her award-winning book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Using an intersectional analysis, Collins shows how oppression operates in various spheres (i.e., political, economic, and ideological) rather than a hierarchical formula (Collins, 2002). The text describes how power (perceived and exerted) and social class may offer protection or resources against oppression (i.e., sexism, racism, ageism). However, middle and upper-class status does not remove an individual from the implications of political, economic, and ideological inequities (Collins, 2002). This same message aligns with preventable, unjust health inequities, specifically among Black women, where regardless of social class and educational attainment, health outcomes are poorer than non-Hispanic white women and Hispanic women (Collins, 2002, 2004). High social class and even being in positions of presumed power do not eliminate social norms, stereotypes, stigma, discrimination,

and other oppressive behaviors like sexism and racism. Collins discusses how intersectional support is needed … [and] it is up to all genders, races, and cultures to realize social justice and Black feminist thought is about social justice (Collins, 2002).

Lastly, Dr. Lisa Bowleg is a professor of applied social psychology who has contributed to applying intersectionality discourse to social and behavioral research, specifically connecting intersectionality to public health. In Lisa Bowleg's article "The Problem with the Phrase Women and Minorites: Intersectionality—An Important Theoretical Framework for Public Health," she critiques the terms "women" and "minorities" used in public health discourse, policy, and research. Her rationale for this critique is that the term implies "mutual exclusivity of these populations," not taking into account that these two categories, women and minorities, intersect in the lives of women of Color (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267). She writes that even the word "minority" is multi definitional, not just referencing race and ethnicity (Bowleg, 2012). Bowleg illustrates that there are clear limitations even in formal government documents due to how minority characteristics are framed. For example, she highlights how the *HHS Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* uses the word "or" when listing minority categories like "race or ethnicity" and "sexual orientation or gender" (Bowleg, 2008, 2012), which implies individuals fit into just one group. The purpose of this important document was to report on minority characteristics that are historically used to exclude individuals or groups and linked to discrimination, which in turn influence health status. The rhetoric of the *HHS Action Plan*, like anti-discrimination law, is problematic and further exemplifies the notion that only a single issue of discrimination or single-characteristic can exist or be claimed (Bowleg, 2012).

Intersectionality and Black Oral Health

> Oral health disparities are profound in the United States. Despite major improvements in oral health for the population as a whole, oral health disparities exist for many racial and ethnic groups by socioeconomic status, gender, age, and geographic location. (Office of Minority Health, CDC, 2018)

Oral health directly links to one's overall health yet is often a neglected health topic. Oral health disparities experienced by Black and African Americans are great in number but discussed much less in research and health care settings than other health-related topics (Allukian, 2008; Fiscella et al., 2000; Lee & Divaris, 2014). Blacks generally have the poorest oral health of all the racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Lee & Divaris, 2014; Sabbah et al., 2009). And, among Black children, caries or cavity prevalence is much higher (Edelstein & Chinn, 2009; Flores & Lin, 2013). Black adults with untreated tooth decay are also greater than most racial-ethnic groups (Allukian, 2008; Edelstein, 2002; Laurence et al., 2006). Periodontal disease is higher in men than women, is greatest among Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Blacks, and affects those with less than a high school education (Allukian, 2008).

There are several factors that contribute to these disparities, such as insurance status, income or SES, lifestyle behaviors like tobacco use, and dietary choices and preferences (Arora et al., 2017; Lee & Divaris, 2014; Satcher & Nottingham, 2017). These disparities may be even greater based on immigration status (Cote et al.,

2004; Nicol et al., 2014), literacy level, (Geltman et al., 2013; Horowitz & Kleinman, 2008; Jones et al., 2007; Vann et al., 2010) and the level of trust in dentists (Borrell et al., 2004; Haden et al., 2003; Hilton et al., 2007; Kelly et al., 2005).

Few studies address Black oral health, especially Black adult oral health, and even fewer use an intersectional framework (Bradley et al., 2007). This is an issue because oral health is often a neglected and complex topic, as many factors affect oral health outcomes and diseases (e.g., genetics, insurance status, gender; Li et al., 2015). The majority of oral health interventions focus on factors separately (e.g., SES, gender, ability) and do not account for how one's identity and environment overlap and connect (Allukian, 2008).

Intersectionality, Tobacco-Related Disparities, and the Black Community

> African American children and adults are more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke than any other racial or ethnic group. (Tsai et al., 2018, p. 1342)

Tobacco and tobacco-related health disparities affect Blacks more than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States (Benowitz et al., 1998; Moolchan et al., 2007; Nguyen et al., 2017). The reasons for this are many and are clearly unjust. Historically, Blacks have been targeted by tobacco companies in advertisements and marketing (Moran et al., 2017; Ribisl et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2018) and the location of tobacco retail stores (Ribisl et al., 2017). For the past five decades, public health departments and communities alike have pushed for banning tobacco sales, marketing, and flavored products, specifically menthol cigarettes, which account for 88.5% of all tobacco sales to Black individuals (Giovino et al., 2015). A recent systematic review exploring gender and menthol use in the United States found that women smokers are most likely to use menthol cigarettes than men (P. H. Smith et al., 2017).

Tobacco use contributes to the three leading causes of death among Blacks: heart disease, cancer, and stroke (Kochanek et al., 2016). The risk of developing diabetes, the fourth leading cause of disease among Blacks, is also higher for tobacco users than non-users (NCCDPHP, 2014; Kochanek et al., 2016). In addition to firsthand smoking disparities, Black children and adults are more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke than any other racial or ethnic group (Homa et al., 2015; Jarvie & Malone, 2008), which is commonly attributed to being in low SES neighborhoods. What is disturbing about these disparities, contrary to what it may seem, are (a) Black youth and younger adults have a lower prevalence of smoking cigarettes than Hispanics and whites (Singh et al., 2016), (b) Blacks smoke fewer cigarettes per day than whites (Schoenborn et al., 2013), (c) most Black smokers want to quit smoking and have tried (Babb et al., 2017; NCCDPHP, 2014), and (d) Blacks initiate smoking at a later age compared to whites (Benowitz et al., 1998; Schoenborn et al., 2013), yet (e) Blacks are more likely to die from smoking-related diseases than whites (NCCDPHP, 2014).

Now how does this connect with intersectionality? Most studies on tobacco and smoking-related disparities and health outcome differences focus on race, ethnicity, gender (male vs. female vs. transgender vs. LBGT), and SES, but few explore how these characteristics intersect (Aguirre et al., 2016; Hooper, 2018; P. H. Smith et al., 2017). Current methodologies also limit our

knowledge; numerous studies on this topic are quantitative and do not go beyond explaining the differences and restating the disparity (Aguirre et al., 2016; Douglas, 2014, 2019). These approaches are problematic as they lack meaningful framing to understand the complex nature of tobacco-related diseases.

Discussion

Both oral health and tobacco disparities are prevalent in Black populations and communities. As research indicates, health disparity studies usually focus on race, ethnicity, SES, age, and sometimes gender differences, yet most studies do not analyze or acknowledge where these categories intersect and how this might affect health outcomes and intervention effectiveness. As research suggests, Black populations are either forgotten (oral health) or specially targeted (tobacco), perpetuating health inequities. Limited research on Black health disparities uses an intersectionality framework to date.

Similarly, Black social movements like #BlackLivesMatter have been critiqued for not having an intersectional stance on social justice issues. In contrast, movements like #*SayHerName* and Black Health Matters have been more inclusive of acknowledging the complexities of intersectionality. Although there are some limitations, these movements are closer to acknowledging that injustice and inequalities in health go beyond race and sex. Black Health Matters is an emerging movement that emphasizes inequalities in health outcomes faced by Black individuals and communities by addressing the layers of discrimination and how this impacts health. This movement is a Black health social justice movement connecting with law, policy, research, and practice.

Scholars such as Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Dr. Patricia Hill Collins, and Dr. Lisa Bowleg showcase the importance of intersectionality in research, practice, and social movements. It is necessary to acknowledge the existence of intersecting identifies and social categories as a step towards understanding and addressing health inequities in a broader context, instead of the traditional method of placing individuals and populations in a best-fit box (e.g., female, Black, or lesbian).

Using an intersectional approach at the beginning stages of formulating research questions and developing ideas of how to address health issues in Black communities is crucial to finding effective methods and strategies for improving Black health. Oppression has deep roots in society and the health care system; thus, to create more successful interventions and see decreased disparities, one's identities and how these intersect must be considered. This has proven true and important during this year's COVID-19 pandemic. The inequities in the health care system have made national news, highlighting how those who identify as Black are more likely to contract COVID-19 and less likely to survive (Lopez et al., 2021). There have been explicit examples where Black individuals and families have been turned away from care, even those who work in the health care field. For these reasons and many more, it is necessary to have intersectionality and Black Health Matters at the forefront of our health conversations and communications.

Conclusions and Implications for Black Social Movements and Black Health Research

Preventable and perpetual oral health and tobacco-related disparities are just two of the many health inequities that

significantly impact Blacks. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for researchers in public health, social and behavioral sciences, policymakers, and social justice advocates. There are notable challenges, but including an intersectional framework in health disparity and health inequity research is important to delve deeper into why these disparities continue to exist and address multiple factors contributing to the inequities. Black Health Matters is a call to action that can be monumental for Black communities if an intersectionality and social justice framework are incorporated.

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Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Black Mamas Matter: State Maternal Mortality Review Committees and the Reproduction of Race

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Abstract

The maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in the United States has doubled over the past three decades, representing a crisis in maternal health. The overall death rate obscures the reality that Black mothers are significantly more likely than white mothers to experience severe morbidity and death while pregnant, birthing, and during the postpartum period. Research demonstrates that obstetric racism operates as a core contributing factor to high and racially disparate MMRs in the United States. In response, states have legislated the creation of maternal mortality review committees to review mortality cases, determine causal factors, and make recommendations to reduce the rate of maternal deaths. This research examines the extent to which these committees acknowledge and address obstetric racism in their annual reports and recommendations. The analysis reveals that only three of 51 review committees comprehensively address obstetric racism, and the remaining committees vary in their commitment to birth equity. By reducing high mortality rates to patient-level factors, these state actors absolve health care providers and delivery systems of their role in the deaths of Black mothers while also reproducing controlling stereotypes of Black mothers.

Keywords: birth justice, reproductive justice, motherhood, maternal mortality, racism

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> There is a crisis in [B]lack women's maternal health care … we don't want to think that these things have anything to do with professional or institutional failings. We'd rather think of the doctors and hospitals as knights on white horses, riding in to save women and infants from enemies with mysterious names like preeclampsia or venous thromboembolism. But if lives are to be saved, we must listen to and face hard truths. (Oseguera et al., 2018, p. 12)

Birth Justice, Obstetric Racism, and the Maternal Mortality Crisis

The maternal mortality ratio in the United States exceeds that of every other high resource nation; it is one of only three nations across the globe in which the maternal mortality ratio is increasing, nearly doubling over the past three decades (Centers for Disease Control, 2019). While the United States reports 19 deaths per 100,000 live births, European ratios fall below 10, with many nations reporting under five deaths, and countries like Norway and Italy reporting only two maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (World Health Organization, 2019). In the United States, the overall maternal mortality rate obscures that Black women are significantly more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), Black (37.1 deaths per 100,000) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) women are three times more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes than are white (14.7 per 100,000) women, a disparity that grows even wider with age. In some cities, the disparity further widens, with Black maternal death rates up to 12 times higher than white women (Howell, 2018). Racial-ethnic inequities also vary across states; for example, Arizona reports 70.8 AI/AN maternal deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 22.4 for Hispanics and 17.4 for white women (Cabasag et al., 2019). The CDC (2020) acknowledges that at least two-thirds of the 700 maternal deaths each year in the United States are preventable.

Responding to this public health crisis, numerous states have implemented maternal mortality review committees (MMRCs), most commonly housed in state health departments, seeking to identify the factors contributing to maternal death and promoting recommendations and interventions. Established and well-known organizations such as Sister Song, Black Women Birthing Justice, and the Black Mamas Matter Alliance have already researched, identified causal factors of racial disparities, and proposed recommendations to reduce maternal mortality. Yet, instead of looking to these experts, federal and state governments are turning to MMRCs, comprised largely of health care providers, to craft implementable recommendations that generate impactful outcomes.

Because maternal mortality rates in the United States are racialized, and the rise in maternal death in many states is largely explained by an increase in Black mothers dying, MMRCs must consider the impact of obstetric racism as a central part of their work. *Obstetric racism*, defined by Davis (2019) as the racism experienced during maternal healthcare processes, comes in many forms, including "critical lapses in diagnosis, being neglectful, dismissive, or disrespectful; causing pain; and engaging in medical abuse through coercion to perform procedures or performing procedures without consent" (Davis, 2019, p. 562).

This research utilizes a birth justice framework to examine the extent to which MMRCs consider and examine obstetric

racism as a central contributing factor of maternal death for women of Color. Highlighting obstetric racism as a driver of maternal morbidity and mortality, the *birth justice framework* extends the reproductive justice model and focuses specifically on the birthing process, arguing that pregnant individuals have the right to safe and dignified birth (Oparah, 2016). More broadly, *reproductive justice* (R. J.) is an intersectional, theoretical, and methodological framework first mapped out by an alliance of Black women, including the widely influential scholar and activist Loretta Ross, in 1994. Three core values guide reproductive justice—the right to have a child, the right not to have a child, and the right to safe and dignified parenting (Ross & Solinger, 2017, p. 65). The birth justice framework advances the notion that "Black Mamas Matter" and provides key theoretical concepts and analytic tools for exploring the extent to which reports and recommendations of MMRCs comprehensively acknowledge, address, and intervene in obstetric racism.

Explaining Racial Inequality in Maternal Mortality

The fact that United States maternal death is disproportionately distributed across the population has been discussed by the lay press and medical and social science literature. In 2019 and 2020 alone, *New York Magazine*, *Glamour Magazine*, National Public Radio, and *Good Morning America*, amongst a host of other news media, covered racial disparities in maternal death rates. Alongside these lay presses, biomedical and social science scholarship investigate racial disparities in maternal death, searching for causal factors from preconception to postpartum. This body of scholarship attributes racial disparities in maternal illness and death to multiple factors, ranging from patient-level to systems-level explanatory factors and mechanisms.

Patient-Level Factors

It is customary practice to attribute racial disparities in maternal mortality to Black mothers' deficient bodies and behaviors. This fallacious view is inseparable from the historical legacy of obstetric racism in the United States (for an overview, see Ross & Solinger, 2017, and Solinger, 2005). From J. Marion Sims' early obstetric experiments conducted on enslaved women to the 2020 allegations of coerced sterilization of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women under carceral control, dark bodies have systematically been deemed unfit for motherhood (see Bekiempis, 2020, and Ross & Solinger, 2017). Within this dominant narrative, Black women's higher rates of preconception chronic illness and their higher rates of certain types of hemorrhage, preeclampsia and eclampsia, gestational diabetes, and hypertension are all identified as primary medical causes of maternal mortality. Patient-level factors such as advanced maternal age, drug abuse, poor nutrition, lack of knowledge, and failure to seek early and regular prenatal care are attributed to be causes of mortality.

Societal-Level Factors

Social scientists have critiqued the "mother blame" discourse in which MMR explanations are entrenched, revealing how environmental factors, including racism, can lead to chronic illnesses that heighten the risk of maternal morbidity and mortality. Social and anthropological perspectives highlight that the chronic stress of living in racialized environments and interacting in racist institutions maps onto the bodies of women of Color, regardless of class and

level of education. This work often builds upon Geronimus' (1991) well-known *weathering hypothesis*, in which cumulative social and economic disadvantages are shown to lead to accelerated aging and an early deterioration of health in Black women. Evidence of weathering due to social inequality has also been shown to impact Mexican-origin women, especially those U.S.-born (Fishman, 2020; Wildsmith, 2002) and AI/AN women (Fishman, 2020). The low socioeconomic status of women of Color, which causes toxic stress, is argued to play a large role in the weathering process. However, studies demonstrate that disparities in the MMR persist even for high-status women of Color and for Black women with advanced degrees (Petersen et al., 2019). Thus, while health care delivery systems are often conceptualized as lifesaving in studies on maternal mortality, birth justice studies reveal that health care provider (HCP) factors are part of the system of power that shapes Black women's birth trauma, survival, and death.

Obstetric Racism

Provider racism in health care has been well-documented. In a literature review (Maina et al., 2018) on implicit bias amongst health care practitioners, 31 of 37 studies found racial bias. Paradies et al. (2014) also found evidence of HCP across 26 of 37 studies examined in their review of provider racism. *Obstetric racism* involves the racism that emerges specifically during medical encounters relating to women of Color's reproductive health (Davis, 2019). Davis explains, "Obstetric racism lies at the intersection of obstetric violence and medical racism" (2019, p. 561). In light of the history of race-based obstetric violence against women of Color, scholarship must consider the significance of HCP racism in obstetric care. Along these lines, Valdez and Deomampo (2019) have urged scholars to center race and racism in reproduction scholarship. Neither patient-level nor societal-level models explain why Black and AI/AN women are more likely than white women to die of pregnancy disorders (Petersen et al., 2019). They also do not explain why racial disparities in maternal outcomes persist even when controlling for education and income. Centering race and racism opens the research on MMR to considering how obstetric racism produces birthing inequities.

To understand the persistence of racial inequality in MMR, a growing body of scholarship examines how, within the biomedical model of maternal care, health care provider racism during prenatal, birth, and postnatal care operate as an additional social determinant (Bridges, 2011; Morton et al., 2018; Oparah & Bonaparte, 2016; Oparah, 2016). Given that many pregnant individuals gestate in chronically stressful environments, prenatal care providers must provide supportive environments for their patients. Contrarily, research demonstrates that pregnant individuals of Color enter into what Colen (1995) terms a *system of stratified reproduction* in which they are condescended, assumed deviant, and provided with culturally inappropriate, substandard care. Systems of stratified reproduction exacerbate stressors that impact women's reproduction (Valdez & Deomampo, 2019; Oparah et al., 2018).

Davis (2019) analyzes the birth stories of U.S. Black women and finds that obstetric racism is woven throughout prenatal and postnatal medical encounters and that these racialized experiences link to stratified maternal outcomes. Obstetric racism increases women's stress and discourages early and regular prenatal care. Bridges' (2011) fieldwork in a public hospital in New

York highlights how social workers and medical experts socially construct the behaviors that they expect to see in Black mothers who are Medicaid recipients. For example, bureaucratic streamlining of services for mothers on public insurance, social workers often purposely misrecorded mothers' eating behaviors as deficient to receive the supplemental nutrition benefits (i.e., food stamps). Beyond this tracking of constructed maternal "bad" behavior, heightened surveillance of Medicaid recipients also means that prenatal behaviors are surveilled and scrutinized in ways that their affluent, white counterparts are not (Bridges, 2011).

In the third wave of the *Listening to Mothers* survey, one in five Black and Hispanic women reported racial-ethnic discrimination in their maternal care encounters (Declercq et al., 2013). Interviews with Black women similarly identify four practices commonly deployed by medical staff that contribute to strained and stressful relationships (Oparah et al., 2018). The themes identified were: (a) the refusal of HCP's to listen to women's concerns and knowledge about their own bodies, (b) the lack of respect for women's boundaries, (c) stereotyping, and (d) the suppression of self-advocacy.

Racial and ethnic inequalities in severe maternal morbidity (SMM) further highlight the role of provider racism. Leonard et al. (2019) find that SMM is higher amongst Black women and lowest in white women, and these inequalities persist even after controlling for patient-level factors. Authors suggest that institutionalized racism, including within health care delivery systems, is likely implicated and that there is a "need for initiatives that specifically target maternal health inequalities" (p. 7). While some initiatives have curbed maternal mortality rates overall, race disparities remain substantial (Leonard et al., 2019, p. 35). Obstetric racism explains this remaining disparity, explaining why Black women die of pregnancy-related disorders that white women do not. In her foreword to *Battling Over Birth* (2018), sociologist Christine Morton shifts the discussion away from the pathological Black mother and toward the health care industry. She writes, "We need to know more about the training and attitudes of clinicians who care for [B]lack women during their pregnancies, how they interact with [B]lack women and their families, and how these factors affect outcomes" (2018, p. 5). This paper explores the extent to which maternal mortality review committees consider the health care industry.

Study Design & Background: The Rise of Review Committees to Address MMR

In 2020, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention launched the *Hear Her* Campaign, urging individuals, families, and health care providers to listen when pregnant and postpartum women report symptoms of pregnancy-related complications. While the campaign takes a colorblind approach, they, along with The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), have encouraged all states to implement MMRCs and examine system failures as they impact maternal health. At both federal and state levels, several review committees have been formed to study maternal mortality and design initiatives to reverse trends in maternal mortality. MMRCs are tasked with investigating state-level maternal mortality rates, their causes, preventions, and developing implementable recommendations for averting future death. Many of these committees' partner with ACOG through the broader national collaboration of

organizations, the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM). AIM works through MMRCs to implement initiatives that intend to curb maternal death.

This is true regarding Black maternal mortality, with many committees dedicated to improving birth outcomes for Black mothers. While Metz (2018) shows that such committees can effectively collect data, assess the preventability of maternal death, and create recommendations for curbing maternal death, the extent to which these committees' efforts translate into impactful practices that reduce maternal death is unclear—it is not apparent that the formation of such committees and initiatives has been effective. For example, in an early study of maternal mortality state-level committees (1938–1978), states with committees showed smaller declines in maternal mortality rates (Grimes & Cates, 1977). Further, in some states such as California, initiatives appear to reduce overall maternal death, yet racial disparities persist (Oparah et al., 2018).

Because obstetric racism produces negative outcomes for obstetric patients, initiatives must interrupt stratified reproduction directly and address how health care providers and hospital policies operate as core drivers of maternal morbidity and mortality disparities. As birth justice research highlights, there is a significant need for initiatives that address deep-rooted maternal health inequalities. If maternal mortality committees and initiatives do not address racial inequality, their ability to curb maternal mortality inequality between white and Black pregnant and birthing individuals is limited. This research inquires whether MMRCs: (a) acknowledge or address racial inequality in their states, (b) acknowledge or address obstetric racism, and (c) advance recommendations specifically intervene in practices of obstetric racism.

The output of MMRCs constitutes a discursive formation surrounding Black maternal death that influences health care delivery systems and the practices of obstetric providers within these systems. This research involved creating a large database of MMRCs and their work in all 50 states and Washington, DC. The data were discursive—including legal documents, full committee reports, websites, and info sheets. I coded these documents in two waves, using the research questions as a framework of analysis. I examined each committee in-depth, noting its year of formation, whether or not it was formed by statute, the number of seats it included, and the stakeholders included in each committee. I examined and coded the reports and recommendations of MMRCs in every state and explored the extent to which they directly and comprehensively addressed racial inequality in maternal mortality. I specifically focused on obstetric racism and looked for recommendations that directly addressed how race shaped the missed opportunities for diagnosis and treatment of maternal morbidity.

All 50 U.S. states and Washington, DC have a maternal mortality review committee or are in the process of implementing a committee at the time of this research. Beyond this, states varied widely in noticeable ways—whether or not their committees were appointed by legislation, the amount of funding they receive, how often they meet and publish reports, their access to medical information, and their ability to oversee and implement actionable initiatives—were all points of differentiation. In the following section, I highlight findings germane to the research questions, specifically addressing the extent

to which committees acknowledge obstetric racism as a driver of racial inequality in maternal mortality and how states generated initiatives and recommendations that specifically address obstetric racism. As opposed to addressing the findings of each state MMRC, I highlight themes that emerged throughout the process of coding and offer examples from different state MMRCs as relevant.

Findings

State MMRCs and the Reproduction of Race

Coding and analysis of reports, related legislation, and informational materials of 51 MMRCs, revealed that only two states—California and New York—and Washington DC directly addressed obstetric racism in their stated goals, reports, and recommendations. These MMRCs stand as models of commitment to reducing racial disparities in maternal mortality and highlight three strategies for reducing maternal mortality.

Obstetric Racism as a Driver of Maternal Mortality

First, these three committees acknowledge that it is necessary to center Black women as the leading experts on Black women's prenatal, birthing, and postpartum experiences. As Collins (2005) argues in regard to the mainstream feminist critique of motherhood, knowledge produced without the critical standpoint of Black mothers is likely to be limited in its impact and usefulness in the lives of Black mothers. Each of these committees includes Black doulas and midwives, as well as community organizations that advocate for and work with Black pregnant individuals. In New York, Dana Ain-Davis, a trained doula and the anthropologist who coined the term "obstetric racism," serves the MMRC. The Washington, DC MMRC, still in its early phases of organization, opens its meetings to the public and includes a diverse array of stakeholders on its committee. Along these same lines, the New York MMRC recommends equitable reimbursement for midwives, and if implemented by New York Medicaid, this would enable Black women to seek out Black midwives for their care. The California MMRC regularly hosts webinars and information sessions led by community and non-profit organizations that serve Black and Latinx individuals and families.

Second, both New York and Washington, DC have integrated implicit-bias training for health care providers into their recommendations (in DC, it is mentioned in the legislative statute). While the effectiveness of these trainings is debated, for this research, it is important because it demonstrates a shifting of MMRCs' focus from patients to providers. New York MMRC recommends comprehensive implicit bias training for providers and hospital staff that is attached to incentives. These trainings are coupled with numerous other strategies that directly address the differential treatment received by Black women in medicalized birthing settings. New York also suggests loan forgiveness for HCPs from underrepresented groups who work in maternal health for three years, ideally, to reduce the biases experienced by Black pregnant and birthing individuals.

Third, these states recommend evidence-based strategies that remove biases from the process of treating women with symptoms of pregnancy-related disorders. In California, which stands as a model in quality prenatal care and the only state to

radically reduce maternal mortality rates, the focus is on provider and hospital training, not on patient control and surveillance. By combining checklists, protocol, and the integration of safety bundles into hospital care, California has taken actionable steps to ensure hospitals address life-threatening pregnancy disorders such as hemorrhage. Referred to as the CMQCC model, California has pioneered free and easy-to-access evidence-based toolkits as resources for providers. Each toolkit contains resources on specific disorders of pregnancy and specific information on racial and ethnic disparities. CMQCC has facilitated the implementation of "safety bundles" in hospitals to ensure that providers have life-saving medical supplies needed for obstetric hemorrhage and preeclampsia. Hosting webinars on birth equity and quality care for all women, they also supply public-facing materials for pregnant individuals with information on "How to avoid a C-section if I don't need one" and tips on avoiding hospitals with high rates of cesarean surgeries (CMQCC, 2020)—these surgeries are known to increase the risk of maternal death. While the racial disparity in birthing outcomes has not been entirely eliminated, California has seen a 55% decline in maternal mortality (CMQCC, 2020). The New York MMRC recommends using the same model to providers across the state.

In both states and DC, reducing racial disparities in maternal mortality is central to the initiative. Each recognizes racial disparity and recognizes that obstetric racism is an explanatory factor. While it is true that many state MMRCs recognize racial disparity, their reports and recommendations do not include provider racism as an underlying factor. In sharp contrast to the MMRCs just discussed, the Arizona MMRC, where the death rate for AI/AN mothers is 70.8 per 100,000 births, invests publicly funded dollars in seatbelt awareness campaigns and admonishes mothers for their supposed resistance to medical advice. What are MMRCs similar to Arizona's reporting and recommending regarding maternal mortality?

The Other 48 MMRCs

The most recent report issued by the MMRC of Maryland revealed a rate of 44 deaths per 100,000 births for Black women during the 2013–2017 review period. More than three times greater than the rate of white maternal death (11.8), it is astounding that their report did not discuss the underlying causes of this inequity. Comprised entirely of medical doctors, who failed to reflect upon their own practices, the panel did not report that it considered or attributed maternal death to any provider-related causes. The Maryland MMRC exemplifies the overall findings of this research: through their work, state MMRCs build a discursive formation surrounding maternal mortality that reproduces racist ideologies about Black women. This formation is not evidence-based but instead relies upon dominant ideologies that demean and blame Black women as the cause of their own suffering. While it is outside the scope of this research to examine the history of controlling images of Black women, it is important to note that at the center of these images is the stereotype that Black mothers are unconcerned with the wellbeing of their children—they are simultaneously (and contradictorily) viewed as welfare-reliant, scheming but also stupid, promiscuous, and belligerent (see Bridges, 2011; Collins, 1990, 2005). In this way, most state MMRC reports perpetuate controlling images of Black women, dangerously couching their reports in medicalized terms, tables, and recommendations cloaked in objectivity. This section highlights two findings

regarding the other 48 state-level MMRCs. First, the analysis of MMRC reports and other relevant documents revealed that maternal mortality continues to be understood as a patient-driven phenomenon. Second, in states that do explore systems-level factors, including provider-level factors, racism enacted by providers is not considered.

Patient-Level Factors

Many states, exemplified by Arizona's seatbelt-wearing campaign, continue to blame mothers for their deaths. Like Arizona, many states mention structural-level barriers to care (such as lack of access in rural areas) in their reports but rely on patient-level solutions when making recommendations. In the case of Arizona, two of the top three recommendations are mother-blaming (see Cabasag et al., 2019). When recommendations are framed through a patient-level lens, the recommendations that result often suggest extending the disciplinary apparatus of the state further into the lives of marginalized women, typically by intensifying the scope of social control into the homes and private lives of women. Arizona, for example, is one of many states that recommend considering home visitations. While a home visitation can be incredibly valuable to a healing new mother, their value is experienced differently based on access to racial and class privilege, particularly when the home visitation becomes a requirement. In these situations, home visitations can coerce women into a regulatory position in exchange for prenatal care. Adding requirements and visitations for Black women who are already receiving low-quality or culturally inappropriate prenatal care only further subjects them to objectification under a racialized and medicalized gaze—a gaze that is given access to mothers in the most private and intimate spaces of their everyday lives.

As Clarke et al. (2010) explain, "risk and surveillance are aspects of the medical gaze that is disciplining bodies" (p. 64). Being "at-risk" demands and justifies the coercive surveillance of the imagined population. Health is assumed to be achieved largely through surveillance and avoidance of risk through the technomedical gaze (Clarke et al., 2010); for pregnant individuals, this achievement involves ongoing prenatal surveillance even in the absence of symptoms that might suggest or indicate risk. In this way, Virginia's MMRC, who also advocates for additional home visitations for postpartum women who are publicly insured, might be interpreted as a state actor that is building additional mechanisms of state surveillance and discipline in which the state is permitted to enter the home of pathologized and criminalized mothers.

Clarke et al. (2010, p. 63) also explain that, under the biomedical era, health is framed as a social and moral responsibility. Along these lines, I found that maternal mortality review committees demonstrate high commitment to prenatal care as a moral responsibility, without acknowledging how providers routinely discourage regular and early care through disrespectful or dismissive care. States commonly recommend that women seek prenatal care as early and consistently as possible throughout the entire gestation period while failing to acknowledge why women do not (and that the majority of women die in the postpartum period). They fail to consider the many ways in which women of Color, particularly Black women, put themselves at risk just by entering into a biomedical model of birthing and delivery.

In this way, mothers are implicated in their own deaths, failing in their moral and social responsibility to nurture their children. MMRCs commonly define women who eschew prenatal care as negligent, irresponsible, and even abusive. MMRCs should consider that a mother so readily labeled as abusive would likely not want the state in her home, assessing her body and behaviors.

MMRCs systematically did not indicate the percentage of maternal death attributed to failure to seek out prenatal care or discontinued prenatal care. This leaves one to question the percentage of deaths that were related to sporadic or dispensed prenatal care. This may be because there is no evidence that women of Color do not seek prenatal and postnatal care when they become symptomatic of complications. In contrast, an abundance of research, including research gathered by MMRCs, demonstrates that women of Color are overlooked when reporting problematic symptoms, including extremely dangerous symptoms such as high blood pressure and bleeding. Despite this, MMRC reports overwhelmingly relied upon a narrative of a neglectful or unintelligent mother who ignores prenatal care and postnatal warning signs.

If MMRCs looked to expert organizations such as Black Women Birthing Justice, Black Mamas Matter Alliance, and other groups leading Black women's health, they would likely conclude differently. Yet, MMRCs were highly unlikely to involve patient advocates, Black midwives and doulas, or stakeholders representing Black mothers. Their committees tended to be small (under 20 seats) and comprised entirely of obstetricians and medical practitioners. Reproductive justice for women of Color requires recognizing Black women as leaders of the birth justice movement (Ross, 2017, p. 79) and bringing them to the table to chart the way forward. These organizations shift the lens from patient to provider-level factors; MMRCs, comprised almost entirely of medical providers and representatives of the biomedical industry, produce a patient-level discourse that absolves them of any responsibility. To end reproductive injustices in the lives of Black women necessarily involves the dismantling of state barriers to Black women's agency and power in identifying and ending the injustices that shape their birth experiences.

Systems-Level Factors

MMRCs occasionally recognized systemic racism as an explanatory factor. Most often utilizing some variation of the weathering hypothesis, these MMRCs acknowledged how a lifetime of toxic stress maps onto the pregnant body. These MMRCs, such as New Mexico, Illinois, Indiana, Connecticut, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, South Dakota, and Washington, discussed MMR disparities in their states. While acknowledging a racialized problem, these states often proposed colorblind solutions or patient-level solutions. Further, they commonly neglected to include health care institutions as a racialized environment, furthering the assumption that health care, and the providers that practice within them, are colorblind.

Absolving physicians, medical delivery services, and the state of their role in perpetuating racial inequality, these states sometimes discussed provider-level deficiencies. In reviewing the deaths of pregnant and postpartum individuals, many MMRCs acknowledge that providers routinely miss opportunities for diagnosis and treatment, commonly referred to as

system failure. In this model, state MMRCs such as Ohio, Iowa, and Indiana acknowledge that provider care is often inadequate. Ohio, for example, highlights in their reports that poor quality care and failure to screen and diagnose women have resulted in many preventable deaths. In fact, most states acknowledge that at least over half of the maternal deaths are preventable. These states do not investigate further, seeking to understand how obstetric racism shapes which women are screened, diagnosed, and listened to and those who are not. Data tell us that the system fails many more Black mothers than it does white mothers, a fact MMRCs systematically disregard. Why are MMRCs conceptualizing healthcare delivery systems as racially neutral actors situated outside of systems of power? In-depth interviews with members of MMRCs would be a useful avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) noted the urgency of understanding the intersection of race and gender in Black women's lives. This urgency cannot be overstated when examining maternal mortality in the United States. This analysis shows that of 51 MMRCs, only three address obstetric racism in their reports and recommendations. That 48 MMRCs do not comprehensively center race and racism in their work is puzzling given that they are charged with resolving a race-based public health crisis. Consequently, these state actors reproduce racist and controlling images of Black mothers as pathological, lacking in knowledge, defiant, and deficient. Far from offering solutions, MMRCs largely absolve health care providers and health care delivery systems of their role in constructing high rates of maternal mortality in the United States. Their recommendations largely ignore the profound forms of provider racism and obstetric violence endured by women of Color within biomedical systems of maternal care. In so doing, these initiatives comprise a discursive formation that socially constructs an imagined population of "at-risk" Black and Indigenous mothers, reproduces biological notions of race, and fails to address racial inequalities in maternal care.

Black Mamas Matter. My research suggests that state-level maternal mortality committees and their initiatives have not yet integrated the ethos and spirit of this movement. State MMRCs may be comprised of experts, but they are not necessarily experts on Black maternal health; to be impactful, MMRCs must acknowledge and intervene in the everyday practices of obstetric racism that kills Black mothers.

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Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Chelsey's Piece: My Navigation Through My Black Identity as a Dominican Woman

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Abstract

My vitiligo became visible at the age of nine, and through this piece, I discuss my navigation of identity considering my race, ethnicity, culture, skin color, and skin condition. I tackle the questions of what defines *Blackness*—is it skin-tone or culture? If skin tone defines Blackness, does that make me culturally homeless, longing for a home of "in-between"? Within Dominican culture, Blackness and any variation of it are negated, has been for decades, and is engrained in the minds of many, if not all, Dominicans. This piece shows how I reclaim as a Dominican, despite my light skin, due to my vitiligo. This is all to demonstrate that Blackness is not defined merely under the constraints of skin tone. The diaspora does not allow for such a simple definition of Blackness equating to dark skin due to the complex history of diaspora for Indigenous, Black, and white peoples. Blackness includes culture, experiences, *and* skin tone. In addition, Dominicans as an ethnic group must learn to accept all parts of ourselves, though we have been taught to hate our Blackness. Claiming our Black identity shows strength and resilience.

Keywords: Black, diaspora, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Dominican, anti-Blackness, internalized racism

Chelsey Minerva Sarante is a Dominican-American woman born and raised in the Bronx, NY, and is currently a senior at Denison University, majoring in Communication and Black Studies. Chelsey has spent time throughout her undergraduate career navigating her identity through transparent conversations with others and with herself while being at a predominantly white institution. *Black Rage Journal* inspired this piece, a journal on Denison's campus revived in 2020 for Black students to express themselves.

Figure 1: My grandfather, "Bolo" and I, circa 2001–2002

My vitiligo, a skin disorder, started when I was nine years old. Mamí said it was when I was seven, but I noticed it when I was nine while on a trip to the Dominican Republic. I remember clearly saying, "*Mami, Mami, mira toda las marcas blancas queen tengo en mi brazo, ¿qué es esto? ¿Qué está pasando?*" ("Mommy, Mommy, look at all these white marks on my arm, what is this? What's happening?"). From that point forward, I began phototherapy and other treatments. It spread everywhere until my skin didn't produce any melanin at all. This was when my "identity crisis" began.

I knew there were different racial groups among Dominicans. I grew up in a neighborhood with Brown, Black, and light-skinned Dominicans. As the Dominicans would say, my grandfather was *Moreno* ("Black"), and my stepfather and uncles (Figure 1). When learning to dance bachata, merengue, and tipico, or the Reggaeton from my parents, I noticed the similarities in these types of Latin and Afro-beats. I would look around in *Fondo Negro* and see everyone dancing.[1] Everyone dancing was Black. When I was younger, I would talk to my Black friends, and we'd compare our parents and experiences. We would sit in between our mother's legs while they did our hair together. Through music, complaining about parents, and playdates (how kids normally do), I realized that my experiences were Black. Though I thought our races and experiences were different, they aren't and never were. But because of my vitiligo, I felt like I couldn't call myself Black. My skin was not black or brown, but it wasn't white either.

When I acknowledged my Blackness, others wouldn't acknowledge it the way that I would. I would always feel that there would be certain aspects of the Black experience that I was excluded from because of my vitiligo. Does my vitiligo disqualify me from being Black? Is my "Black Card" revoked? My grandmother would always say *mi Negrita* ("my little Black girl"), but that would always confuse me more. I lived the Black Dominican experience whenever I visited my family. When I ask about their ancestry, they would never say *Moreno* or *Africano* (Black or African) but always say *de España* ("from Spain"), anything that would bring them closer to whiteness.

Mi Negrita.

In Kingsbridge, I was never challenged to think beyond my ethnicity.[2] "What are you?" "I'm Dominican," was always my answer. When the other Dominicans were told, "You're Black," their response was always, "I'm not Black, I'm Dominican." Nobody ever told me I was Black. Just like the meme, always in denial to a certain extent. If I told my mom, "*Soy Negra, soy Morena*" ("I am Brown, I am Black"), then she would say, "*No, tu eres Dominicana*"

("No, you are Dominican").

I didn't know the difference between race and ethnicity; I never needed to in the hood. Saying "I'm Dominican" was enough. Yes, I'm light-skinned as hell, but that doesn't mean anything. My 3B, 3C, 4A -hair with my full lips and other features helped me realize that: Yes, I too am Black, and Dominicans are racist as fuck. Tryna separate Black and Dominican when IT DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY.

Me telling my mother she's Black, and her retaliating with, "No, I'm mixed." "You're mixed with what, ma? With Black."

She stayed silent. Looking at her father, my grandfather, he's Black and Dominican. She sits here and tells me that she's not Black and that I'm not Black. She tells me not to date a Black man because I'd be "damaging the race," even though her father was Black.

The more I learned about the history of the Dominican Republic and how Christopher Columbus landed on La Hispañola and started the slave trade on the island, I began to understand that the majority, if not everyone, from the Dominican Republic is some type of mixed. And when I say "mixed," I ain't talking mixed with white. I mean mixed with Blackity Black-Black. Trujillo's reign continues to affect the mindset of many Dominicans. My grandmother had four kids with a Black man, yet she still tells me, "Not to damage the race." My mother is married to a Black man but never calls him Black.

"*Tu papá no es Negro, es Moreno*." ("Your dad is not Black, he is Brown").

What is the difference? What is the difference if any white person were to look at him and call him a *Black* man?

My relationship with my identity is not linear.

I didn't start identifying myself as Afro-Latina until I came to Denison. Saying "I'm Dominican" was not enough anymore. Claiming my Afro-Latina identity was a way that I could acknowledge my Black identity while not negating the Dominican culture that I grew up with, the Black culture I grew up with, and the combined Dominican AND Black culture I grew up with. This was a way to express my true self without having anyone negate it for me. My mother will not be there to tell me, "*No, tú no eres Negra, mi blanquita*." ("No, you are not Black, my white girl").

Mi Negrita

I can fully embrace my curls without my mother nagging me to straighten them; I can fully embrace my curves without my mother figures riding me to lose weight or stop dancing a certain way. I can fully embrace my Blackness. I have learned that Blackness is more than the color of one's skin, though that is most evident. Blackness is also shown through culture, through experiences, through knowledge, through the ancestral knowledge that you can *feel*, and the spirit that is embedded in you; through the knowledge shared by your mother (even if she denies her Blackness) in conversations, physical touch, and experiences together.

Dominicans need to unlearn our internalized racism, and our racist parents and elders need to be held accountable. This acceptance of self despite the constant erasure of our identity from our Black parents shows resilience and power in our generation. To teach ourselves to love our Blackness and proudly wear it, claim it, and

defend it in the faces of those that negate it.
We are Afro-Latine; to call us revolutionary
is an understatement.

Footnotes

[1] *Fondo Negro* is a town in the countryside of the Dominican Republic near the city of Barahona, Dominican Republic.

[2] *Kingsbridge* is the "hood" I was raised in, in the Bronx, NY. Near the 1 train and the 4 train. Uptown. All the way uptown.