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"Black Elephant in the Room": Black Students Contextualizing Campus Racial Climate Within US Racial Climate

Chrystal A. George Mwangi   Barbara Thelamour   Ijeoma Ezeofor
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The systemic racism in US society being resisted through larger movements such as Black Lives Matter is also reflected and reproduced in US higher education. In this qualitative study, we examined how Black students contextualize their campus racial climate within broader race issues, tensions, and movements occurring across the nation. Findings revealed 4 themes: (a) perceptions of Blackness on campus, (b) campus racial climate mirroring societal racial climate, (c) experiencing and engaging in movements on campus, and (d) impact of racial climate on future planning.

Universities are experiencing increased pressure to demonstrate their utility to society, meet the demands of increasingly diverse students, and engage in the application of knowledge and research toward solving societal problems (Tierney & Perkins, 2015). Given this context, it is important for higher education to remain connected to the issues of the local, national, and global communities in which they are located as well as prepare students to positively engage in these communities. Conversely, scholars often reify the "ivory tower" image by conducting higher education research that is disconnected from the broader societal context within which universities are situated (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012).

Our study stemmed from this inconsistency as we examined the interplay between US societal racial climate and campus racial climate for Black students. Scholars clearly have demonstrated that Black collegians are more likely to have negative assessments of campus climate than do their peers of other races (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Researchers also have demonstrated how universities are working to improve campus racial climates by developing targeted campus-based interventions (Hurtado et al., 2012). Yet, what is missing from this research is how the broader US society's racial climate impacts (and is impacted by) racial climate on campuses as part of the student experience. The 21st century US racial climate demonstrates growing pessimism regarding race relations, increased public visibility of police brutality toward Black people, and growing empirical evidence of the implicit anti-Black racial bias that exists in US society (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Swift, 2017). Simultaneously, this climate reflects the growing strength of movements for racial justice and the fight against anti-Blackness, including the Black Lives Matter movement (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). As Black college students see this racial climate reflected in social and news media, experience their racialized identities being connected to broader systems

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of oppression, and engage in race activism, the lines between racial climate in the United States and on campus become blurred. Thus, the interplay between the macrostructural US racial climate and the microstructural campus racial climate must be acknowledged and investigated to fully understand Black students' experiences. Our study was centered on this issue, and we posed the research question: How do Black students contextualize campus racial climate within the broader racial climates of US higher education and society?

Engaging this question is important given that in a study by the American Council on Education over 55% of college presidents stated that racial climate has become more of a priority than it was 3 years previously and 75% believed that high-profile events, such as #BlackLivesMatter, increased campus dialogue (Espinosa, Chessman, & Wayt, 2016). When Black students respond to a negative campus racial climate by creating lists of demands or engaging in protests, it is not acontextual from racial tensions in broader society. Through our study, we explicitly demonstrate how universities and broader society are inextricably linked regarding race and racism. If universities are looking only inward to find solutions to the challenges and barriers their Black students have regarding racism, they will be leaving out key external factors that play a role in and inform how race and racism are enacted on campus. Furthermore, systemic racism is reflected in US higher education institutions, and these institutions can act as agents in the social reproduction of inequality as well as act as agents for positive social change. Thus, it is important that institutions are aware of how they reflect, reify, and resist racism in broader society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students of Color have a history of margin-alization, discrimination, and isolation within higher education (Edman & Brazil, 2007; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Although universities seek to increase structural forms of diversity to improve the representation of People of Color, this does not always improve racial climate (Griffin, Cunningham, & George Mwangi, 2016; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Researchers have suggested that many Students of Color feel disconnected from their campuses and experience an unwelcoming academic climate (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). This reality is further exacerbated when scholars look at the specific college experiences of Black students.

For example, scholars have reported that Black students have negative perceptions of their campus climate due to racial/ethnic hostility, inequitable treatment, microaggressions, isolation, tokenization, lack of representation, and overt racism (Ancis et al., 2000; Griffin et al., 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000). Perceptions of their institutional environment impact students' overall campus experiences (Rankin & Reason, 2005). For example, negative perceptions of the campus racial climate contribute to isolation (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009) and diminish sense of belonging and institutional commitment (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Johnson et al., 2007). Negative perceptions of campus racial climate influence a number of student outcomes, including retention, academic success, and graduation (Edman & Brazil, 2007; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). Isolation and sense of belonging are two of the most prevalent issues discussed when addressing campus climate for Black students (Johnson et al., 2007).

Literature on the experiences of Black students clearly demonstrates the impact that

campus racial climate has on their college experiences and well being. Yet, although the racial issues described in earlier studies continue to exist at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), today's Black students are now using tools, such as social media (see for example Black Liberation Collective, n.d.), that connect them to information about racial injustice beyond campus walls and students are engaging in national and international Black movements such as Black Lives Matter (Howell, 2016). Still, there is little literature that addresses the interplay between students' experiences, campus racial climate, and the racial climate of the broader US society (Mendez & Cabrera, 2015). In our study, we addressed this knowledge gap by investigating how Black students contextualize their campus racial climate within broader race issues, tensions, and movements.

Much of the work on Black students' experiences with campus racial climate reference or are framed using Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen's (1998) original framework; however, this framework has since been revised by Milem, Chang, and Antonio (2005) and Hurtado et al. (2012). These revisions have further integrated structural/organizational and external contexts to understand campus climate. Given our interest in the connection between campus and US racial climates, we extended the literature on Black students' experiences with campus racial climate by framing our study using the MultiContextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (the DLE) developed by Hurtado and colleagues (2012).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The DLE was informed by research on the educational experiences of Students of Color and provides a holistic framework for understanding campus climate, university practices, and student outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2012; Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). It draws upon the developmental ecological work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Renn (2003) and "is much more explicit than previous models about the multiple contexts at work in influencing institutions of higher education and student outcomes for the twenty-first century" (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 48). Contexts are embedded within structures (e.g., historical, political, economic, cultural, and institutional environments), and these structures contribute to the shaping of individuals' learning and identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The DLE is particularly relevant to understanding the racialized experiences of Black students because the DLE considers multiple systems and contexts as well as whether and in what ways structural, contextual, and other related factors impact the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students at PWIs.

Hurtado et al. (2012) noted that racism, a pervasive system of oppression across US society, is interwoven with the institutional dimension of the campus climate. Thus, the DLE integrates the five elements of the original campus racial climate model (Hurtado et al., 1998): (a) historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, (b) organizational and structural dimension, (c) compositional diversity, (d) psychological dimension, and (e) behavioral dimension. The DLE expands the institutional context of the original campus racial climate model to further acknowledge students' experiences with their university's climate for diversity. Situating a student's identity at the center of their institutional experience, the DLE suggests that identity is directly connected to students' curricular and cocurricular engagement (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). These compounded experiences help to explain student outcomes (e.g., retention, multicultural competency, and the achievement of larger societal goals

such as social equity). In particular, the model illustrates the relationship among campus climate, diverse educational outcomes, and diversity while focusing on equity and civic competencies (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). The DLE highlights the educational benefits of diversity and implores institutional leaders and key stakeholders in student success to assess their campuses for diversity and inclusiveness within the student body.

The DLE is particularly relevant to our study because it demonstrates that campus climate is situated within the local and national communities, policy arenas, and sociohistorical contexts within which an institution operates. According to Hurtado et al. (2012), "the organizational [and structural] dimension of the [campus] climate can be understood as reflecting the pervasive, systemic, and ordinary nature of racism in American institutions and perpetuate inequity through status quo processes in education" (p. 60). With this in mind, we sought to examine the experiences of Black students as they navigate their campus environment within the context of racial issues and tensions occurring in broader society.

METHOD

The data came from a larger mixed-methods project on the educational experiences of Black American and Black immigrant college students; however, in reviewing the qualitative data a strong emphasis was found among participants on how they navigated campus racial climate given the broader context of racial tensions, racism, and racialized incidents occurring across the United States. Although this broader US societal context was not captured in the quantitative survey, the qualitative narratives on the topic were so powerful that they warranted in-depth analysis. Thus, in this article, we focus on the qualitative narratives emerging across Black students'

experiences with campus racial climate as situated within the larger US racial climate.

Study Recruitment and Sample

We recruited a sample of participants who: (a) identified as Black, (b) were undergraduate students (current students or graduated within the past 2 years), and (c) were attending or attended a PWI in the United States. Participants were targeted via a recruitment e-mail that was distributed to campus organizations that commonly work with Black students, and others were included through snowball sampling. The recruitment flyer invited students to take an online survey (resulting in 351 participants). At the end of the survey, participants could opt into an individual interview, which yielded 25 participants. (See Table 1 for interview participants' demographic characteristics.)

Data Collection

After completing the survey component of the mixed-methods study (measures captured the individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors contributing to their college experiences), participants were invited to take part in a 45–60 minute interview via the online conference platform, Zoom. The interviews explored survey themes in depth to gain an understanding of experiences with and perceptions of sense of belonging, social networks and support, racial/ethnic identity development, academic motivations, wellbeing, and campus racial climate. Interviews utilized a semistructured protocol, and examples of interview questions included: "How would you describe your transition to college?" "How would you describe your current level of satisfaction with your university?" and "How would you describe or evaluate diversity on your campus?" All interviews were recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used to provide confidentiality.

TABLE 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Preferred Racial/Ethnic Identity	Additional Self-Reported Identities	Region	Student Status
Jen	Female	African American and Puerto Rican or Latina	None	Midwest	Senior
Donna	Female	African American	Gender, sexual orientation	Midwest	Junior
Aisha	Female	Black and Caribbean Hispanic	Gender	Northeast	Junior
Monica	Female	Black	Gender, profession/major	Mid-Atlantic	Recent Graduate
James	Male	Black	Sexual orientation, class, disability, nationality	Midwest	Recent Graduate
Nancy	Female	African or Black / African American	Religion	Northeast	Sophomore
Sheila	Female	Biracial (Black, White Portuguese)	Gender, profession/ major	Midwest	Junior
Alexis	Female	Black	Class, sexual orientation, gender	Midwest	Senior
Gayle	Female	African American	Gender	Northeast	Recent Graduate
Peter	Male	Black, Nigerian, and Ibo	Religion, artistic expression	Midwest	Recent Graduate
Curtis	Male	Nigerian American or Black	Religion	Midwest	Junior
Samantha	Female	Black	Nationality, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, age, class	Northeast	Freshman
Liz	Female	Black and Nigerian American	Gender, religion, class	Northeast	Recent Graduate
Kelly	Female	Black Latina	Religion, profession/major	Northeast	Senior
Gina	Female	Black	Political, profession/major	Northeast	Senior
Rebecca	Female	Black and Jamaican	Religion, US region, sexual orientation, hair type	Northeast	Sophomore
Howard	Male	Black, African, Nigerian-born Ugandan, clan and parents' tribes	Disability, artistic expression	Midwest	Recent Graduate
Kim	Female	Black American	Gender, class	Northeast	Senior
Robert	Male	Black, Ghanaian, Ashanti, Fante	US region, athletics	Southeast	Recent Graduate
Lauren	Female	Black	Class, gender, sexual orientation, disability	Midwest	Sophomore
Ben	Male	African American	Intellect, aspirations	Midwest	Junior
Candice	Female	Black	Gender, class, marital status, parent	Midwest	Recent Graduate
Jill	Female	Haitian American or Afro-Caribbean American	Religion, class	Northeast	Junior
Frank	Male	African American with Cheyenne descent	Religion, gender, military family	Mid-Atlantic	Senior
Mariah	Female	Black	Religion, class, big sister	Midwest	Freshman

Data Analysis

We used NVivo software to inductively and deductively code transcripts using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). We chose 20 deductive codes reflecting key concepts from the interview protocol and conceptual framework. A priori codes included psychological, structural, historical, and behavioral aspects of campus racial climate (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). In addition, we open coded the data using inductive codes emerging from the patterns within the narratives. To do so, as we read through transcripts, we made annotations at lines in the text that appeared useful in answering the research question. Examples of inductive codes included: being the only one, Black campus activism, and racial allies.

We employed the constant comparative method to construct axial findings by drawing together open codes to form patterns and themes (Charmaz, 2006). For example, we had open codes that reflected how participants believed Black students were perceived on campus. In reviewing these codes, we saw that they were related and therefore placed each within a category called "perceptions of Blackness." Through this process, we developed four broad categories that were used to organize the Findings section. Overall, campus racial climate as a microcosm of US societal racial climate emerged as a prominent storyline across the participants' interviews as did how participants perceived Black student engagement in issues of race and racism and the impact of these issues on their academic and career plans.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Findings were consistent across the different contexts (e.g., geographic regions) of the participants; however, we recognize that the themes identified may be different for other Black students. We used a constructivist lens to emphasize students' experiences and perspectives and increased the study's transferability through detailed methods and the use of thick, rich description throughout our findings (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Considering positionality and engaging in reflexivity (e.g., the process of self-examination and self-disclosure) are crucial parts of qualitative research (Krefting, 1999). We, as researchers, acknowledge that our identities intersected with the study and shaped our perceptions of the data. The research team included one doctoral candidate, one education practitioner, and two faculty members. All of the researchers identified as Black women, and three researchers also had an immigrant heritage. Given our positionalities, who we were and how we were perceived provided benefits and challenges in working with the participants and analyzing data. We worked to ensure trustworthiness by engaging in reflexivity. For example, throughout the study, as a research team we engaged in reflexive dialogue about what we were experiencing to ensure that our interpretations of the data were consistent across the group (Maxwell, 2005). We offered feedback to one another as we developed drafts of the findings, engaged in discussions regarding emerging themes, and provided data-based evidence to support interpretations.

When we disagreed on an interpretation, it was discussed as a team. For example, team members at first disagreed with whether to disaggregate our findings by demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, nativity/ethnicity, social class, religion), given that our data allowed for this. As Black researchers with multiple intersecting social identities, we did not want to perpetuate the fallacy that Black students are a homogenous group (see for example George Mwangi, 2014). In this case, we turned to the data and did some initial disaggregation to determine if there were major

differences in how students described their experiences with this specific article's topic and found that the themes we were presenting were predominantly consistent across participants; however, we chose to provide demographic information about each of the participants to demonstrate the diversity within the sample (see Table 1) and, where applicable, within their narratives present quotes that address and intersect with their other social identities. At other times, when we struggled with how to interpret our findings, we turned to the DLE framework and extant literature as guides. Findings were revised based on new understandings the team members formed as we addressed divergent interpretations of the data and collaborated to communicate an interpretation with which we all agreed.

FINDINGS

Four themes emerged: (a) perceptions of Blackness on campus, (b) campus racial climate mirroring societal racial climate, (c) experiencing and engaging in movements on campus, and (d) impact of racial climate on future planning.

Perceptions of Blackness on Campus

In discussing campus racial climate, participants described how non-Black campus members perceived Black students. Some participants discussed their race being associated with fear. Jen explained that on her campus, "it's like [White people] stereotype: they see us, they fear Black women, they fear Black men. It still happens." Candice furthered this point by saying: "[White people] immediately seem on edge. They think I'm going to become an angry Black woman real fast. . . . Sometimes I feel people are afraid of me." Often participants were shocked and unsure about how to react to these perceptions. James described not knowing how to deal with

"people jumping when I'm turning corners or afraid to work in groups with me. . . . I wasn't prepared to address it and handle it." The fear participants described regarding attitudes and stereotypes of Blackness could often result in negative, prejudicial, and/or violent treatment.

Most of the participants described being proud of their racial and ethnic identity, yet they were frustrated with the stereotyping they experienced. Howard exclaimed:

> For something that I have zero control over, such as my race or my skin color—I was born this way, I'm proud of it, and that's all there is to say about that—I don't understand how there can be so much hatred against something that somebody has no control over.

This sentiment was expressed by many participants and was summarized by Aisha: "Stop looking at the color of my skin, and treat me like a person."

Participants also described how microaggressions, rather than overt racism, are what is shaping the contemporary campus racial climate. Monica expressed: "There are different things you can do that say whether or not you align with or you're sympathetic with People of Color. There's a lot of things besides 'I hate niggers' that communicate that kind of [negative] attitude." Alexis noted the range of experiences that come with being Black on her campus: "There's certain things people don't say to you unless you're Black. It's everything from hair politics to sexual fetishization of Black women." James explained that the cumulative effect of racial incidents on campus impacts not only Black individual students but also the entire campus environment: "It's like the black elephant in the room. That is the racial climate." James's description of campus racial climate as "the black elephant in the room" demonstrates how critical racial issues are on PWI campuses, but that there is a lack of effective and authentic

engagement or acknowledgement of these issues on these campuses.

Campus Racial Climate Mirroring Societal Racial Climate

Participants were very attuned to the US racial climate through the media and their own research; however, they suggested that Whites could choose not to be engaged, as Monica described:

> I wake up in the morning and, whether or not I should, read up on the latest thing. Ferguson is getting sued. . . . I was reading about the processes of slavery, some of that Willie Lynch stuff, and how that still affects people today. . . . These [White] people don't either know or care why these things happen, why they matter.

In explaining how she purposefully read about racial issues each day, this student alluded that White people can remain distanced from these issues. Similarly, Gina resented that her White friends would not attend a Black Lives Matter protest with her: "They don't care that their friend is Black and this is your friend that is being affected by that. . . . That was a wake-up call . . . that just really got me, like I'm done." Although participants discussed purposefully engaging in and educating themselves about national racial incidents and violence, they could not avoid it, even if desired, due to their race. As one student explained: "Then with all the things that were going on while I was at [college], like the murder of Trayvon or Tamir Rice or John Crawford III, that's just made me hyperaware of being Black." Participants felt that, although their PWIs and White peers could tune out the negative aspects of US racial climate, they themselves could not.

Participants also discussed seeing the national racial climate as a clear reflection of issues going on in their lives and on their campuses. For example, Gayle explained:

> I have to worry about the issue of getting home safely. . . . If we get stopped, what's going to happen? I commute to campus, and I have to drive a long—about two miles worth—of a two-lane road. I don't like to drive on it at night. I have driven on it thousands of times, but the thousands of times that I've driven on it . . . we didn't have issues like Mike Brown, like Freddie Gray, like Sandra Bland, and I get worried about that. I . . . think that for a lot of students who aren't of Color, they don't have to worry about those issues.

Likewise, Curtis discussed his fear of how he was being perceived in relation to the Trayvon Martin murder:

> I was walking home one night. I just had my hoodie up. . . . This [White] couple, they were walking. . . . This alleyway was very narrow. I couldn't really get past. . . . I had to pretty much stay behind them. It was the instance of "What can I really do?"; but I guess walk slow behind them, which looks more suspect, because I have a hoodie up, I am Black. The lady just continued to look back [as if to say], "What is he about to do?" [I thought], "I can't stay in this situation. This is very bad." I have seen what has happened on TV, what has happened in cases like Trayvon Martin with his hoodie up. That's what I thought of.

Participants saw themselves reflected in the murders of Black men and women and experienced anxiety about what could happen to them when just walking around campus or driving home from class.

A number of students described how tension and brutality among the police in the broader society was also present between Black students and campus police at their universities:

> There was a huge issue with public safety officers. . . . They were racially profiling Black [students], Black males because they thought they were [from the local

community]. They were like running after them and it was like this huge deal. . . . They were just like, "You're from the town. You're a Black person that's menacing the [university]." (Kim)

Other students also described the tense relationship with campus police as an issue:

There's a lot of tension with the public safety officers and especially Black men. There's a student that got attacked by a public safety officer because he thought that he didn't go here. . . . [It] touches on the Students of Color, because if you're perceived to be from the town, then you get classist, racist treatment that they wouldn't do explicitly to another student. (Gina)

In addition to individual Blacks being targeted, participants described more police presence at events held by Black student organizations than by other organizations, giving the perception that events held by Black students or having high Black student attendance could be problematic.

Another theme was the presidential election, which participants described as intersecting political climate and racial climate. Kelly explained that the racially charged language of presidential candidates was giving people greater license to engage in racist behavior:

Even Donald Trump, I feel like there's always been racism, but now in this time, a lot of people are not afraid to say what's on their mind. Back in the day, people might have been like, "Keep it on the hush hush"—they won't say it. Now, people are saying whatever they want to say about Blacks, because they know nothing's really going to happen.

Another student expressed: "Going places and seeing a Trump sign, or a Cruz sign, all of those things are uncomfortable for me." This student would see these signs around the college town

that she lived in. Although some students believed their campuses were trying to provide a positive racial climate, their surrounding communities often did not. Lauren discussed town–gown relations:

[The town is] full of rural people that don't make a lot of money; there's a lot of racist people that don't go to the college but are around it. . . . I have bad problems with panic and anxiety, and it's to the point [that] I'm afraid of every truck that drives down the street because 9 out of 10 times, they're yelling things or throwing things at me as I'm walking down the street.

A number of participants expressed that the campus environment should be a place to reflect on these issues, but many found that their classroom spaces did not acknowledge them:

Last year, I struggled with all the stuff [that] was going on: Black Lives Matter movement . . . a lot of the police violence happened. . . . To read about that and then come to class and no one brings it up, that was difficult for me. I wanted a space to talk about those things. (Peter)

When discussions did occur, participants expressed discomfort in how they were facilitated and the expectation that Black students represent their race. Jen explained: "Whenever we talk about police brutality, the whole class is, '[Jen], what's your opinion?' Wait, there are other students here. You don't have to just ask me because I'm a Person of Color." Similarly Lauren expressed: "There's always that classic instance of, if we're talking about anything that has to do with race, and students do that side glance at you, expecting you to be that monolith voice when we move to class discussion on it."

Furthermore, students wanted their peers, faculty, and administration to acknowledge the role that the university played in reifying racial inequality. James explained how he connected

the movement at the University of Missouri to his own college experience:

> One of our faculty was like, "If that student who starved himself at Mizzou . . . if he was here, I would have to do something as a faculty member to support him and make sure he doesn't have to starve himself to get his point across." . . . I'm like, "Well what are you doing about [me and another Black student in this program]? We're not starving ourselves, but we are loudly advocating for ourselves, and pointing out: this shit is not okay. But we're still eating. Do we have to starve ourselves for us to be taken seriously?"

Some students saw their campuses making efforts toward engaging racial issues but believed it was not enough. For example, Samantha explained:

> [My campus] has the signs all across the lawn and wanting Black students to know they matter, but Black students . . . want more than just you posting signs. They want to see you act, and they don't want to hear that you have a plan. They want to see something going on now. . . . That's where the clash is, because all they hear is rhetoric or see a sign.

Overall, participants drew a number of comparisons between what they saw happening across the country related to race being mirrored in what they saw on their own campuses (e.g., police brutality and tension, racially charged political climate). These were issues that they consistently encountered and thought about in both their academic and social campus engagement.

Experiencing and Engaging in Movements on Campus

Students described the impact that racial incidents in US society had on them, one expressing: "When something happens—and something's always happening, like Mike Brown or Trayvon Martin—it feels very

personal to me. It's definitely a very raw experience." Describing the experience as "raw" demonstrates the vulnerability and pain students carried. It was present in how they experienced university spaces and engaged with campus members.

For example, when race-related issues would occur and be in the news, it impacted participants' interactions with White faculty and peers:

> Black Lives Matter, there was something happening in the news [about it], and people are just very insensitive to these things, even in front of me. . . . It's been an experience for me to try to address microaggressions without being unprofessional. (Sheila)

Racial microaggressions, insensitivity, and invalidation were heightened in campus spaces, particularly if a student was the only Person of Color. Liz illustrated this: "A lot of the times I was the only Black person. I remember having to feel like I was the spokesperson for Black people and that my experiences weren't valid." Sheila and Liz demonstrated that not only were students experiencing distress from race-related issues in broader society but that the hurt was reified by a PWI campus that exerted racism and pressure.

Many participants were also disheartened by their interactions with White peers outside of the classroom:

> I lost a friend last semester. He was a White male and we were talking about the Michael Brown thing in class and his reaction was: "He was a criminal. He got what he deserved." And we had this debate that ended our friendship. [I was] like, "You don't know the whole story either way. Even if he was or if he wasn't, no one deserves to die and sit there in the middle of the street. That's just common decency." That broke my heart because that was really one of my good friends . . . and so to completely lose that friendship over that debate was hard because I know

there's other people who experienced that. (Donna)

Similarly, after a conversation about Mike Brown, Howard expressed to his White peer: "No, you just said something very messed up, and I don't want to associate with you." The sentiments of feeling obligated to engage in conversations regarding racism and racial tensions in the United States was something many Black students felt they needed to do. Yet, as these examples suggest, it could change their relationships with White students.

These racist and racializing encounters contributed to and/or reinforced the desire among participants to engage in race-related activism. Students described participating in protests, sit-ins, walkouts, and die-ins, but these were not always well received on their campuses:

> We did marches for Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, and I remember I was marching for Trayvon and we were on campus and we had our signs. . . . Somebody yelled, "STFU," just very angry and people got so upset that we were marching through campus. (Sheila)

Similarly Mariah, a student from a campus in the Midwest, was shocked by some of the responses against campus activism: "We did a silent protest where we had tape on our mouths, and there's stuff like, 'Ooh, I'm glad somebody finally taped their mouths shut. They're so ignorant. Ugh, they're so rowdy.'" Gina also described the response after a walk-out on campus:

> Yik Yak blew up. A bunch of people [sent] messages about the protest, and they were very hateful and openly racist. One of them was: "Somebody needs to come get their slaves." They said a whole bunch of things like: "I don't understand why all these Black people need to throw a temper tantrum every time one of them

gets killed." It was really hateful, hurtful, racist, very racially charged comments on Yik Yak that day.

As these students illustrated, the hate, ignorance, and racism that Black Lives Matter protestors and other race activists experience in US society was present at PWIs as students took an activist stance.

Some participants explained that their White peers had a hard time understanding the significance of Black student activism, as some White students believed that they were not directly impacted:

> When we had the die-in, [the campus] ignored it until they saw that we were going to be there on the library floor. We were encouraged to stop and were told that we were being monitored. Because it was the week before finals, a lot of people were pissed off. A lot of people didn't think we needed to do this because it wasn't directly affecting students. (Samantha)

This participant also recognized that some students might not agree with the tactics used, but it was important for them to still recognize the significance of the movement and stand in solidarity with one another: "We should respect each other, but that doesn't happen if, as I'm protesting something, people are telling me that my life is pretty much worthless."

Despite these negative experiences, students found race-related incidents opening up space for dialogue on their campus about race and racism as well as empowering students to engage in activist movements. James described a Black Lives Matter march on campus:

> To my surprise, a ton of people came. I was like, "Wow!" It was just so heartwarming to see that even if 78% of the people and the faces in the crowd were White, that this was still something that could happen at [my campus].

Other students talked about how their universities were attempting to be more deliberate in their actions of supporting student activism:

> I think that was really our moment to stand up to what is going on in our campus, which has sprung to some change. The change that we want is coming slowly, but it seems progressive, with a new president of the university who's having diversity talks and just hearing any Person of Color or any one voice that feels marginalized. (Curtis)

Gayle also discussed university support: "During a program that our president was hosting— it was right after the Missouri issue—not only were students protesting outside, but our faculty were protesting." Thus, solidarity and initiatives for racial justice could be found at PWIs, particularly when administrators and faculty provided the support and resources needed to foster change.

Impact of Racial Climate on Current and Future Engagement

Participants discussed how their experiences with race and racism in college increased their desire to positively represent what they described as the Black community: "I am part of a community that has all sorts of needs, and I have a responsibility as a person in that community, especially one who is in a place to make some change" (Monica). Students saw themselves as part of a community they received support from and represented.

Like Monica, many students described the responsibility that they had to the Black community. For example, Frank stated what it means to be a part of this community:

> You have to approach things in a way that an African American male is obligated to do so, in everything that you do. There [are] stigmas surrounding life as an African American that you have to, one, battle, two, in some cases live up to, and live beyond.

Alexis also reflected on her need to rise above stereotypes as part of her responsibility:

> You have this way you have to present yourself as being against what people would say is the stereotyped idea of what a Black person is. Instead of just living your life like, "Oh I'm just a human." It's like, "No, you are Black and you're the best model of it."

However, in describing being part of a Black community, it came from a sense of empowerment rather than a role pushed upon them by White peers and faculty, as described in the previous themes.

Participants described obligations to the Black community not only via representation but also via action. Kelly expressed a desire to be a mentor to incoming Black students:

> I definitely have had a lot of opportunities, but I feel like if I had a mentor, if I had somebody that I could relate to, it probably would have been a lot easier. It motivates me, because now I want to get somewhere where I would be able to help somebody, and they wouldn't have to go through all the nonsense that I went through to get to where I'm at.

Similarly, Gayle described her challenges as motivation for helping other Black students:

> I often question myself as far as, "Can I really do that? Do I really belong here?" Because I don't see, as far as faculty goes— there are no African American females within the college. . . . It's sad and it's upsetting, but at the same time it's just, "Okay, you can't let the fact that there are no African American females as far as faculty go deter you from being able to succeed." I feel being Black within the university pushes me to be better and to want to have other African Americans be able to do the same things that I was able to do.

Gayle went on to say that she makes sure that there is a Black student presence on the

university governing board, because it was an opportunity that she had and one that she sees as important.

Participants had motivation to be leaders and provide opportunities for Black students; however, this created pressure for students as well: "Now that I'm in a primarily White environment, I feel that drive twice as hard. I have to be on my shit 24–7, or go above and beyond, just to feel like I'm representing my race well" (Monica). Similarly, Gayle described: "I have to be a representative of the entire African American community when it really shouldn't be a weight on my shoulders alone. But I would not identify as anything else, because being Black made me have to work harder." For these students there was tension as they felt empowerment and stress at PWIs in seeking to support and be a representative of the Black community.

Students discussed being engaged in leadership within the Black community on their campus or college town. This included the Black Student Union, African or Caribbean student associations, Black Greek organizations, religious organizations, and service/mentoring groups. Sheila explained: "I'm a part of a mentoring program here on campus for students that identify with the African diaspora, and it's a one-on-one mentorship between an upper-class student and a first-year student."

Students also described their future plans for engaging in the Black community, which often was connected to their professional goals:

> We as a community need to focus [on] getting back in touch with our roots. . . . That's something that's important to me. . . . We have to get back to those times where we're making sure that we as a community are good and looking out for each other. (Kelly)

This desire to focus one's engagement in the Black community and pursue racial uplift was common. Most described wanting to get involved in public service or outreach-related careers, even if that was not the main focus of their major. For example, one student in STEM expressed:

> I want to land somewhere where I'm teaching or running a Black student inclusion-in-science outreach program. I don't think that I can just be a straight scientist or researcher. I can't just sit here and study plants; I need to be involved in my community.

For this participant, despite being trained to be a scientist who traditionally works in a lab, being involved and engaging in outreach was more desirable. Additionally, a student in criminal justice described a desire to get involved in reducing Black incarceration:

> I want to be a case manager or a correctional treatment specialist, working directly with adult male offenders, specifically African American. Stop the mass incarceration and slow down recidivism rates . . . helping offenders figure out their plan for when they get out, so they don't come back into the system. . . . What barriers do they have to cross when they get out? What type of programming are they interested in if they want to continue school? How to get them out on their feet.

These narratives demonstrate the desire for students to engage in action and make change within their racial community. They are aware of the challenges that Blacks face in overcoming systemic barriers to participate in STEM or deal with the legal system, and plan to use the skills, knowledge, and credentials they will have attained in college to fight for racial justice.

Students described how their racial identity and college experiences were connected in fostering their professional endeavors. Frank explained: "One of my goals is to [run] or be involved in running a university. I have a unique perspective on the approach to

police brutality, and then discrimination and violence on college campuses toward African American folk." Similarly, Kelly expressed: "I'm interested in education policies, mentoring students, teaching students, because I just feel like at this point I've become more self-aware when it comes to my race and my identity." Participants drew from experiences with racialization and racism throughout their lives, but particularly on their campuses, as a driver of their endeavors.

A number of students said going to graduate school would help in achieving their goals:

> I want to get my Ph.D. in developmental psychology focusing on racial identity development in Black and Brown kids. . . . I'm fond of the education system because, if you're working with kids, that's where they spend the most time. How education supports or fails to support identity in Black and Brown kids, and what are steps we can take? (Liz)

As students experienced the highly racialized nature of their campuses, they were becoming more aware of how they could positively impact issues of race/racism through their future goals.

DISCUSSION

We discuss four issues that support and advance scholarly understanding of Black students' experiences with racial climate as well as the DLE. The first reinforces the need to understand how universities are connected to systems and structures within broader society. "Institutions do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are part of communities and individual external commitments and macrosystems or the contextual forces outside the institution" (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 49). Unfortunately, this claim has remained more of a conceptual construct than one that is often explicitly emphasized in research and practice. Much of the literature on campus racial climate focuses exclusively on the institutional context (e.g., structural, behavioral, psychological factors; Mendez & Cabrera, 2015). Yet, Black students' narratives in this study highlight that campuses reflect the larger US culture or "macrosystem" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). As outlined in the DLE, although it is important that universities work to improve the racial climate on their campuses, this work must be situated within the local community environment, policy arena, and sociohistorical context with which and within which universities operate.

Second, although the DLE emphasizes the exosystem and macrosystem, it does not explicitly reference the contemporary climate for diversity or the racial climate in US society. This climate is a mesosystem factor that has a direct impact on policy agendas, local community climate, and as we argue, campus climate. Our study contributes to the discourse on Black students' educational experiences by demonstrating the interconnected nature of campus racial climate and the racial climate of US society for students. Participants demonstrated how the systemic anti-Black racism being resisted through larger movements such as Black Lives Matter is also reflected and reproduced in US universities. Participants also highlight that, although their White peers can ignore this connection or remain at arm's length from societal racial issues, for Black students the issues happening in society are a racial mirror of what is happening on their campuses. This finding takes extant research that has demonstrated that different racial groups experience and react to their campus racial climates in different ways (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008) a step further by showing the nuances in how Black students experience and react to societal racial climate in ways they perceive as distinct from their White peers. These racialized contexts (campus and societal)

are interwoven for minoritized students, and this must be acknowledged and engaged for universities to actively promote inclusion at multiple levels.

Third, our study advances understanding of community context and external commitments, which the DLE outlines as impacting campus climate for diversity. Scholars have highlighted how students' external commitments to their local communities and families can have positive and negative effects on retention (George Mwangi, Daoud, English, & Griffin, 2017; Tseng, 2004). For example, low-income students may feel an obligation to help their families while in college by working or helping out at home while other family members work (Titus, 2006). Yet, participants in our study described a different kind of external commitment than what has been described in the DLE. Rather than a more easily defined unit, such as family or hometown, these students expressed a commitment to the Black community as a driving force in their campus engagement and future goals. Participants felt a responsibility to act as an agent for change within the Black community given their positionalities as college students. This sense of deep commitment toward maintaining the vitality of the Black community may not have originated during their time in college, but it was clearly developed and reinforced by the racial tensions occurring in US society and students' experiences with race and racism on their campuses.

Finally, our findings complicate the understanding of how the climate for diversity and external commitment relate to student outcomes. The external commitment to Black community that participants described led to engagement that had a positive impact on participants but were reinforced by negative racial climate experiences. Their experiences with campus racial climate were in alignment with extant literature, which states that Black students at PWIs often experience isolation due to racial prejudice, lack of structural diversity, and discrimination (Griffin et al., 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Milem et al., 2005). One might conclude that this would negatively impact students' retention and achievement (outcomes of the DLE); however, our study demonstrates that, even with these struggles, Black students continue to find ways to positively connect to their racial identity through activism and engagement in the Black community on and off campus, which also reinforced their persistence. In some ways, this commitment to the Black community reflects values of justice, equity, and inclusion that parallel one of the outcomes of the DLE: developing competencies for a multicultural world. Hurtado and colleagues (2012) defined this outcome as "a set of skills and abilities needed to interact with individuals from different social identity groups, and to make ethical decisions in a society marked by inequality and conflict" (pp. 52–54). Our findings extend this to consider how Black students learn to navigate how they are negatively perceived and treated by others, which unfortunately, is a skill that is also needed in today's US racial climate.

IMPLICATIONS

Although Black students' experiences with the campus racial climate at PWIs have been researched, our study demonstrates there are areas for further investigation. Researchers should continue to investigate the interplay between the university context with the political, sociohistorical, and racial climate of the broader society. For example, because social media and news media play such major roles in how issues of race and racism are portrayed in the United States, scholars should consider how messages from these outlets impact minoritized students and racial climate on campuses. Another related topic for inquiry is

how students' experiences on campus influence their activism outside of campus as well as how students' off-campus activism and engagement in societal issues impact their on-campus engagement and outcomes.

We demonstrated that Black students perceive a responsibility to their racial community, which is reinforced by negative experiences at their PWIs. This external commitment may help counter the negative experiences and thus have a positive impact on the students' success; however, it is beyond the scope of this article to draw that conclusion. Future research can examine the relationship between this type of external commitment and college outcomes to determine how it impacts students' academic outcomes and civic engagement, for example, using concepts of racial community uplift, community agency, and community pressure to understand the interplay between these and Black students' academic outcomes and well-being.

Our findings have several implications for campus administrators. The results underscore the importance of having resources in place to support Black students when they experience racism from various parties on campus and off. Support may come in the form of multicultural centers and program houses that have resources specific to the needs of Black students (Landry, 2002), hiring mental health Professionals of Color (as evidence exists that cultural mistrust might prevent some Black students from seeking help from White counselors; Nickerson, Helms, & Terrell, 1994) or training White counselors to center on Black students' unique experiences (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Additionally, mentorship from faculty can create spaces for Black students to not only share and process their experiences but also maintain motivation to continue their studies (Griffin, Perez, Holmes, & Mayo, 2010). Although these forms of support are not new, we name them because, across the

United States, PWIs are cutting resources for multicultural centers, aggregating resources targeting Black students into more generalized diversity programming, and creating systems in which Black student organizations compete with other cultural organizations for funding (Patton, 2006). Further, Black Studies programs are being eradicated or aggregated into other academic programs and there is continued underrepresentation of Black faculty and counseling staff (Rooks, 2007; Turner Kelly, Gaston Gayles, & Williams, 2017). This shift away from resources supporting the specific needs of Black students is problematic given the findings of this study, and we recommend that universities make sure they are aligning their resources with the needs of Black students to ensure their success.

Our recommendations for supporting Black students might have the added benefit of creating a more welcoming campus racial climate, but do not ensure it. To create a more positive campus racial climate diversity and inclusion as well as social justice and anti-blackness must be integrated into the campus environment and culture. As our findings demonstrate, White students and faculty can "opt out" of engaging and grappling with racial issues happening in broader society, which then impacts the campus climate for diversity. Thus, any resources, interventions, or programs developed for improving racial climate must ensure that White campus members are exposed to historical and contemporary racial issues. At the student level, administrators can work with student leaders and groups to create spaces for positive interactions among diverse peers (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Structured diversity programming targeting students in the first year, for example, are effective in having them interact with those outside of their own race (Hu & Kuh, 2003), which is key for intellectual development around race (Hurtado, 2007).

Administrators must name the role their institutions play in reifying racial inequity and racist structures. At some colleges, administrators are acknowledging the role that slaves played in the construction of their campuses and are connecting this to current practices related to the slaves' descendants and to Black communities in the local area (Walters, 2017). This work toward racial reconciliation draws explicit connections between historical and contemporary campus (and societal) contexts. A positive racial climate can be encouraged by acknowledging institutional history and emphasizing the difficult, but critical, change needed through action and policies focused on areas where equity is not realized (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Finally, because colleges are embedded in towns that have their own political and cultural ideologies that might conflict with the institutions' ideologies, another implication is the need for colleges to engage and collaborate with their local communities. Town–gown relationships provide colleges and their local communities opportunities to collaborate and effect change in both settings (McComas, Stedman, & Hart, 2011; Miller & Shinn, 2005). Our study shows that the racial climate in college towns impacts Black students' well-being. Thus, it is critical that administrators create inroads with local leaders and thereby allow stakeholders to find ways to attend to the needs of the community together, to foster understanding of the diversity present within the student body, and to create safe environments (Gallo & Davis, 2009).

Predominately White institutions need to look both inwardly and outwardly when working to improve their campus racial climate and the experiences of minoritized students. Our participants illustrated that they cannot disconnect their campus experiences from the systemic racism occurring in broader society. Participants also expressed that their PWIs are not properly acknowledging these issues or effectively helping students navigate them. Thus, we call for PWIs to not act as isolated ivory towers but, instead, recognize and improve their role and position within the racial ecosystem of US society.

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