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# “It Makes Me Wonder, How I Keep from Goin’ Under:” Deconstructing Cultural Strengths in the Stories of Black College and University Students

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# “IT MAKES ME WONDER, HOW I KEEP FROM GOIN’ UNDER:” DECONSTRUCTING CULTURAL STRENGTHS IN THE STORIES OF BLACK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

"IT MAKES ME WONDER, HOW I KEEP FROM GOIN' UNDER:" DECONSTRUCTING CULTURAL STRENGTHS IN THE STORIES OF BLACK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by Sikeza Chandra Fowlks

To deconstruct conceptualizations of Black cultural resiliency outside of the perception of the current dominant culture, the present study interviewed Black university and college students for their narratives about their perceptions of Black culture and how they navigate systemic oppression. To create a full conceptualization of Black issues and cultural resilience this study explored the current literature around Black experiences of racism and its relationship to Race-Based Trauma. Additionally, the researcher expanded upon current interventions used to mitigate Race-Based Trauma and how Black culture is currently defined within systemic oppression. To answer the study's research question framework around Black cultural perceptions and Black ways of coping the researcher recruited six Black higher education students for semi-structured interviews framed by a narrative-inquiry and thematic analysis approach in addition to the use of song elicitations to texturize study contributor narratives. The findings of the study revealed how Black higher education students use their cultural capital to resist adversity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because “it’s like a jungle sometimes.” Thank you to my family who have made navigating these difficult times we live in more bearable. And to all of the students who felt that they were alone, you are seen, and together we are creating a way out.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Throughout history, Black individuals in America have been subjected to various forms of racial discrimination, but especially since the inception of the Atlantic Slave Trade. A historical theme of oppression and terror has contributed to continued narratives around suffering and adversity for Black adults today (Edman & Gozen, 2021). Currently, the Black male college experience is assumed to be danger-laden, and the constant aura of crisis ascribed from generational oppression is inherent to Black identity or Blackness more broadly (Brooms, 2020). Similarly, female Black college attendees are characterized as resilient and gritty individuals who triumph over the legacy of generational discrimination through the pursuit of higher education (Williams et al., 2022). However, these conceptualizations of Black adults inflame the recurring risk of race-based trauma that permeates their everyday lives from birth to old age (Jones, Anderson, Gaskin-Wasson et al., 2020). With the lack of Black voices in current academia to dispute the harmful perception that Black people can tolerate continuous racial harm, a need to highlight their perspectives is imperative for advancing means of dispelling race-based trauma in Black adults.

While emerging literature for therapeutic interventions for Black people includes clinicians applying mainstream interventions in more culturally sensitive ways, the demand for cultural competency around the strengths of Black culture is increasing. Subsequently, I posit an investigation of Black cultural strengths as a call to action for social justice via Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework based on five tenets for resistance to current systems of oppression towards diverse groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000), and Community

Cultural Wealth (CCW), a framework for recognizing the six types of capital that allows diverse groups to resist oppressive systems (Yosso, 2005). These lenses create avenues for mental health professionals to adhere to in order to maintain ethical expectations for multicultural awareness and service provider competencies.

**Background**

The purpose of this study is to spotlight the voices of Black university students in relation to their cultural identity. Under the guidance of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth pedagogies, participants of this study are considered to have valuable information to share. Additionally, given the current framework for research being centered around imbalanced power dynamics that reflect the archetype of the oppressor and the oppressed (Freire, 2014), such as the dichotomies between the researcher and the researched, clinician and client, and the investigator and the investigated, Critical Race Theory would posit that these dynamics continue to perpetuate systems that bar diverse groups from being seen as equitable figures in sociopolitical and academic spaces (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005). As such, this study's participants will be referred to as contributors throughout the remainder of this study.

As current literature suggests that emerging adulthood may be an active life stage in the identity development process (Grier-Reed & Ajayi, 2019), Black student contributors from higher education institutions within the Pacific Northwest; including Oregon, Washington, and California, were invited to participate in the study. While 41 million Black people live across the U.S., 2 million reside in California, 300 thousand in Washington, and 80 thousand

in Oregon (United States Census Bureau, 2020a; United States Census Bureau, 2020b; United States Census Bureau, 2020c), and there are no Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) present in any of these states (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Thus, I have attempted to illuminate the lives of Black students on the West Coast who may not have the same experience as Black students who are closer to larger communities of Black people and institutions with Black students in mind. As such, I propose that this study's contributions from the Pacific Northwestern population of Black students can serve as an additional perspective of the Black experience for Black adults living on the West Coast of the United States of America.

**Positionality Statement**

As a graduate student of San José State University's Master's degree Counselor Education program in pursuit of Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor pre-licensure qualifications, I must acknowledge my privilege as a student in a higher education institution as it may texturize the viewpoints of this study. My identity as a first-generation student and biracial woman of Black and Indo-Fijian descent is a critical component to consider in the storytelling aspects of this research, as my worldview may inform the perspectives that may be illuminated from this study. In fact, the wellspring of this study's conception is based on my perceptions and experiences as a college student navigating institutions that were not developed for the progression of those with identities such as mine. My own experiences with feelings of otherness, and experiencing microaggressions in non-Black spaces are areas I have subjected to personal reflective processes so I do not superimpose these projections

onto the study's findings. However, it is essential that while much of my identity is to be considered in the co-authoring of this study's narratives, it also expands upon the voices of Black and Pacific Islander women in the spheres of academia and dismantles current ideologies of research that are institutionalized by "whiteness." In doing so, I hope that this study will present as a form of counter-narrative to the societal perceptions of young Black people and generate further discussion on how to eliminate the practices that bar them from progressing across physical, mental, and spiritual development.

**Problem Statement**

Research has shown that Black individuals develop race-based trauma (RBT) as a result of experiencing racial discrimination and are at risk for experiencing a decreased quality of life due to RBT inciting the development of emotional and behavioral disorders, low self-esteem, frequent physical symptoms of illness, and impaired frontal lobe capacity (Henderson et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). Current therapeutic literature that attempts to address RBT focuses on the impact these traumatic incidences have on the biopsychosocial development of Black people (Elisha & Collins, 2022), harmful conceptualizations of Black individuals (Anderson, 2019; McGee & Stovall, 2015), the therapeutic relationship (Kelly et al., 2020), and the systemic issues that RBT has emerged from (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). However, current literature showcases limited information regarding the specific positive cultural traits that may mitigate the effects of race-based trauma in Black individuals, particularly Black university students. At present, Black college students are expected to persevere in educational institutions that mirror the racial landscapes outside of them, while

their identity is viewed as an obstacle rather than as cultural capital (Wallace, 2022; Williams et al., 2022). This depiction is relevant to mental health professionals who may serve Black college students as, overall, Black clients are continuously portrayed through a deficit model in lieu of acknowledgement of the cultural wealth that they bring to their counseling experiences. Consequently, this limited mindset around Black cultural capital wealth excludes avenues for clinicians and Black clients to achieve healing through the therapeutic process.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to highlight the common positive cultural resiliency factors that are present in the narratives of Black university students who have experienced race-based trauma in order to provide practitioners with additional context about Black cultural capital. Through narrative inquiry and thematic theoretical analysis, this study aimed to reveal core narratives relevant to the framework of Community Cultural Wealth, which consists of six types of capital (Yosso, 2005). A triangulation of narrative inquiry methods including semi-structured interviews, and elicitations through a song immersion experience around the narratives of this study's contributors attempted to illuminate the experiences of Black individuals to provide additional counternarratives to the effects of systematic oppression, where Black thoughts and voices are continuously viewed as minority. Subsequently, practitioners may be more prepared to conceptualize their Black clientele such as university students from a strengths-based perspective in lieu of the deficit and crisis model (Brooms, 2020) associated with this community at present.

## Research Questions

Informed from a Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth theoretical framework, where Black clients are conceptualized from a strengths-based perspective based on the assets that their culture endows them with to develop counternarratives to the discrimination resulting from systematic oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005), this study addressed the following questions around race-based trauma and Black adults:

- What would Black university students describe as Black cultural capital?
- What specific themes or cultural assets from Black culture may mitigate the effects of race-based trauma?
- What cultural resiliency factors aside from "grit" can be identified as Black cultural capital wealth?
- How have Black college students persevered against adversity?
- What perspectives around Black identity have not been previously considered?

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of contextualizing the focus of this study, the following terms were used:

***Black*** - the identification moniker of the people and culture of North American descendants from the Atlantic slave trading of African-Americans; used interchangeably with African-Americans to describe the study's population focus.

***Blackness*** - a term used to describe the concept of Black identity; used interchangeably with the phrase "Black identity."

***Capital*** - the resources of an individual or group that an individual belongs to that enhances their capacity to navigate and progress through social, economic, academic, and political landscapes (Bourdieu, 2018).

***Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)*** - a critique of Bourdieu's six forms of capital in a sociological context that is centered around the tenets of Critical Race theory and centralizes the resources of marginalized peoples in contrast to their being viewed as detrimental to living within a society (Yosso, 2005).

***Critical Race Theory (CRT)*** - a five-tenet framework designed to deconstruct oppressive institutions, practices, and thought processes that acknowledges the enduring nature of racism and the permeance it has on the lives of marginalized groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

***Race-Based Trauma (RBT)*** - a non-pathological condition expressed as adverse psychological and physiological effects from experiencing racism (Carter 2007; Henderson et al., 2019).

## Assumptions

For the purposes of facilitating this study, the following assumptions were made:

- Individuals interested in participating in the study would be willing and able to participate in the study from its beginning to end phases.
- Individuals that participated in the study would find that sharing their experiences would be beneficial to their psychological well-being.

- Individuals that participated in the study would answer the provided questionnaire with as much accuracy and detail as possible.
- Individuals would be forthcoming to co-author their narratives.

**Limitations**

In the process of creating the study design, the following limitations were considered:

- Individuals that participate in the study may not be entirely forthcoming in the construction of their narratives due to discomfort around topics such as discrimination or racism.
- Individuals that participate in the study may not answer questions during the interview in its entirety or with expanded details.
- Individuals that participate in the study may not complete each phase of the study due to time conflicts or other reasons.

**Delimitations**

In the process of creating this study's design, the following delimitations were implemented:

- Although race-based trauma can occur in Black individuals across the lifespan, this study focuses on Black adults.

- While 41 million Black people live in the United States, they account for 5.3% of the Black population in California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). This study only focuses on Black undergraduate and graduate students attending an institution on the West Coast of the United States of America

**Significance Statement**

Though racism and its permeance in Black development and culture has been an issue since the slave trading of Africans at America's conception, conversations surrounding the issue have heightened in recent years at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pointedly, challenges of the pandemic further exposed fractures in the perspectives we have of Black people, their challenges, and their needs (Dong et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2020). At present, Blackness is consistently associated with *grit*, triumph, and overcoming the odds at the expense of mental well-being, and as a result continues to perpetuate the narratives that sleight the needs of Black Americans (Anderson, 2019; Dong et al., 2023; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Implicitly, these viewpoints suggest that Black people are consistently in the midst of turmoil that can only be relieved by the generosity of the systems and peoples they are oppressed by in lieu of mindsets that celebrate the positive narratives Black people create despite adversity. This is not to suggest that Black people are to become responsible for their own healing in response to hardships, but to offer means of dismantling mindsets around oppressor "messianism" (Freire, 2014). Thus, centering focus on the narratives of Black college students who carry the generational effects of systemic oppression while navigating institutions that are not centered around their cultural strengths

serves to deconstruct the way that professionals think about serving the people who are consistently failed by these systems.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Current research highlights the prevalence of race-based trauma in Black adults as a result of experiencing racism. The effects of race-based trauma can lead to the development of maladaptive psychological and physical health symptoms such as diminished self-esteem, recurring headaches, impaired executive functioning, and the appearance of emotional and behavioral disorders (Henderson et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). While emerging studies have begun to examine interventions and therapeutic practices for clinicians to consider while working with Black clientele, limited research evaluates Black communities' unique Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). This lack of information about the nuances of Black experiences leaves room for clinicians to miss the possibility of leveraging Black cultural capital as a resiliency factor to mitigate race-based trauma. Examining cultural capital as resilience is thus critical for enhancing therapeutic services to Black clients who are widely affected by racism and systematic oppression (Kelly et al., 2020). Simultaneously, in analyzing the minutiae of the Black American experience and identity development processes using the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), the current bodies of literature that associate Black Americans with a deficit model can be countered (Brooms, 2020). The following discusses the current understanding within the literature of how Black Americans experience racism, how the impact of racism leads to RBT, the current interventions used to mitigate RBT, and cultural considerations for dispelling RBT.

## Black Americans and Their Experiences with Racial Discrimination

In order to develop a body of research that thoroughly explains the detrimental nature of racial trauma on Black individuals and to deconstruct current epistemologies surrounding the cultural perceptions of Black people, the element that constitutes its cause, racism, will be considered in the components of this study. To initiate this deconstruction process, I introduce Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is founded on five core tenets noted as (a) centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, indicating that racism is enduring and present in the institutions and policies individuals interact with; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, the notion that these institutions and policies are advantageous to perpetrators of racism; (c) the commitment to social justice, the everlasting resolve to dismantle racism; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, the knowledge of cultural groups is essential and valid to interpreting systemic oppression; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective, the concept of racism being challenged through various mediums and methods (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). These tenets will guide the premise of challenging current thought around Black people, their struggles, and how the dominant culture perceives them. Furthermore, by acknowledging the manifestations of racism and its historical linkage to Black culture and identity development, the researcher presents their commitment to social justice. Thus, to further this agenda, the relationship between race, racism, and Black identity will be explored across various contexts while presenting perspectives to consider in regard to Black people and their mental health needs.

Historically, Black people have suffered and retaliated to unfair treatment since the conception of the slave trading of African Americans to modern-day policing in the United States (Kelly et al., 2020). Consequently, slavery's realization and systemization in the US, along with its after-effects on Black thought, are considered to be interwoven with Black identity formation (Helms, 1990, as cited in Burrell-Craft, 2020). Given the interconnected relationship between racism in the environment of Black people and Black identity development, one can consider that racism is inseparable from the psyche of Black Americans. In consideration that many of the traumas Black people experience are a result of racism (Carter, 2007), it is imperative to examine the contexts in which racism presents itself and its manifestations.

Racial discrimination has become an intrinsic component of the Black American experience and can be identified through overt and covert acts of racism. Definitively, overt acts of racism can range from physical and verbal attacks, threats to one's life, exclusion, social avoidance, and discrimination (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Conversely, covert acts of racism exist in the foundations of educational and societal systems, largely in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions, which reflect beliefs and schemas about certain racial demographics, are most noted as racial profiling, racial vilification, institutional racism, racist attitudes, and denial of racism (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Findings around the perceived covert and overt acts of racism in the U.S. revealed that racial discrimination is an experience that more than half of Black adults reported having across vocational and social interactions (Datz, 2017). Additionally, 51% of Black individuals expressed that they have

heard racial slurs directed towards them, and 52% shared the experience of hearing offensive comments about Black people. In tandem, 4 in 10 Black individuals have had the experience of violence and harassment related to race. In summation, 92% of Black Americans believe in the existence of racial discrimination in the United States (Datz, 2017). Clearly, for Black Americans, racism remains ever present in their lives. As such, the consideration of racism in regards to Black well-being, identity development, and resistance is paramount.

Black Americans not only experience racism in relation to history and the present but also across their lifespan, where its effects result in adverse psychological and physical health conditions (Jones, Anderson, Gaskin-Wasson et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2019). From an early age, racial discrimination weakens self-confidence, becomes internalized, prevents achievement, and affects mental health in Black children (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Additionally, due to the early onset of racial discrimination, Black children may experience challenges in their identity developmental processes as racial experiences may accumulate from this stage in life and onwards (Jones, Anderson, Gaskin-Wasson et al., 2020). Racism presents itself even at the preliminary stages of life, and its consequences may be considered as a component of Black identity that is to be challenged.

However, experiences of racism do not end in early childhood. Markedly, an increase in suicidality among Black adolescents, with a 73% increase in the rate of occurrence between 1991 and 2017, suggests that the cumulative effects of racism are a contributing factor for young Black Americans who decide to end their lives (Elisha & Collins, 2022; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020). Addressing the effects of racism is imperative, and it is equally

urgent to illuminate means of resisting its consequences if they inform later stages of Black lifespan development, including the lives of Black people who attend university.

Similarly, racial experiences do not end in adolescence. Markedly, the Federal Hate Crime Summary conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2014 revealed that 48.5% of hate crime cases were racially motivated (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). In contrast, the Federal Hate Crime Summary of 2019 disclosed that 57.6% of hate crime cases were racially motivated (FBI, 2019). Along with the data's indication of the increasing frequency of these hate crimes, the increased intensity of public awareness of racially motivated hate crimes has stirred Black Americans over the past three years, particularly in response to the violent deaths at the hands of police enforcement of Elijah McClain in 2019 and George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. Similar to the publicly displayed deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice via television and social media outlets from 2014 through 2015, public instances of Black suffering (Grinage, 2019) are no exception to hate crime data. These overt acts of racism are seemingly unavoidable to Black Americans regardless of age, whether they are experiencing violence akin to the aforementioned tragedies or if they are experiencing these violent acts vicariously in the media broadcasted around them.

The reality that many Black individuals face is that regardless of the covert or overt nature of racism, it is apparent in the policies and practices of institutions, and it presents itself through interpersonal interactions that harm Black individuals simply for being Black (Henderson et al., 2019). This compilation of overt and covert racist experiences across the

lifespan then contributes to racial trauma, or race-based trauma, where Black Americans continuously experience increased levels of harm to their psychological, physical, and social being. Subsequently, this trauma results in hypervigilance, increased levels of arousal, and other symptoms associated with anxiety and depression (Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019). Considering the wide scope of racism, which can inflict racial trauma on a Black person from childhood to adulthood, and the pointed number of Black Americans having been affected by racial discrimination, it is clear that racial trauma cannot be overlooked by clinicians when they serve Black clients. Thus, this study intended to further explore counters to the development of racial trauma, as its wellspring from racism is a central component of the Black experience. In addition, this study attempted to expand how mental health professionals and the larger society can be an ally in resisting these challenges.

**Race-Based Trauma and Its Impact on Black Life**

To further contextualize the occurrence and prevalence of race-based trauma (RBT), one can assess the extent to which racial trauma dwells in a client's environment by applying Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT, while framed as an educational theoretical framework, applies to the treatment of individuals of color across the field of mental health as its core tenets examine the enduring function racism has across societal institutions at the expense of individuals of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). It is often defined as a means to critique racism, which is viewed as a means to oppress and exploit groups of a specific race in the society at large (Crenshaw & Gotanda, 1995). CRT can be applied like a pedagogy that derives from judicial, sociological, ethnic, economic, and political principles to analyze

racism in these contexts as a systematic application of supremacy and inferiority based on race.

Subsequently, CRT allows one to reveal institutionalized hierarchies based on race in the spaces Black Americans transit through (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Lynn & Parker, 2006). CRT across these contexts can be organized into three principles: that race is still a dominant factor in yielding inequities in the U.S., that the way U.S. society exists is based on property rights, and that the junction of property and race allows one to understand inequalities that are present in our institutions (Eppley et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Given that racism is a central figure in the lives of Black Americans, the likelihood of their developing RBT is equally salient as it is the wellspring of psychological and physical health issues that emerging literature classifies as RBT (Carter, 2007). Racism's enduring properties suggest that RBT is as intrinsic to the lifespan development of Black adults as the interactions between one's being Black and the environments which have been systemized by racism are continuous. However, just as racism is persistent, its repercussions of RBT are equally persistent.

At present, the concept of racial trauma can be explored through various interpretations, including those that describe racial trauma as "racial melancholia" (Grinage, 2019) and "haunting" (Yoon, 2019). Haunting, much like its cultural interpretations in western mythology, refers to cyclical or inescapable notions that cannot be put to rest or buried and are carried on as echoes of the past that affect the individual's present. Racial trauma in this framework can, thus, be explained as experiences and fears that one cannot move on from

and are carried with them in their own bodily being (Yoon, 2019). This framework of racial trauma is acceptable in that it not only explores the repetitive component of trauma that constitutes trauma in general but also acknowledges the effects that trauma has on one's body (van der Kolk, 2014). Furthermore, this framework of RBT as "haunting" is parallel to how racism has historical origins, such as slavery (Kelly et al., 2020), that continue to inform current systems of oppression. In a similar light, racial melancholia posits itself as a continuous negotiation between melancholy or grieving as a result of experiencing racism or racist events. Racial melancholia is persistent and remains attached to the body to catalyze its struggle to survive such experiences. Subsequently, with the nature of racial melancholia being parallel with the survival processes of trauma survivors (van der Kolk, 2014), racial melancholia is not quickly extinguished from the lives of the afflicted (Grinage, 2019). This continuous affliction of trauma is not exclusive to a single point in time, and even Black college students are susceptible to its infractions.

Of course, a less psychoanalytic interpretation of racial trauma is referred to as an adverse interaction that can be ongoing or daily with institutional, public, and individual overt or covert acts of racism (Carter, 2007; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019). This "weathering" of Black Americans reveals disproportions in the mortality rates of Black adults compared to White peers (Geronimus et al., 2006). In relation to the permeation of racism and RBT on Black lives and its cumulative effects, Black youth are superfluously affected by racial trauma as a result of experiencing racism, with approximately 65% of Black youth reporting that they experienced a traumatic event (Metzger et al., 2021). Black

youth are also more likely to share that they have poor emotional and behavioral responses to trauma, such as inadequate mental health, overuse of substances, overall decline in welfare, and unsafe sexual escapades (Metzger et al., 2021). Traumas that incite such responses are at times referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which include ten categories of abusive or family-related traumas in one's early childhood (Felitti et al., 1998). These categories specific to Black youth today include witnessing violence, experiencing psychological abuse, witnessing family with substance abuse challenges, living with family members who had been incarcerated, experiencing discrimination and bullying, and experiencing difficult situations in one's locale (Joseph et al., 2020). The consequences of experiencing an ACE are strongly correlated to significant causes of death in adulthood, such as cardiovascular, liver, and respiratory diseases, the development of cancers, and bone fracturing (Felitti et al., 1998). Evidently, for Black individuals, racial trauma can negatively impact their ability to live healthy and long lives even if its inception occurred in one's youth.

Furthermore, research examining the relationship between racial discrimination and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal system, the stress system of the body, revealed that racism contributes to high variability of cortisol release in the bodies of Black adults, resulting in poorer health (Seaton & Zeiders, 2021). Coincidentally, a diminished health status as a result of racism is also linked to low life satisfaction and psychological distress (Utsey et al., 2000). These physical manifestations of RBT, while demonstrating markedly negative outlooks for the lives of Black adults, are similarly impactful as the psychological conceptions of RBT.

While evidence continues to highlight this ongoing psychological and physiological duress of racism, there is little evidence available as to how these complications can be countered from a therapeutic lens.

Given the research spotlighting the internal and external consequences of RBT and the superfluous influx of Black children, adolescents, and adults affected by it (Datz, 2017; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020; Metzger et al., 2021), it is all the more necessary to address means of invoking post-traumatic growth in Black individuals (Dong et al., 2023). Racism's outcomes are not only consequential on Black psychological well-being but also on physical health, and the lack of perspectives for combatting these issues suggests a need to explore avenues for healing. Engaging in such exploration may enhance the practices of mental health service providers who are expected to hold these issues in therapeutic sessions with clients such as Black university students.

### *Measures and Assessments of RBT*

Since RBT can be compounded by several racial discrimination events that present in covert and overt ways across academic, social, and vocational environments, several forms of assessment for its presence in Black clients may be considered (Metzger et al., 2021). When considering the embedded nature of racism in American institutions and the perspective of racism as the etiology for maladaptive adjustments in individuals who have experienced discrimination, RBT can be assessed from a nonpathological inventory of significant symptoms in reaction to a traumatic racial injury (Carter, 2007). These include assessing whether the event an individual experienced could be identified as racial discrimination or

harassment perceived as emotionally disturbing, intractable, and without warning. Simultaneously, if the experience resulted in a psychological or physiological trauma reaction that would constitute avoidant, aroused, or intrusive behaviors, then an individual could be identified as having RBT (Carter, 2007). As such, RBT can be identified through anecdotal means and allows for the diversity of experiences of Black individuals to be relevant to its identification.

The validity of this kind of assessment for RBT can be endorsed by the core tenets of CRT, where racism is inflicted on the perceived minority groups by the dominant culture (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000) rather than as a pathological development inherent to minority groups. Additionally, investigating clients' experiences with discrimination may require professionals to discern if clients cannot express a single major stressor as a cause of their RBT-related symptoms (Carter, 2007). In contrast, this would imply a cumulative nature to the client's stress, which is consistent with the effects of racism, as evidence currently suggests.

Furthermore, investigating a client's known caregiver's experiences with RBT symptoms and racism may also reveal a likelihood of RBT's presence. Especially given that caregivers who engage their children in *racial socialization*, the process of informing kin of messages about navigating discrimination (Neblett et al., 2008), are likely to have experienced discrimination themselves (Metzger et al., 2021). When considering the legacy of racism in Black history and the high prevalence of racial socialization amongst Black familial connections (Edman & Gozen, 2021; Metzger et al., 2021), applying the CRT and CCW

frameworks of centralizing the experiences of people of color as an informative asset (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005) in this context would justify this cultural factor for racial trauma assessment. Similarly, aligned with the notion of *familial capital*, a form of capital sourced from the resources family connection can provide an individual (Yosso, 2005), racial socialization can be viewed as Community Cultural Wealth and another texturization of RBT's existence. Clearly, RBT has been verified in its existence in the lives of Black Americans through historical narratives of suffering, current trends in the psychological and physiological health of Black people, and patterns of social perceptions of racism. While it is as permeated as racism in the lives of Black Americans, equally present forms of cultural capital, such as racial socialization, are viewpoints that are minimally considered in the narratives of Black individuals. Narratives including such considerations may, of course, present themselves within the realm of a therapeutic relationship between mental health professionals and Black clients.

**Current Counseling Interventions that Address RBT in Black Adults**

As racial trauma may be endemic amongst various Black American experiences, the intersections of race and mental health services was one of the researcher's areas of focus. Mental health providers are expected to maintain ethical standards in providing therapeutic services to their clients. Notably, counselors are expected to consider the cultural factors that come with their clients to best inform their practice and the therapeutic relationship (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014, Section A.2.c.). Similarly, psychologists are slated to strive to consider the way identity develops in the context of an individual's

environment, which may include culture, trauma, and sociopolitical contexts (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). These ethical codes not only entail the level of multicultural competency that mental health care providers must have but involve the treatment of individuals who have experienced race-based trauma, which Black college students are not exempt from. However, a study exploring the level of self-perceived competency that service providers have toward serving clients with RBT revealed that professionals felt a lack of awareness, training, and treatment methods for RBT (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Considering that more than 50% of Black Americans perceive that they experience racial discrimination (Datz, 2017), it is imperative that more research regarding effective treatments and competencies around serving Black clients from their cultural context is conducted.

At present, there is an emerging focus on the therapeutic prerequisites and interventions for Black adults with RBT. Some research proposes that it may be appropriate to introduce Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) for these affected individuals (Metzger et al., 2021). TF-CBT is a short-term treatment option that consists of eight features of the therapeutic process that allow practitioners to work with those affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety symptoms as a result of trauma, and emotional-behavioral issues. These features are often noted as: (a) psychoeducation, where professionals provide validation to the reactions clients have to trauma; (b) relaxation, which provides an opportunity for clients to learn how to self-regulate their trauma symptoms; (c) affective expression and modulation, which is a means for the client to

practice identifying their emotional state; (d) cognitive coping, a skill taught to help clients reframe their thinking to reduce distressing trauma related feelings; (e) trauma narration and processing, a method of contextualizing the client's trauma using historical experiences in relation to racial discrimination in order to encourage dialogue around the client's reaction to traumatic racial experiences; (f) in vivo mastery, where professionals can assess the client's level of proficiency with using the skills they learned to reduce psychosomatic responses to trauma; (g) conjoint sessions, which are utilized when the client is a child by encouraging racial socialization from the client's parent while reviewing skills learned in therapy; and (h) enhancing future safety and development, a stage where professionals help clients to identify their triggers and ways to respond to a racially related event (Metzger et al., 2021). This model of trauma-informed therapeutic practice may help Black clients validate and process their racial traumas and develop ways to self-regulate in the face of racial encounters they may experience again (Metzger et al., 2021). However, while this method of intervention addresses the management of psychosomatic reactions to RBT, it does not illuminate the cultural strengths of Black clients. Instead, it maintains a crisis model in relation to their cultural existence by providing a means of healing only after one's experience with racism.

Similarly, using mindfulness strategies in therapy with Black clients has been offered as a means of encouraging Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) in response to RBT, a process of rebuilding conceptualizations of the world after experiencing a traumatic event (Dong et al., 2023). A study investigating the relationship between PTG and RBT suggested that beliefs about one's self may hinder PTG processes (Dong et al., 2023), especially if these beliefs

were related to the measures of high self-hate or anti-whiteness via the Cross Racial Identity Scale and the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity. These models posit that Black individuals orient their identity towards being at fault for their experiences with racism, or towards blaming white people for being at fault for racism (Sellers et al., 1998; Worrel, 2011). Conclusively, the study purported that if a strong positive racial identity is present in individuals with RBT, then this racial salience may encourage the formation of PTG (Dong et al., 2023). While this may not be representative of the attitudes of all Black individuals, the implication that racial identity can affect PTG in response to RBT suggests that mindfulness interventions alone are not enough for combatting RBT and that investigating more means of increasing positive racial identities for Black clients is a necessary endeavor (Dong et al., 2023).

At present, current research discussing therapeutic interventions for Black people is limited and erratic, with findings around their efficacy. Pointedly, the aforementioned interventions available, such as TF-CBT (Metzger et al., 2021) and mainstream interventions adapted with cultural colloquialisms (Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020) focus on the challenges and adversity around Black individuals without considering positive cultural aspects of Black identity. If the experience of RBT presents as a likely reality for reportedly over half of Black Americans, it is critical that research continues to find ways to understand Black culture to encourage the effectiveness and accessibility of mental health services (Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020). Furthermore, I believe that it is not enough to have typical methods to serve Black clients but rather to remain committed to dismantling the

constructs set forth by systemic oppression that bar Black individuals from achieving healing. Developing cultural competency is another modality of non-exhaustive efforts towards this cause.

## Cultural Capital and Resiliency

In regards to Black culture as a factor in mental health healing, many viewpoints appear to be unconsidered. Literature that examines current trends in Black psychological well-being reveals that a rise in suicide among Black youth suggests that certain resiliency factors may not be practical, in use, or are unconsidered in the treatment and prevention of Black mental health challenges (Elisha & Collins, 2022). Furthermore, many of the viewpoints considered so far in regard to Black well-being are limited in providing perspectives around cultural factors developed by Black people that minimize the effects of RBT. As this study aimed to identify strengths that are relevant to Black communities through the lens of CRT, the concept of Community Cultural Wealth was an additional consideration for investigating the assets of Black communities for mitigating RBT.

### *What is Cultural Capital?*

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) is a counter to Bourdieu's framework of capital. This asset presents in various forms and runs through the currents of socialization and institutional development, creating a system of advantages and disadvantages. Bourdieu posits that cultural capital is a derivative of capital that may be transformed into a measure of academic and, subsequently, economic and social achievement. Capital, from this perspective, is then important because of its permanence within society (Bourdieu, 2018).

When placed in the context of Black Americans resisting racial trauma, identifying capital from Black culture could be critical in developing a narrative counter to racial trauma and its contributor racism, which also has permanence in the scaffolds of American society.

However, Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework highlights the perpetuation of systemic racism in Bourdieu's (2018) definition of cultural capital, as Yosso's emphasis on historical events and institutional recognition as determining factors of cultural capital effectively locks in systematic prejudices that contribute to deficit models around diverse populations (Yosso, 2005). CCW defends instead that cultural capital is centered around the knowledge and ideas of the diverse groups it emerges from. It can be divided into six subcategories comprising assets to resist the effects and institutionalizations of systemic oppression (Yosso, 2005). These subcategories are operationalized as (a) aspirational capital, which is the ability to continue to persevere towards future desires despite facing adversity; (b) linguistic capital, the ability to use various forms of expression to acquire knowledge or to engage with various audiences; (c) familial capital, which entails the continuous connection to and preservation of knowledge developed within kinship; (d) social capital, a means of using peer connections to help navigate barriers and derive psychological support from; (e) navigational capital, a set of skills developed for successfully traversing institutions that view persons of color as minority groups; and (f) resistant capital, which is knowledge acquired through challenging the systemic forces of oppression (Yosso, 2005). However, aspects of Black culture such as Black joy are limitedly discussed in academia as an aspect of CCW (Tichavakunda, 2021). Moreover, in spite of the limited

attention that Black joy receives in academia, it can be understood as a positive *racialized emotion;* a cultural group's emotional response to racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). Given this definition of Black joy as a positive racialized emotion specific to Black culture, Black joy fits under the framework of CCW (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2021). Despite the framework of CCW being able to encompass the cultural facets of Black identity and community, current evidence does not discuss how components of Blackness such as Black joy can be recognized as one of these forms of capital. Given its limited discussions in the literature, this study attempted to highlight narratives centered around Black students' experiences with Black joy.

Even so, emerging literature posits that having a positive Black identity can be a resilience factor that may mitigate the effects of RBT due to its enhancement towards positive psychological well-being in Black individuals, which suggests that there is an opportunity for exploring the nuanced characteristics of Black identity (Kelly et al., 2020). This assumption that culture is a form of resiliency is consistent with the perspectives of CRT and CCW frameworks. While the definition of resiliency is cited as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to adversity or change” (Merriam-Webster, 2023), current explorations of the presentation and operationalization of resiliency posit that it is the ability to resist adversity and hardship by using the assets of a community, which may range from cultural facets such as spirituality, language, worldviews and traditions (Abi-Hashem, 2011). This operationalization of resiliency is congruent with the six components of CCW, as it allows for the view of customs, forms of expression, and beliefs of Black people as a means

of resisting adversity (Yosso, 2005). Thus, one can deduce that Black CCW is synonymous with being a form of resiliency to simultaneously systemic oppression and race-based trauma. As such, increased research about Black culture and identity beyond the depiction of Black people as struggling victims will better inform professionals about how to serve this population.

However, the markers of Blackness are not neatly defined and often hinge on Black people's historical entanglement with racism (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Cross, 1994; Edman & Gozen, 2021; Kelly, 2019). Limiting the conceptualization of Black identity to the confines of a victim narrative subsequently leaves little room to acknowledge the viewpoints that focus on the celebratory and innovative landmarks of Black cultural identity. Notably, a gap remains in what clinicians may be aware of regarding Black community cultural wealth, and so the concepts of Black identity and how its components can be identified as cultural capital to increase professionals' multicultural competency was explored further.

### *Current Perspectives on Black Identity and Cultural Capital*

To move forward with considering Black CCW as a form of resiliency, an assessment of what constitutes Black identity, or "Blackness," is necessary. Black identity may be analyzed from various frameworks, especially when considering that racism is consistent in its presence in Black people's lives from childhood to adulthood. Recent evidence around ubiquitous cultural resilience factors in Black culture reveals inconsistent themes, and the lack of findings over the past three decades indicates that additional investigation of these factors may be needed (Elisha & Collins, 2022). Longstanding research such as the

Nigrescence model hinges on the experience of racial discrimination or the encounter phase of Black identity development as a component for developing a secure Black identity (Cross, 1994). Much of the literature on Black identity formation notably refers to the Nigrescence encounter phase (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Carter, 2007; Sellers et al., 1998; Williams, 2022; Worrell et al., 2011). Considering that the Nigrescence model debuted 30 years ago and that the expansion of the perspectives of Black identity development has not progressed from this viewpoint, Blackness is still defined by the interactions of Black people with the environments and people around them in lieu of its inherently rich culture. Surely, this perspective is not conducive to creating a strengths-based model for Black people across the social spheres they traverse and, as a result, only continues to perpetuate the ideas set in place by systemic oppression. Conceptualizing Black people from their racial interactions and providing mental health treatment based on this contingency can be detrimental to promoting healing for Black clients due to the component of RBT that includes re-traumatization, a flashback component akin to PTSD (Carter, 2007). Clearly, exploring other constituents of Black identity and cultural capital that can be utilized in therapeutic spaces is imperative. Despite the encounter phase being an important consideration in Black identity development, by focusing primarily on the victim mindset around Black people, professionals risk reigniting the psychological and physiological responses to discrimination in their Black clients and, as a result, eliminate pathways for Black clients to feel a sense of pride in their identity.

Even though the Nigrescence framework has attempted to identify unifying factors of Black identity, the developers of the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) suggested that Black identity is multidimensional and that it may not follow the linear developmental processes suggested by Cross' Nigrescence model (Worrell et al., 2011). Recent evidence regarding Black identity development notes limited information around the intersection of environments, systems, and individual experiences that contribute to the variations of Blackness within the Black community (Burrell-Craft, 2020). In tandem, authors of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), a scale that examines the relationship between 4 axis of Black identity development including centrality, one's inherent personality conceptualizations; racial salience, one's level of attention to their race; racial regard, one's perceptions of being grouped with their racial identity; and racial ideology, one's personal philosophy of what is Blackness, posited that the notion of Blackness is not consistent due to its reliance on the interaction between a Black individual's internal identity conceptualization and the level of importance the individual places on their race. Subsequently, this results in Black individuals having different approaches and reactions to racially related incidences (Sellers et al., 1998). As current literature investigates the idea of the heterogeneity of Black identity, the implication that follows is that research to understand further the various dimensions of Black identity and culture is necessary for increasing mental health professionals' multicultural competencies (Jones et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2021). Despite these implications, however, few narratives illustrate the heterogeneity of Black culture available for professionals to deconstruct pre-existing epistemologies around Black identity.

In relation to the current understanding of the dimensions of Blackness, these dimensions are influenced by long-standing narratives surrounding Black individuals. To elaborate, a selection of literature refers to Black identity as a state of "becoming," as through the continuous endurance of historical and intergenerational systemic oppression, Black communities can cultivate a unanimous experience around suffering. Through this collective suffering, Black people have developed forms of expression such as literature, music, and art to interact with the dominant culture (Cross 1994; Edman & Gozen, 2021). Markedly, music can be a tool for consolidating one's identity formation process. In a qualitative study investigating the importance of music in Black identity formation, it was found that "Black music" could reflect shared struggles, self-acceptance, and the embrace of Blackness (Myrie et al., 2022). When considering constituents of Black cultural capital, music may suitably be noted as a form of counter-narrative, or a form of resistance to pre-existing expectations of the dominant culture under CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000), and as linguistic capital under CCW (Yosso, 2005). Under these frameworks, music presents itself as a transformative modality, in which experiences of adversity are transmuted into a narrative of triumph and pride. In spite of the powerful capabilities, music may have on the counter storytelling and healing of Black individuals, its use in qualitative cultural research is limited. However, the empowering aspects of expressive forms, such as music, may be modalities for professionals to encourage positive Black identity formation to create protective factors for RBT in Black clients.

In addition to themes of empowerment, music may reveal themes of struggle and adversity, which Black people overcome through sheer “grit” (Edman & Gozen, 2021). "Grit” is often operationalized as a form of cultural capital for Black people (Anderson, 2019; Edman & Gozen, 2021; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Wallace, 2022). However, in the context of CRT and CCW frameworks, “grit” may be a less reliable form of cultural capital to use as resilience from RBT.

***Grit versus Resiliency***

Grit, which is often interchangeably utilized as the concept of resiliency, is consistently associated as a strength of Black families and individuals, given their continued pursuit of betterment despite facing historical and systemic forms of racism (Anderson, 2019). Grit, an inherent ability to recover to how one was before encountering adversity, can be a double-edged sword in its perception as a strength in the Black community as it negates the institutionalized forces that instigate the need for grit. Subsequently, this perpetuates a continued mental toll in response to the continued permeation of racism as it places much responsibility on the oppressed individual to cope and overcome their race-based traumas (Mcgee & Stovall, 2015). While grit is framed as a positive form of cultural capital under aspirational and navigational capital, where it is viewed as an incredible medium for defying the obstacles of systematic oppression (Elisha & Collins, 2022; Wallace, 2022), this notion places a demand on Black people to be responsible for their healing from systemic issues instead of demanding that the system treats Black individuals with humanity (Anderson, 2019; Elisha & Collins, 2022). Grit is isolated under this definition as an extraordinary

quality attributed to certain people (Anderson, 2019; Masten, 2001). Thus, it is critical to consider that this unchanging concept of grit is not to be conflated with the concept of resiliency, as where grit places responsibility for healing on the victims of oppression, resiliency allows for the celebration of cultural characteristics in more specific motions while still maintaining accountability for the perpetrators of systemic oppression. Resiliency, as a cultural framework, allows for counter-narratives and the contextualization of oppression (Anderson, 2019).

Moreover, in contrast to the unmoving definition of grit, the concept of resilience as a spectrum of responses to adversity of varying degrees is congruent with the conceptions of Black people being multidimensional in identity development (Anderson, 2019; Sellers et al., 1998). In understanding that resilience is an amalgam of cultural strengths rather than a static definition of character, professionals may increase their ability to form relationships with Black clients. Subsequently, the need to examine resiliency as an amalgam of Black cultural strengths is necessary for enhancing the practices of mental health professionals that serve them (Abi-Hashem, 2011; Anderson, 2019; Elisha & Collins, 2022; Kelly et al., 2020). Continuing to inform current perspectives on Black individuals using singular ideas such as grit excludes the possibility of other perspectives on Black culture that can serve as positives towards their conceptualization and, as a result, can create more opportunities for connection between mental health professionals and Black clients that seek their support. Subsequently, in moving towards additional means of rapport building, Black individuals may have greater chances of reducing the effects of RBT.

## Conclusion

Considering the historical and systemic overtones of racism in the lives of Black people from birth to adulthood and the adversities that develop from race-based trauma as a result of experiencing racism, pathways for creating resistance to the institutionalization of racism and the likelihood of RBT are necessary for promoting healing for Black clients. Black university students are no exception to the discrimination of the non-academic world and continue to face encounters with racism as they traverse higher education (Wallace, 2022; Williams et al., 2022). Consequently, Black university students are notably vulnerable to RBT and likely candidates for mental health services. However, mental health professionals, while held to ethical standards around multicultural competencies (ACA, 2014; APA, 2017), have responded to the concerns of Black clients with limited understanding of how to provide service to those with RBT or with crisis-response interventions (Dong et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2019). Simultaneously, professionals are limited to narratives around Black clients that place them as either responsible for their own healing based on the premise of "grit" (Anderson, 2019; Elisha & Collins, 2022) or as victims of a discriminatory system from which they need saving (Freire, 2014). Consequently, these narratives exclude the possibility for Black clients to develop a sense of pride in their identity.

As such, the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth serve as modalities for Black people to generate a strong cultural identity that may resist RBT's effects. These frameworks may expose aspects of Black identity, such as linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) or Black music, which can promote healing and social mobility for Black

university students (Wallace, 2022). Notably, these aspects have been explored with superficial research, so expanding the viewpoints around their values as Black cultural capital may be helpful for mental health professionals who serve clients such as Black college students.

## Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to illuminate Black cultural resiliency factors from the perspective of Black higher education students. This chapter details the methodological framework for conducting this study, the methods by which narratives from study contributors was collected, the contributors who inform this study's outcomes and approaches to data analysis.

Due to this study's orientation towards Critical Race Theory's components of counter storytelling and resistance to oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000), I used a narrative inquiry approach, where study contributors shared their experiences in relation to the area of research. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach used to investigate complex nuanced human issues that quantitative methods may not encapsulate (Kim, 2016). CRT tenets include the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, where the conceptions of race and racism are enduring in the institutions and ecosystems that individuals exist within and intersect with other identities subject to oppression; the challenge to dominant ideology, where existing institutions and epistemologies cloak the interests of the oppressor and must be challenged to deconstruction; the commitment to social justice, which is the continuous resolution to dismantle racism; and the interdisciplinary perspective, where the modality of challenging pre-existing institutions of racism is texturized by various means (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). As a method of counter-narrative to enhance the current wellspring of information around Black college students and their needs, the use of narration through semi-structured interviews and elicitations through a song immersion experience

served as the aforementioned means to provide a multidimensional viewpoint to challenge oppressive epistemological narratives around Black people.

In addition to enhancing the perspectives around Black college students with respect to their narratives, using the framework of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) provided potential themes about these narratives that would indicate constituents of Black cultural capital. CCW, derived from the tenets of CRT, is a critique and expansion of traditional forms of Bourdieu's social capital, and it centralizes the experiences of marginalized groups as a means of resisting adversity. According to CCW, these forms of capital include *aspirational capital*, the ability of a cultural community to create and maintain goals; *linguistic capital*, the various forms of expression that emerge from a culture, including language, colloquialisms, poetry, and music; *familial capital*, the resources accumulated from the experiences of kin within a cultural group; *social capital*, the connections within a cultural group that may provide resources and emotional support; *navigational capital*, the strategies of a cultural group used to navigate systems of oppression; and *resistant capital*, the knowledge and resources maintained within a community that resists oppression and the surrounding dominant culture (Yosso, 2005). Keeping these aspects of CCW in mind, the narratives that arose from the narrative inquiry process were coded for elements of stories that were in relation to these forms of capital. In doing so, I was able to texturize the narratives of the study's contributors while enhancing counter-narratives to current epistemologies.

In regards to the use of song elicitations in the narrative inquiry process, elicitations such as music and its lyrics are justified as a form of capital which has historically been used as a resistive modality (Edman & Gozen, 2021; Myrie et al, 2022; Wallace, 2022). Especially considering that Black experiences are often conveyed through traditions from the African diaspora and slavery, rooted in storytelling and musical expression (Edman & Gozen, 2021; Wallace, 2022), music is also a form of linguistic capital within Black communities. Furthermore, counter-storytelling can be a form of identity development and consolidation and can be done through the elicitation of music. One can reflect on themes of identity development in musical content, so it is a catalyst for exploring narratives of one's development (Myrie et al., 2022). Given this understanding, this study used music to texturize further contributors' narratives of resisting adversity. In providing opportunities for contributors to share their experiences, comments, symbols, and thoughts around their perception of Blackness through storytelling in interviews and musical elicitations, the researcher adhered to their commitment to counter-narrative and social justice reform.

**Participants**

Of the six contributors, one identified as male, one identified as bigender, three identified as female, and one identified as non-binary. Two participants were born in Arizona before moving to California in early childhood, two were born in Hawaii before attending college in the Pacific Northwest, and two were born and raised in California. Five had parents who attended college, and one did not. Two contributors identified as Multiracial in addition to Black. Contributors were studying for undergraduate degrees in animation and illustration,

music, nursing, psychology, and sociology, except for one who was obtaining a master's of social work. Table 1 below displays various demographic characteristics of the contributors.

**Table 1**

*Contributor Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender Identity | Undergraduate/Graduate | Field of Study | State of Residence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chantal | 19 | non-binary | Undergraduate | Music | California |
| BlackParade | 18 | bigender | Undergraduate | Animation and Illustration | California |
| Zoe | 19 | cisgender woman | Undergraduate | Sociology | Oregon |
| Del | 38 | cisgender man | Undergraduate | Nursing | California |
| BiggerPicture | 23 | cisgender woman | Graduate | Social Work | California |
| Control | 20 | cisgender woman | Undergraduate | Psychology | California |

## Instruments and Materials

To create accessibility for contributors in the study, I used Google Forms as the platform for the eligibility questionnaire to screen for contributors. The preliminary phase of the study involved an eligibility questionnaire that determined if interested contributors identified as Black, a current higher education student, and an individual who has experienced the effects of systemic oppression. Questionnaires only collected the emails of the interested contributors so I could contact them if they were eligible to obtain their consent and their song choices for the interview and to arrange a time for the meeting. Additionally, I limited myself to requesting only contributors' university email addresses on these forms to ensure the confidentiality of the responses. The researcher used Zoom to record and transcribe interviews when permitted by the study's contributors. The researcher coded the data from the interview transcriptions within NVIVO. Audio files, transcriptions, and questionnaire responses were stored in a Google Drive folder specific to the study contributor. This folder

was made accessible only to the researcher and will be discarded after three years of publication of this study.

In addition to posting the study flyer to online forums. The study was shared by word of mouth from the researcher's professional contacts, shared via email correspondence to graduate and undergraduate ethnic studies and social sciences programs in the Pacific Northwest, and advertised in various schools in the Bay Area of California. Invitations were presented via a flyer (see Appendix A) through the researcher's university's email correspondence system to the aforementioned departments.

Correspondence was framed as an opportunity for Black students to share their experiences developing their identity as Black adults. Advertised correspondence included the disclosure of compensation for contributors, which was a $10 gift card to a local coffee shop funded by the researcher. The study's flyer was developed via Canva by the researcher and included a QR code and URL link to a secure interest form developed through Google Forms (see Appendix B) made only accessible to the researcher. Interested contributors were then able to view further details regarding the nature of the study, including the phases of the research process, how the information was to be used, and how the contributors would be involved in the co-narration process.

Additionally, interested contributors were provided with informed consent documentation (see Appendix C) that indicated the protection of the contributor's identity and personal information, the contributor's right to have any pieces of their narrative excluded from the study, the solely academic use of relevant narrative information provided by the contributor,

and the contributor's right to withdraw their participation via written correspondence at any point in the study. Consent was obtained from interested contributors using San Jose State University's encrypted DocuSign software, and signed documents were stored in a Google Drive folder made only accessible to the researcher. I then contacted contributors who provided consent via the email they provided in the questionnaire to arrange a meeting time for the narrative interview. Contributors were informed that interviews would last up to an hour and a half, and could take place in either a secure San Jose State University campus-affiliated collaboration room, or through an online Zoom meeting. Contributors and I met at the agreed meeting time, and I reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study given an opportunity to ask me questions. These actions were taken to facilitate rapport building and mitigate the dynamics of the researcher and the researched. Once contributors indicated their readiness to begin the interview process, I used a semi-structured narrative protocol to collect contributors' stories (see Appendix D). Interview questions were developed within the research question framework.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

After approval from San Jose State University's Institutional Review Board, this study recruited contributors across undergraduate and graduate social sciences and ethnic studies departments of higher education institutions from across the Pacific Northwest. Six contributors were recruited to generate sufficient narratives to analyze using narrative analysis modalities and to ensure a high level of quality in the data collection (Kim, 2016). Students who identified as Black or Black and Multiracial who responded with interest to the

study were invited to participate. After obtaining informed consent, contributors were invited to share two song choices related to Black strengths or Black pride to listen to during a semi-structured interview centered around their experiences as Black individuals overcoming adversity. Contributors were informed that their stories and perspectives around Black culture in light of systemic oppression would be collected for the study's findings. They were provided with informed consent indicating their right to withdraw their participation at any point in the study. Contributors were given pseudonyms to protect their personal identity in the study's findings. Compensation was provided immediately upon attendance at the interview. Interviews lasted no longer than an hour and a half, and began with the narrative interview protocol (see Appendix D). Questions for the interview were tailored around perceived Blackness, adversities related to Blackness, Critical Race Theory tenets, and Community Cultural Wealth frameworks as they relate to cultural capital. To respectfully and accurately analyze the narratives from study contributors, I ensured that each interview included elements of the narration and conversation phase in narrative inquiry interviews (Kim, 2016). First, I facilitated a narration phase in the semi-structured interviews where contributors were uninterrupted after being asked to share their stories about cultural experiences as a Black person. This phase also involved my asking open-ended questions around their experiences for clarity. Embedded in the narration phase was the conversation phase, where I engaged in meaningful dialogue with the contributors to develop an accurate and complete understanding of the narratives they intended to convey. This process emerged organically as contributors shared their stories while I asked questions for clarity, and as a

way to member check my understanding of their responses. Keeping these interview phases in mind ensured that information relevant to the study was grasped while information that may have been previously overlooked was illuminated (Kim, 2016). Following the narrative portion of the semi-structured interview, contributors were offered a wellness break to mitigate the possibility of distress that could have occurred while they relayed their experiences with systemic oppression.

In the latter segment of the interview, contributors were asked to engage in a song immersion experience where they listened to at least one of the two songs they decided to listen to for the purpose of the interview. Depending on the time constraints of the interview, I played one or both of the songs a contributor provided while displaying the lyrics to the song in front of them. Contributors were asked to highlight or underline lyrics or moments of the song that were most meaningful to them. Additionally, contributors were asked to circle Black strengths that they noticed in the lyrical content. This was done to provide references to the song for contributors to expand upon in the interview protocol following the song listening experience. After listening to the song together, contributors were asked questions that were framed in relevance to the research framework. This was done similarly to the first half of the interview protocol, where contributors were asked to share stories related to the experience of listening to the song and its relationship to their experiences of Blackness and systemic oppression. This portion of the interview served as an extension or additional clarification of the stories shared in the earlier phase of the interview.

Both interview responses and song immersion question responses were recorded per the contributor's permission, and later transcribed in order to assist the coding process. Upon completion of the interview, contributors were informed that I would correspond with them again as part of a member check process to present preliminary findings and offer the opportunity for feedback. This step was completed to further the trustworthiness of the study findings.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

To consider how Black higher education students respond to and cope with systemic oppression, this study acquired various stories from each participant around this discourse. Keeping in mind how stories are composed of a beginning, middle and end, this study analyzed the transcriptions of the stories told by contributors to extract narratives which showcase a plot that conveys a meaning outside of the lived experiences of the study contributors (Denzin, 2013). This process required me to consider how narratives reflect macro-level contexts across the cultural, historical, and ideological domains of a group of people (Denzin, 2013). In the context of this study, it was imperative for the researcher to extract a prominent counter-narrative to the impacts of systemic oppression on Black people. I created a narrative typology system with the nuances of the macro cultural influences in mind. Much of this process relied on my insight into these larger cultural implications on the stories told by contributors due to my shared identity with the study contributors.

To begin this process, I integrated the guidelines of inductive analysis, where rather than imposing perspectives on the study’s questions onto the gathered stories of contributors, I

examined the gathered stories and chunked relevant elements together to create codes (Bhattacharya, 2017). Using the premises of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth as a guide for narrative coding, I first noted common stories within each contributor's narrative, while also noting narratives relevant to the aforementioned theories of CRT and CCW. Collected data were analyzed through the development of a typology classification system for recurring themes within each of the contributors' narratives. Creating a classification system for the interview transcriptions allowed for the analysis of variations and similarities between the shared narratives (Rolón-Dow & Bailey, 2022); this system created a framework to provide more answers regarding the ambiguity of Black cultural strengths. Given that narrative inquiry accounts for the complex and phenomenological occurrences of this study's contributors, the transcription coding of the interviews process included screening for conversational fillers and exchanges that were irrelevant to the research's focus coding. This process began by gathering all of the audio recordings and transcripts of each participant's interview and engaging in several re-readings.

To remain consistent with the premises of narrative inquiry where the researcher codes for narratives rather than themes (Bhattacharya, 2017), I attuned to elements of stories and narratives indicated in each contributor's interview, such as cast, exposition, conflict, plot, and resolutions within the content of each participant's disclosures. This process was highly iterative in that I coded the stories of participants and would reflect on previously coded elements of contributor interviews throughout the coding process and engage in coding

processes again with these reflections in mind. This was also supplemented by notations of my reflections and intuitive deductions about how these stories related.

All of the participant narrative transcripts received preliminary coding and annotations before being analyzed and coded repeatedly in NVIVO to analyze similarities or variations between each interview. Narrative codes analyzed in NVIVO were then exported into a Google Sheets table accessible only to the researcher to analyze the similarities and differences across participant stories. The narrative codes and their corresponding transcript data were then analyzed and clustered into five shared narratives across all participant narratives. While analyzing the narrative codes and their corresponding participant responses, I relied on their intuition around the high context communication from participants within each response to cluster their narratives. This included how participant stories were told and the meaning which was intended to be conveyed from each response.

Similarly, narrative transcripts from the song immersion segment of each contributor's interview were subjected to the same preliminary coding process as the rest of their interview. These segments received similar levels of engagement and reflection on the storytelling components they contained. I reflected and re-engaged with the codes I ascribed to these segments in NVIVO as well to organize the relationships between each contributor's narratives. Codes in the song immersion segments were consolidated into the codes delineated in the earlier portion of the narrative transcripts as they aligned with the research question framework and because they did not deviate from the findings of the earlier segments of each contributors' interview.

To mitigate my interpretation of the data to be superimposed on the clustering of the narrative responses, I engaged in my own reflective processes outside of the data analysis process, and referred back to the low context narrative elements present within each response to substantiate what was being conveyed from the high context texturization responses. Responses that were incomparable to other participant responses were refrained from being integrated into preliminary narrative clusters until it was revealed in the analysis process that they were supported as being relational to other participant narrative responses. This process resulted in several instances of drafting preliminary narrative clusters and disposing of them until participant narratives were able to be consolidated into these narrative clusters by demonstrating good congruence with each other in each of these respective clusters. Subsequently, these shared narrative clusters were conceptualized into a concept map to reveal a single shared narrative across all participant narratives.

**Trustworthiness**

To increase the level of trustworthiness in the study, I engaged in several processes of triangulation and engaged study contributors in the co-creation of narratives that developed from the interview process. The researcher considered contributor stories in addition to the narratives derived from the song immersion experiences to triangulate the perspectives that emerged from the participants' responses to substantiate further the viewpoints shared by contributors. To mitigate how research is currently centralized around dominant narratives that perpetuate power dynamics between researchers and participants, I invited contributors to member-check the narratives I extracted from their stories. Contributors were encouraged

to reflect on the accuracy of the meaning and purpose of the stories which they conveyed. The researcher reflected with contributors about the ways their extracted narrative made them feel to ensure good congruence between the presented narratives and the initial stories collected. To maintain the theme of counter-narratives, I explained the narratives and themes derived from the interviews to their respective contributors to affirm the accuracy of their counter-narratives. This was done to maintain the contributors' perspectives while also deconstructing power dynamics between the researcher and the study’s contributors.

## Chapter IV: Findings

After conducting the narrative inquiry analysis, I identified five dominant narratives from the stories of study contributors: (1) Stories about daily interactions with ongoing systemic oppression, (2) Stories about being in community with Black people and those who provide empathy to Black experiences, (3) Stories about perseverance and the acknowledgement of their historical epistemologies, (4) Stories about Black achievement and authenticity, (5) Stories about generating Black joy and empowerment. The five narratives, in summation, revealed a single dominant narrative of (6) the story of Black students' development of perseverance in the face of systemic oppression through the generation of Black joy. The five narratives were subsequently found to have a relationship with each other to yield a single dominant narrative reflective of the stories shared by study contributors. How these narratives were composed, and their relationship to each other are presented in summation. The song immersion experience is also discussed as it relates to these narratives.

### Stories about Daily Interactions with Ongoing Systemic Oppression

In considering aspects of Black identity that have not been revealed in the literature before, contributors shared how their experiences within and outside of academia are framed within the larger context of systemic oppression as stories that shape their perspectives on defining Blackness. BiggerPicture painted the exposition from which Black students begin their educational journey as "that picture of the kids with the boxes…[who are] standing up [to] see over the fence…yes, everyone's given the same thing, but it's like if someone starts lower than" than the rest of their peers. As contributors shared their narratives around

progressing towards their goals, they referred to how Black people have historically been at an economic and social disadvantage because of their Blackness, creating obstacles for attaining equitable economic and social opportunities.

Control and Zoe further established that the lived experiences for Black students begins from this disadvantaged point of existence, and it is the difference between this and the jumping points of privilege compared to peers who adhere to the dominant narrative that result in perceived misconceptions about Black culture. Misconceptions such as “certain people are ghetto, and if you grew up in a certain spot, you are white” and “[people] don't actually think there is Black culture” were commonly reported by contributors. These dichotomous perceptions of Blackness were especially evident in stories shared around contributors’ orientation to academia as “stereotypes…that Black people can only be entertainers or athletes, and that the dominant culture views Black people as ‘not intelligent,’ ‘not being scholars,’ or not ‘prevalent, [in] academic spaces.’ contributors like Del, BiggerPicture, and Control shared that when they pursued higher education, they were received as “kind of white” due to their pursuit of “academics like that.”

Scrutiny from both Black and non-Black spaces of Black academia resulted in contributors like Control reporting that they felt “like [their] Black identity was being taken away from [them] in other people's minds because [they were] educated.” These feelings of evaluation and deculturation were especially present when contributors noted receiving messages from the dominant culture that Black people “do music,” “listen to only Black artists,” “like hip hop or rap” or “do hair.’” Much of these perceptions around Black students

were inflamed with prevalent misconceptions around certain expectations enforced within and outside of Black spaces "that somebody deems as…'a Black trait.'" Contributors shared how these misconceptions presented themselves as familiar daily interactions of racism outside of Black spaces, via numerous microaggressions, symbolized by several common quotes

- "'Oh, can I touch your hair?'
- 'I like what you got going on there. Is that like from the thrift store or something?' Or like, is that a hand me down? Because I know you don't really have any money.'"
- "Why didn't you apply to any of those [HBCUs]?

These type of daily interactions with systemic racism framed the presence of Black students as unwanted within most environments developed by the dominant culture. However, contributors also shared interactions that revealed the dismissal of Black students' presence within these spaces as microinvalidations such as the one Zoe experienced. She stated,

> There was a time when my high school had a culture day and I was just unsure of what I wanted to wear… and I was talking to somebody about it and they knew that my mom's Hungarian and… I was like, 'I don't really know what I'm gonna wear for culture day…' Just in the sense that I hadn't thought about an outfit. It wasn't even a sense of do 'I wanna wear something Hungarian? Do I wanna kind of represent African American culture?' And they were like, 'Well you could wear something from your mom's culture.' And I think they had assumed that I was unsure of what I even could do in terms of representing African American culture.

Whether the denouement of these stories of experiencing racism was in the stigmatization or the erasure of Black culture, these types of variable and nuanced interactions began as early as childhood. Del recalled,

> There was one time when I was, man, I was gonna be like 10 or 11 years old and I was shopping with my mom and my mom went…to Ross and I went to…KB Toy Stores.
>
> [I] started looking around and I saw a really cool Transformer and I was thinking about buying it and I remember it was like $9.99 and I remember I had like $12 with me. And so I had enough. And so I was like looking at it, you know, I was inspecting it, you know…I put it down, I was like, 'I'll save my money.' then I noticed there was a store clerk that was following me…And I remember I looped backed around to that transformer..but then I didn't really, you know, look at anything. And so I was like walking around…And then I was in another part, and the store clerk came up to me. And he was like, "Hey, do you know anything about this?" And it was the toy that I was looking at, but someone had opened the box and taken it.
>
> I was like, 'No, I don't know anything about that.' And… I started walking out because I was like, 'I know what that is, you know?'

Interactions where Black students are subject to racial profiling and discriminatory behavior were also frequent into adulthood. Control shared an experience from their job history, stating,

> I was the only person of color actually in the entire establishment…a small business owned by a white couple, and the treatment was definitely not equal.
>
> I was always told to 'Step up and do more' and that I 'Wasn't doing enough.' …And I was always told, 'Oh, can you be on the line more?' But nobody would do the dishes. And it always ended up being me having to go to the back to do piles and piles of dishes for– I kid you not three hours in a row.
>
> And still, I was always told to 'Do more.' And that I 'Wasn't doing enough.'

The messages and interactions that contributors shared confirmed how they perceived non-Black spaces as ascribing derogatory interpretations of Black people as a result of "racism built [into dominant narratives] that makes [people] think that Black culture isn't a good thing" as Zoe affirmed.

### Stories about Being in Community with Black People and Those Who Provide Empathy to Black Experiences

In the oration of stories revealing cultural resiliencies, contributors expressed that "especially with African Americans, community has been so important in having to rely on other African Americans…for support because [we] can't get it in other places" (Control). Being in a community with other Black people was especially helpful for coping with everyday interactions with oppression, given that most contributors shared being "only able to have certain conversations" where they received "empathy" "with other Black people." Particularly in environments where Black people are minoritized due to their limited demographic presence, developing community with other Black students in the community was helpful "finding ways to think positively about our Blackness when so much was negative coming from outside"

Interactions in communities created by Black students ranged from "being able to talk about Black issues" to "being able to talk about personal issues." Most often contributors like Chantal and BlackParade noted how "being able to just have that space was good enough," "where everybody can express their own…feelings and emotions in a setting that they know they won't be judged for." The benefit of being in community with other Black people resulted in "comforting" feelings around "having people understand" interactions of racism, especially when they were covert, "and be so patient" with the feelings of "frustration" and "anger" that surmised from these experiences. The sentiments around the necessity for patience and empathy around Black experiences extended to family and school settings where BlackParade, Zoe, BiggerPicture and Control referenced family members and mentors

that often “allowed [them] to just be grateful and embrace [their] Blackness” and encouraged them “to appreciate” themselves more. Regardless of whether these communities were made up of other “Black friends,” “mentors,” or “family,” having spaces where “empathy” or “understanding” towards “Black struggles” were cited as quintessential components that create a “wavelength” of interpersonal relatability amongst Black students, a social aspiration shared by Del as “how human connection should be.”

This idea of necessary human connection was further emphasized in relation to the premise that “Black struggles” are a “universal” experience and how Black students sought coping from these feelings. Most contributors shared natural inclinations to discuss their struggles with others only to be invalidated, which led to the reinforcement of contributors’ belief of “only really [relying] on people in your community.” To expound on this experience, Control shared,

> The reason I feel such a strong emphasis on having other Black people to talk about [these struggles with is] because I have tried to talk about these kinds of things with non-Black people and I could feel it just not hitting and they just not fully understanding… it like borderline started arguments because I was just trying to express why these things were wrong or why I felt the way I did about it. And it was just like a disregard of my emotions … like “Is it that deep though?”And it's a lot of that. And for a long time I would just bottle all of that up and I wouldn't say anything 'cause…I didn't know how to deal with it…and now I definitely say I still don't know how to target specifically my frustrations with not being understood with Black struggles. But I do know that I can talk to [Black] people about it at the very least. And we vent together. Even if we don't have a specific outlet of what to do or what action to take, I know that we can at least talk about it together.

**Stories about Perseverance and the Acknowledgment of their Historical Epistemologies**

In the face of daily occurrences of oppression, contributors shared how acknowledging the historical context around Black culture is advantageous for developing pride in “coming

from people who are really resilient and who try to do the best they can," as BlackParade described. Many contributors shared perceptions around how much of Black history is "forgotten a lot" and how they make attempts to "carry on" "archival preservations" of Black culture such as "oral stories" and "recipes" to "keep a good appreciation of Black history in order to really celebrate Black culture," as put by Del. BlackParade echoed this notion that acknowledging one's history "from your elders" or similarly, "people that have lived through these experiences" as a way of coping within systems of oppression.

These archival preservations and representations of historically Black struggles in addition to "Black art or Black music" are used "as a form of expression" of the pain from systemic oppression and as a means of allowing others "to look into" this pain and the ways it is used to " help us [get] a leg up in society" (BlackParade). Additionally, the past experiences of Black "mentors," "ancestors," and family presents as an inherited "aspirational quality [to] do everything [one] can" (BlackParade & Chantal) to be in a more lucrative position than the generations before and to set the incoming generation up for success. In reflection of the historical components of Black history contributors recognized collective and personal qualities "like an innate need to just strive for things." This quality of inner perseverance was described as "a common theme amongst Black people" because "the struggle made us prevail." This "story of perseverance [and] striving for freedom, for betterment…not only for [oneself], but for…other Black people" is crucial even in today's world when murders create collective cultural responses from Black people such as attempts "to become palatable" to the dominant cultures of their environment "to be safe and happy"

(Chantal & Del). For Black students, the impacts of the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Emmet Till, meant that "nobody was wearing a hoodie anymore."

The importance of acknowledging even recent events in Black history is not lost on BiggerPicture who affirmed "our people died so for us to be free, which is super powerful for Black people… that goes back to our history…so many people died for us…during even the Civil Rights Movement, which wasn't even a hundred years ago." Black people's "want for basic rights" as a result of their continued mistreatment for Black people is what contributors described as the catalyst for "how people [continue to] stand up" and "dream bigger" (BiggerPicture and Chantal).

It is through "seeing and appreciating perseverance" in the history of Black people, and in the acknowledgment of the continuum of Black history from slavery to Black people's current proximity to privilege that Del detailed as a daily internal reminder to persevere through his challenges, stating

> there are times when, there are literally times when I've been like, man, I don't wanna get up for work. Like 'What the fuck…' And then I kind of… think like, you know, 'Like dude, like my ancestor, like he was like a slave and shit. Like what the fuck? He was up way earlier. Like he didn't have no choice over here complaining about this…' It's kind of weird, but there have literally been times where I've been like 'It could be a lot worse. So. Better you appreciate it.

**Stories about Black Achievement and Authenticity**

In discussion of the actions that Black students view as resistance to systemic oppression and cultural capital, contributors detailed the necessity of celebrating Black achievements. Providing accolades to the many achievements of Black people, whether from notable figures or those within the community, revealed to be inspiration and wellsprings for generating

"joyful celebrations of joy and love" across Black communities. These celebrations and commemorations of accolades varied from "reunions," Black-centric commemorative events, and acknowledgment of achievement amongst Black peers. Contributors noted that these celebrations were inspired by "hearing from other Black people's experiences, living through their experiences," "seeing them historically," and seeing Black representation in various fields. Chantal orated a moment of this kind of inspiration in their early childhood,

> So there was a show on Nick Junior. Yes. It, was on Nick Junior. It was called "Jack's Big Music Show." …One episode there was a Black woman who was a singer and I thought she was just gonna be like a regular singer...No, that Black woman was a yodeler. I was like, 'Wait a minute, this doesn't exist. This is not real.' And my mom was watching it with me and she was just like, you know, just laughing…But I took that so seriously and when I graduated from [transitional kindergarten] I walked across this beam [that] was supposed to be like symbolic of all the things that you did in transitional kindergarten… And I said in front of every single parent in that room that I wanted to be a Black yodeler. My mother looked at me like I was insane…But in that moment I was like, 'Wow, we can go places yo, I wanna go be a yodeler, I can go there…any and everything is possible.

This admiration of another Black person's abilities and achievements were experiences shared among contributors that were revealed to be significant as it provided opportunities to see Black people in ways that defied misconceptions about Black culture. In addition, contributors reflected on how fully authentic expression of oneself is required to defy these misconceptions and attain personal and collective achievements. In reinforcement of the importance of authenticity, contributors spoke about how they "would see the most joy" generated in themselves and the community when Black people engaged in being their most authentic selves by doing what they were most passionate about. Furthermore, contributors noted that in communities where Black people are accepted as they are and given

opportunities to express themselves, their achievements and impact on others fully are well recognized. Notably, Black academic achievement was described as “such a big thing” within the Black community. However, BiggerPicture elaborated that with any Black achievement, “It's like you've gotta see someone… that looks like you do it,” and in areas where Black achievement occurs where it is not expected to, communities revel in it “like a win for the Black culture as a whole” (Del).

**Stories about Generating Black Joy and Empowerment**

While describing means of Black students resisting and navigating systems of oppression, contributors presented Black Joy as consistently present within these measures. Black Joy was literally described as “joy,” however contributors like BiggerPicture emphasized that “it's different than joy because…[it’s] what makes you proud of being Black” and while this may look like “having your hair done, having a fresh pair of shoes…a nice crisp lineup. Having the things to make you feel like, “Oh yeah, I'm really on!”; Black Joy is “more or less about the attitude and the morale behind everything” (Chantal). One way to experience these feelings, contributors explained, was in “being comfortable” or “safe” as is commonly experienced in community with other Black people. This is presented as a crucial means to creating Black Joy, particularly while navigating a system that affords few Black students “comfort.”

However, despite the psychological safety necessary for generating Black Joy under certain conditions, contributors also revealed that Black Joy also arises from authenticity. Being authentic, or “taking that stand and making a point that you are gonna hold true to

yourself and your ideals… [is] a big strength for Black people" (Control) particularly in how it generates Black Joy. In addition, the results of being authentic present as a "sharing thing," which contributors described as how being authentic creates Black Joy that empowers Black people to "wanna share [their] joy with other people;" and this multiplication of this joy "pulls other people in" (Zoe). This was notable in how contributors described how Black Joy can lead to Black achievements, which can inspire Black Boy Joy and Black Girl Magic, a "one and the same" type of Black Joy resulting from Black people. Del stressed how when "you're a kid and you hear those things, they empower you" and reflected on how celebrating Black achievements can spark Black Boy Joy, as noted by Del such as,

> when you're in grade school and you hear about Martin Luther King and all the things he did, and it's like, you look at your skin color and it's like, 'Oh, you're Black, and *you're* Black and you're a boy.' And you kinda look up to that. It's like very empowering to you, you know? Because you're like, 'Oh, maybe I could do that?'

Cultural concepts like Black Boy Joy were framed by contributors like Zoe and Control as "funneling confidence back into Black boys" "in response to the masculinization of young Black boys…from outside of the community and within…in reaction to the cutting down of their joy in certain ways that they express it." Contributors shared sentiments around Black Boy Joy as a helpful form of resistance to how Black boys and men express themselves while navigating "weird stereotypes about" "[being] a man" or about "Black men being stupid."

In addition, contributors framed Black Girl Magic as "support towards other women, and as "being a girl's girl" committed to "bringing up" achievements of Black women. When Black students "[support] other women" particularly when "seeing another Black woman doing something incredible," Black Joy also manifests. Subsequently, the need for "safe

spaces" to more easily incite Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Joy were emphasized by contributors as pathways to not only authentic expression that could lead to achievements for the community but also as cultivators for Black students "to dream bigger, to want more," and to "move progress towards betterment of the entire Black culture" (Del & Chantal). In capitalizing on the interwoven support and solidarity for each other within the production of Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Joy, BiggerPicture described that "it feels that we can unite over things." This unity was particularly noted around the protests in honor of George Floyd, where BiggerPicture pointed out that while "none of us knew George Floyd personally…we were all out there in the streets for him… And it just shows that camaraderie and allyship." When Black people recognize the value in being themselves, appreciate others for doing the same, and prioritize ambitions in alignment with these concepts, they generate Black Joy that feeds a collective feeling of empowerment that arises "to change that negative aspect of our history and turn it into a positive" (Del), and as BlackParade stated, to "[show] that we're here, that we're still here even regardless of how many times that people try to knock us down, how many times that people try to remove us from the picture…and that we're proud to be here."

### The Story of Black Students' Development of Perseverance in the Face of Systemic Oppression through the Generation of Black Joy

In painting the picture of the ways Black students perceive their experiences of Blackness within the context of systemic oppression, contributors described the gravity of the wide net that the challenges of systemic oppression pose for Black students. Pointedly, the impact of systemic oppression was framed as impressionable to the extent that racism becomes "a

social slack" to Black people. Contributors like Chantal passionately asserted that "classism, racism, colorism, Sandra Moore, sexism, all the shit, texturism–fuck, all the stuff is just little, little itty-bitty building blocks" that inform misconceptions about Black culture which perpetuate the continued disenfranchisement of Black communities as BiggerPicture adds on to say,

> it'd be one thing if…we didn't see those problems now, but…we're still seeing it…there's like so many cities that are just like heavily Black populated that aren't cared about or treated like with any type of respect whatsoever. And then we expect those people to act…a certain way. But it's like we've given them no tools, no resources to be that way…you can't expect people to be something when you don't ever help them.

Consequently, the disenfranchisement of Black people inflames misconceptions around Black people's abilities, resulting in further alienation of their culture into otherness within dominant narratives. However, in acknowledging the ways Black experiences have developed across history, contributors reminded us that "a lot of our strengths stemmed from our struggle just 'cause we had to do something to protect ourselves and help ourselves" (BlackParade). Black Joy becomes present when recognizing the ways that as a result of the effects of "slavery" Black people " had to "persevere," and " overcome." Notably, the adverse experiences that accompany "the struggle" are not chosen, and in response Black people create communities such as "Black Student Unions" (BSUs), "mentorships," "Black graduations," "festivals," and "reunions," spaces where Black Joy can come easily in order to "cope…[in knowing] [they are] not the only one." These spaces to "sit and debrief" daily interactions with racism was a concept routinely reinforced by all contributors, as these spaces not only provided "empathy" to their experiences, but also opportunities to generate

Black Joy by “reveling in Black culture or your own productions of it…whether that means something that's come before you, or what you're creating with other Black people right now;” which spans from Black “creativity” to “food and hair, and just all the stuff that comes with being a Black person in general” (Zoe & BiggerPicture).

Furthermore, contributors asserted that within Black communities, the acknowledgment of “the history” and the “celebration” of Black innovation generated feelings of pride, empowerment, or feeling like “[wanting to] flip off a racist real quick.” These feelings, while individualized, were consistent perspectives in relation to Black Joy from a macro-level perspective and congruent with Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Magic as specific types of Black Joy experiences. Black Joy was illuminated to demonstrate purpose and potential in igniting a collective motivation for “better” for Black people, often resulting in “activism” and “justice” for the community. By capitalizing on these narratives of Black strength, contributors shared that Black people resist dominant narratives that “misconstrue” their existence and “put pressure on ‘em.” Similarly, contributors described protesting for the deaths of Black figures for collective “justice” “that everyone [fights] for.”

In addition to the idea of Black Joy as a channel for Black liberation from systemic oppression, contributors called for those who “sugarcoat” or “forget” “the atrocities of slavery” and today’s maintained “systems of oppression,” to ask themselves, “Why are you uncomfortable?” Notably, they specifically wondered about people who ignore or actively promote the status quo around how Black people are perceived and treated outside of Black spaces. As contributors acknowledged the Black Joy that developed from engaging in sharing

their stories for the present study, they posited that when “some people say things because other people have said it, and they don't question it” (Chantal), they perpetuate these systems of oppression which prevent Black people from a life of joy. In doing so, they further narratives that limit Black “intellectual achievements” and opportunities to see “a successful Black person” that “defies [these] stereotypes.” Conversely, encouraging the experience of Black Joy will allow us to “persevere” and “get where we wanna be.”

**Song Immersion Findings**

To texturize the narratives provided around strengths identified within Black culture, contributors were asked to engage in a song immersion experience with the researcher. As a result of the preliminary coding and clustering within the existing research question framework, the song lyrics demonstrated good coherence with existing responses to interview questions. While they supported the conclusion of data saturation, they did not add any further relevant codes or themes to the study's findings.

## Chapter V: Discussion

Due to the irrefutable presence of racism within our current institutions, Black higher education students are at risk for developing Race-Based Trauma (RBT); which causes detriments to behavioral and emotional well-being, concentration, and self-identity (Henderson et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). To find ways to mitigate the likelihood of Black individuals from developing RBT, current literature has explored the systems of oppression that perpetuate it (Carter, 2007; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019), the biopsychosocial impacts RBT has on Black individuals (Seaton & Zeiders, 2021), and therapeutic modalities for the treatment of RBT (Dong et al., 2023; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020; Metzger et al., 2021). However, perspectives that address how Black culture has inherent resiliency factors rather than as a deficit, particularly in higher education (Wallace, 2022), have yet to come to light. The present study sought to illuminate these unseen perspectives, to address what specific Black cultural capital may mitigate the effects of RBT that Black students may describe in their narratives, how Black students' experiences have contributed to their conceptualizations of Blackness, and how Black students have prevailed in the face of discrimination aside from current conceptualizations of Black resilience as grit at the expense of Black mental health (Anderson, 2019; Dong et al., 2023; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; McGee & Stovall, 2015).

For Black Americans, the experience of racism in overt and covert forms is probable regardless of the spaces they navigate due to how US society is contingent on the inequities that form from the relationship between race and ownership of property (Datz, 2017; Eppley

et al., 2020; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These experiences create disturbances in the overall physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of Black Americans (Jones et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2019). To address this national epidemic amongst Black Americans, mental health clinicians have attempted to use culturally adapted interventions such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) and mindfulness to address the physical symptoms and reactions to racism (Dong et al., 2023; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020; Metzger et al., 2021). However, such modalities are insufficient to contextualize fully how systems of oppression affect the daily lives of Black clientele. The current study proposed that using the framework of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) would reveal cultural resiliency factors specific to Black culture and identity development (Cross, 1994; Elisha & Collins, 2022; Kelly et al., 2020) that may serve to improve mental health treatment outcomes for Black Americans (Jones et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2021).

The researcher used a narrative inquiry methodological approach to collect the narratives of six Black higher education students to reveal how they conceptualized personal and external perceptions of Black culture and how they used their culture to resist adversity. The narrative inquiry approach attempted to capture the nuances and meaning attached to the lived experiences of Black students (Denzin, 1989; Kim, 2016) to develop a counter-narrative to the dominant ideologies about Blackness enforced by systemic oppression. The study was advertised using a flyer across multiple online forums and shared social sciences and ethnic studies departments of higher education institutions in the Pacific Northwest. The

researcher recruited six contributors from colleges and universities on the West Coast. Contributors were undergraduate and graduate students, with areas of study ranging from music, sociology, nursing, animation and illustration, social work, and psychology.

Contributors were invited to share two songs to listen to in a song immersion experience with the researcher in addition to an interview around their experiences with oppression, Black culture, and overcoming adversity. Questions asked during the interview centered around the use of frameworks such as Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race theory to extract stories about Black cultural capital. During the song immersion segment of the interview, contributors were asked to develop stories in connection to the songs they chose. Contributor interviews were transcribed and analyzed for preliminary narrative codes before consolidating codes in NVIVO in an iterative process across all contributors. Narrative codes were developed by analyzing transcripts for narrative elements, including characters, plot, conflict, and resolution. Consolidated narrative codes were framed into a conceptual map relevant to the research question framework.

**Conclusions**

An inductive narrative inquiry analysis of the narratives shared by six contributors around Black cultural perceptions and resisting adversity revealed narrative codes that were consolidated into five main narratives: (1) Stories about daily interactions with ongoing systemic oppression, (2) Stories about being in community with Black people and those who provide empathy to Black experiences, (3) Stories about perseverance and the acknowledgement of their historical epistemologies, (4) Stories about Black achievement and

authenticity, and (5) Stories about generating Black Joy and empowerment. Additionally, all five narratives revealed a single overarching narrative: The story of Black students' development of perseverance in the face of systemic oppression through the generation of Black joy.

Contributors shared stories about how they received negative messages about Blackness from outside and within Black spaces, which were informed by daily interactions of racism regardless of their overt or covert presentations and began as early as childhood. Microinvalidations, such as messages that Black people "always make everything about race" and "don't have culture," were commonplace. Similarly, findings illustrating how they experienced and questioned microaggressions around their abilities and achievements in other cultural spaces were consistent with other findings around the Black experience (Jernigan & Daniel, 2014; Sue et al., 2007). This consistent narrative suggests the necessity for not only dismantling ideologies around Blackness but also the misconceptions around educational achievements for Black students. This task would be inappropriate to place as a responsibility of Black students. In sharing their experiences with daily encounters of racism, contributors revealed the daily sense of unsafety and otherness from the environments they exist within. This suggests that as academics and mental health clinicians, we must dismantle how we speak about Black culture from uninformed conceptualizations and instead create safety by demonstrating curiosity and allyship in the communities we build. Rather than forcing Black students to act performatively within higher education, we must affirm to them that their existence is non-threatening and welcomed, allowing them to embrace authenticity

and access achievement. In light of this study's findings, contributors revealed that the misconceptions that are accepted as truth about Blackness, particularly around how skin colors, hair textures, socioeconomic status, education, and speech patterns inform the derogatory treatment of Black students, prevent aspirations of Black students beyond the basic desire to simply live. In failing to develop acceptance and humility toward the humanity of Black students, clinicians, educators, and policymakers perpetuate the ongoing experience of racism for Black students.

Despite these everyday challenges, contributors turned to family, friends, and mentors who could empathize with their struggles when confronted by experiences of racism. The contextualization from community members' experiences appeared to be helpful amongst contributors as it informed how they may persevere in the face of future incidents. How contributors shared the importance of Black community reflected *familial capital*, the preservation of ways to navigate systemic oppression amongst family, and *social capital*, the ways peer connection is used to navigate systemic oppression; (Yosso, 2005). Notably, these forms of capital were discussed in relation to *navigational capital*, the skills developed to navigate the misconceptions of dominant culture, and *resistant capital*, the knowledge produced from resisting systemic oppression (Yosso, 2005).

As the entire Black community is collectively impacted by racism, the ability to relate to suffering demonstrates a collective strength of compassion. While current literature does note the significance of Black communities (Metzger et al., 2021; Neblett et al., 2008) for dispersing navigational capital, few have explored how sharing experiences of racism with

others as a means of coping. However, it is likely that Black people who speak out about their experiences with racism are more likely able to cope and reduce the likelihood of increased blood pressure, which may improve typical health outcomes connected to discrimination (Krieger & Sidney, 1996). Much of the importance for Black students to speak with others who have had similar experiences centers around the empathic listening and non-judgment that they receive while recounting racist incidents. For clinicians, this suggests that they must create opportunities to listen to and provide empathy to Black experiences of discrimination in therapeutic spaces. Additionally, it requires clinicians to discard assumptions of what they believe constitutes an encounter of racism.

In addition to internal community support, the contextualization of Black experiences of racism from a historical epistemology was also revealed to be critical in shaping narratives of perseverance for contributors. With the context of the past, contributors could see their own experiences as milestones of progress and achievement in comparison, which increased greater feelings of pride in their Blackness. Contributors referenced figures throughout history who contributed to eliminating discriminatory practices that would prevent them from pursuing higher education today. Additionally, contributors referred to the continued impacts that the history of the relationship between racism and property ownership has on the treatment they receive today. In acknowledgment of the sustained injury of slavery on the community, Black students derive motivation for an improved quality of life and gratitude that life is improved compared to their ancestors. Both of these sentiments inform the

community's *aspirational capital*; the means to enact perseverance despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005).

Moreover, having community members who relay these stories from the past about the struggles and triumphs of Black people before them are as part of the process of racial socialization as are receiving messages about responding to racism (Thornton et al., 1990), and appear equally important to Black identity formation processes (Jernigan & Daniel, 2014). The result of this is increased racial pride, which contributors described as unique to Black students due to its contingency on past experiences of slavery and segregation. However, the current policies, practices, and actions that maintain the discrimination towards Black people cannot be excused on the premise that it is improved in comparison to the practices of the past. As such, U.S. society is tasked with creating intolerable conditions for Black students. We must create the environmental conditions that eliminate the repercussions of slavery to bring Black students to platforms of success.

Similarly, contributors told stories about how Black achievements formulated a sense of pride and self-identity for Black contributors and the entire Black community. Regardless of the field they championed, these collective achievements served as important factors for resisting oppression. Contributors shared how these achievements can range from personal to academic and stem from the admiration of others to pursue internal aspirations. The community-wide revelry that results from such Black achievements is consistent with the idea of *communalism* in Black culture, the idea that one is interdependent on their community. This experience within Black culture generates positive feelings towards cultural

pride which mitigates stress responses (Abdou et al., 2010; Boykin et al., 1997; Johnson & Carter, 2020; McGee & Stovall, 2015). The importance of Black students accomplishing what they set out to do is critical to providing representation to others in spaces where Black people are not considered to be typically present. Without seeing other Black people achieve, contributors shared that the potential for Black success seems limited.

Similar to the historical markers of Black progress, Black achievements are also factors that transmute into *aspirational capital*. Subsequently, to increase the development of the Black community's cultural wealth, educators and the policies that govern them must develop avenues for Black students to obtain achievements. Dispelling the associations that Black people are not "prevalent" or associated with various fields of mastery begins with increasing the number of Black people in those spaces.

Furthermore, the positive feelings associated with Black achievements were synonymous with cultural assets like Black Joy and its variations, Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Joy. These experiences arose due to showcasing authenticity through achievements, supporting other Black community members, and aligning with oneself. Contributors pointed out that being yourself or recognizing oneself as having value helps generate *racial pride*; the ability of Black students to use their identity and awareness of systemic oppression to recognize racism in their environment while still maintaining an internal sense of pride (Nicolas et al., 2008). Black Joy adds meaning to the lives of Black students, and while interactions with racism are disparaging, it can offset the feelings that arise from them. Black Joy celebrates being alive while being Black, incongruent with the common narratives of the outlook on life

for Black people. This gratitude for the idiosyncrasies that point to evidence of one's existence encapsulates the strength of Black people to be able to persevere when given adversity. Evidently, Black Joy is essential for developing perseverance given its appearance throughout the stories contributors shared.

Contributors noted that Black Joy multiplies when positive messages about Blackness are reinforced, and these positive messages associated with Blackness are critical for offsetting experiences of discrimination, in addition to the communalism and racial socialization contributors shared stories of (Boykin et al., 1997; Caughy et al., 2002; Thornton et al., 1990). As all of these Black contributors stated, these factors not only lead to increased perseverance of systemic oppression, they also lead to better academic outcomes (Caughy et al., 2002). The type of morale that results from the generation of Black Joy from how Black students respond to racism is a type of *resistant capital* (Yosso, 2005), as it aids Black students in challenging misconceptions and obstacles that systems of oppression force them to encounter. For Black students to thrive, it is imperative that we extend the possibilities of incurring Black Joy across all of the settings they are in by celebrating and uplifting their achievements with them and increasing the means that allow them to achieve in any avenue they embark on.

Ultimately, Black students propel their perseverance in the face of racism by generating Black Joy. Contributors shared how this joy develops whenever Black students acknowledge the progress of their ancestors that allow them to pursue their higher education now when Black students commit to authenticity and celebrate the achievements that arise from the

result, and in association with being in community with other Black people as they reinforce the messages of perseverance and achievement of Black people. In the present study's stories, contributors demonstrated how interacting with racism was processed in community with others and refuted by reinforcing their internal desires of a life above the harm that it causes. In the end, Black students commit to being authentic to themselves in order to achieve their dreams; allowing them to persist through the pain the systemic oppression brings. This moxy comes from within and from the Black community's wealth of compassion, history of derailing barriers, and collective resistance to succumbing to oppression. Black students thrive when they receive emotional support and representations of better days to come, and the persistent internal drive to keep going with these gifts from their community must be illuminated to enable this. If clinicians, educators, academics, and policymakers can integrate the empathy, encouragement, and affirmation of the struggles, triumphs, and positive trajectories of Black students, then they can dismantle the effects of systemic oppression that bars them from success.

**Recommendations**

Racism is an inextricable part of life in the US, and race-based trauma is a probable occurrence for Black Americans who disproportionately experience the effects of systemic racism (Geronimus et al., 2006). Accordingly, dismantling ideas around Blackness is paramount for uprooting structures in our society that perpetuate misconceptions about Black people. To engage this type of systemic change, this study encourages educational institutions' policies and mission statements to incorporate the tenets of Community Cultural

Wealth (CCW) to expand the conceptualizations of capital to include the inherent individual and community strengths that Black students can bring to the learning environment. Integrating these tenets involves not just the manner of instruction, but also how the educational environment fosters the establishment and growth of communities specific for Black students. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory posits that an individual's development is contingent on their interactions with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977); for Black students, the institutions they interact with can create avenues that facilitate or impede meaningful contribution and achievement. Eliminating inequities in housing, access to health care, social services, and education in environments that institutions interact with can reduce the probability of Black arrests in the community (Kramer, 2000), resulting in increased likelihood of attending an institution of higher education (Bates & Siqueiros, 2019; Cregor & Hewitt, 2011). Further, continued deconstruction of superficial conceptualizations about Black people and resilience is critical as how Black people persevere are rarely discussed; often, resilience can be framed as an indicator of compliance with oppressive systems (Morton & Nkrumah, 2021). Resilience, while typically equated to grit and discussed as a positive cultural asset of Black culture in response to racism (Elisha & Collins, 2022; Wallace, 2022), does not exonerate the systems that necessitate Black people being resilient in the first place (Morton & Nkrumah, 2021; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Subsequently, how Black resilience is implemented is an area of further exploration.

## Limitations

While the present study does shed additional light on how Black students resist systemic oppression, one particularly salient limitation of this study is the low response rate to the study. It is possible that the low response rate was due to a) students' lack of interest in the study's participation; b) weariness from Black students about exploitation in research due to the historical experiences of exploitation which impact the current sociological landscape that Black students navigate; or c) restrictions on Black students' availability, as Black students may have too many obligations during their educational journey to be available for an interview. The researcher attempted to mitigate this limitation by sharing their flyer in higher educational institutions across the entire Pacific Northwest to extend the study's reach as much as possible. However, the study's total contributor count of six is sufficient for a narrative inquiry methodological approach (Kim, 2016). While not generalizable to the entire population of Black students, the purpose of narrative inquiry is to identify and crystallize the manner and types of narratives to which contributors assign meaning. These narratives are analyzed by the researcher via structured interpretation and secondary meaning-making processes to offer findings that are transferable to other people (Denzin, 2013). In the sharing of these six contributors' stories, this study has satisfied the purpose of this study by adding additional perspectives of Black cultural epistemologies, which may incite the addition and evolution of other narratives of relevance. Further limitations of this study revolve around homogeneity in the contributor sample, and this may be due to the study's exclusion criteria around contributors' and their families' former state residency; factors that may have

impacted the type of contributors who responded to the study. Additionally, the present study's contributor population accounts for one male voice. The impact on perspectives that the lack of variance in gender identity has on the study, while possibly minute, may reflect current cultural misconceptions around Black men sharing their feelings or disclosing their experiences (Krieger & Sidney, 1996), and so Black men may have been less likely to participate in the study given this current cultural narrative. However, the present study's aim was not to synthesize Black culture into a monolith, and in spite of the makeup of the contributor sample it does not maintain this assumption. Furthermore, while a substantial portion of this study analyzed narratives related to song selections provided by contributors, the findings of the narratives within the song immersion segments enhanced the data saturation rather than providing additional perspectives. This may be due to the variance in engagement in the song immersion experiences across contributors, as some contributors' interviews had insufficient time remaining to engage with more than one song. As such, the researcher's future research endeavors may be to extract narratives from Black students using song elicitations with enhanced protocols to facilitate the data collection procedure.

**Further Research**

While the relative homogeneity of study contributors may have limited this study, there are other recent studies investigating how Black higher education students persevere against adversity they face in higher education settings with a larger group of participants (Brooms, 2020; Stanton et al., 2022; Williams, 2022). These studies, in addition to the current study, provide a unique foundation for future studies around factors of resistance to systemic

oppression. Moving forward, researchers must continue to spotlight Black narratives to contribute to a fully conceptualized counternarrative of Black culture to the current epistemologies upheld by dominant culture.

Additionally, while this study collected the narratives of Black students, future research recommendations may point to other means of collecting the intrapersonal, or the subconscious means of expression, of Black students to texturize how they conceptualize Black culture and ways of resisting oppression (Quashie, 2009). Studies using music tastes of Black students to provide a means of externalizing the interior may provide other perspectives needed to bolster the narratives of resisting oppression currently available (Allen & Randolph, 2020). It is critical to bring to light the internal processes of Black students in order to create infrastructures that allow them to achieve and thrive in higher education settings. This study's use of music demonstrated as an effective means for further conceptualizing the narratives of contributors, which is consistent with other studies that examined the content of Black music for narratives of resistance (Chaney, 2018). Particularly, when considering how historically, Black music has served the function of facilitating the liberation of Black people and preserving how Black people persevered through adversity, academic researchers should center their work on the continued importance of Black music for resisting racism in today's context. Additional research by academics that explicitly focuses on the use of song elicitations for narrative inquiry may address the limitations of this study, and capture perspectives that may not have been revealed in this study.

Race-based trauma, akin to a ghostly "haunting" where narratives of the past tether to the present physical world and are seemingly unable to resolve, linger on the lives of Black students in the U.S. with the prospect of detrimental long-term physical and psychological health outcomes (Geronimus et al., 2006; Yoon, 2019). However, how Black culture is used to resist the generational torments of systemic oppression is still in preliminary exploration (Brooms, 2020; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020; Neblett et al., 2008; Williams, 2022). The present study attempted to provide insight into these aspects of Black community cultural wealth by highlighting the narratives of Black students in higher education, who implore policymakers and the general dominant culture to deconstruct current misconceptions about Black students that dispel Black achievement. In consideration of this study's findings, it is paramount for academics and counselors to continue researching Black culture as an asset in order to dismantle falsehoods about Blackness that prevent society from extending beyond the tolerance of Black people and creating infrastructure that values, advances, and respects their culture and existence.

While the literature examining ways to use Black cultural resilience factors to promote healing in a therapeutic context is in its early stages (Grier-Reed & Ajayi, 2019; Jones, Anderson, & Metzger, 2020; Kelly, 2019), mental health practitioners can consider how their profession is related to matters of the "soul," as liberation psychology frames the essence of mental health therapy within various cultural groups (Duran et al., 2011). When practitioners approach mental health therapy in this way, they authentically integrate cultural competency within their work and, in doing so, empower the communities they serve to thrive. Black

communities are not exempt from accessing these spiritual and intrapsychic forces from the generational tidings of their communities. Subsequently, they can benefit from clinicians integrating these intrinsic strengths in therapeutic spaces using modalities such as sandtray (Fleet et al., 2023). Ultimately, research on how mental health professionals can incorporate cultural strengths in their work with Black clientele advances our liberation from the systems of oppression that chain these ghosts of our past to our lives.

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**Appendix A: Study Flyer**

# BLACK CULTURAL STRENGTHS RESEARCH STUDY

YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY DECONSTRUCTING BLACK CULTURAL STRENGTHS FACILITATED BY SIKEZA FOWLKS, MASTER'S OF ARTS STUDENT OF SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY'S COUNSELOR EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

THE STUDY INVOLVES A 1.5 HOUR INTERVIEW ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH BLACK CULTURE AND LISTENING TO MUSIC ABOUT BLACK CULTURE

THE STUDY WILL RESULT IN YOUR SHARED EXPERIENCES BEING PUBLISHED AS A VIGNETTE WITHOUT REVEALING YOUR IDENTITY

**COMPENSATION IS A $10 COFFEE OR TEA GIFT CARD**

IF YOU ARE A BLACK MONORACIAL OR MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT SIKEZA FOWLKS AT SIKEZA.FOWLKS@SJSU.EDU

**SCAN TO SUBMIT YOUR INTEREST!**

**Appendix B: Screening Form**


# "How I Keep From Goin' Under": Breaking Down Cultural Strengths in the Stories of Black University and College Students

**Title of Study**
"How I Keep From Goin' Under": Breaking Down Cultural Strengths in the Stories of Black University and College Students

Thank you for your interest in this study! The purpose of this study is to showcase Black cultural strengths that have not been previously considered in academia and mental health research in order to eliminate barriers to services for Black university and college students. The following questionnaire will determine your eligibility and interest to participate in the study. If you are determined to be eligible to participate in the study, Sikeza Fowlks, the study's researcher will reach out to you to discuss further details.

**Name of Researcher:**

Sikeza Chandra Fowlks; San Jose State University Master's in Counseling and Guidance Graduate Student

**Study Chair/Supervisor:**

Dr. Zachary McNiece; Ph.D., CTP; Thesis Chair, Assistant Professor, Department of Counselor Education

If you have any questions regarding the study please reach out to Sikeza Fowlks at sikeza.fowlks@sjsu.edu or Dr. Zachary McNiece at zachary.mcniece@sjsu.edu .

## Eligibility and Interest Determination

The following section will determine your eligibility for participation in this study as well as the best way for the researcher to contact you with further details. Your personal information will not be shared in any way, shape, or form outside of the purpose of contacting you.

Do you identify as Black? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Do you identify as Multiracial? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Age *

Your answer

How do you describe yourself? *

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female

How do you describe yourself? *

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Trans Male
- ◯ Trans Female
- ◯ Gender Noncomforming
- ◯ Different Identity

If you answered "Different Identity" please clarify how you describe yourself below.

Your answer

What are your preferred pronouns? *

- ◯ he/him/his
- ◯ she/her/hers
- ◯ they/them/theirs
- ◯ different pronouns

If you answered "Different Pronouns" please clarify how you would like to be referred to below.

If you answered "Different Pronouns" please clarify how you would like to be referred to below.

Your answer

Are you currently a college or university student? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Where do you attend college or university? *

Your answer

Did either of your parents attend college or university? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Are you the first in your family to attend college or university? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Were you born in California, Oregon, or Washington? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Have you always lived in California, Oregon, or Washington? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

If the answer to the previous question is no, where else have you lived? (If this does not apply to you, please put N/A). *

Your answer

Have you ever experienced, or felt like you have experienced the effects of systemic oppression? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Submission to this questionnaire indicates your interest in participating in the study. *

Are you interested in participating in the study?

Have you ever experienced, or felt like you have experienced the effects of systemic oppression? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Submission to this questionnaire indicates your interest in participating in the study. *

Are you interested in participating in the study?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

To provide you with further details should you be eligible to participate in the study, please provide the best email to reach you at below. *

Your answer

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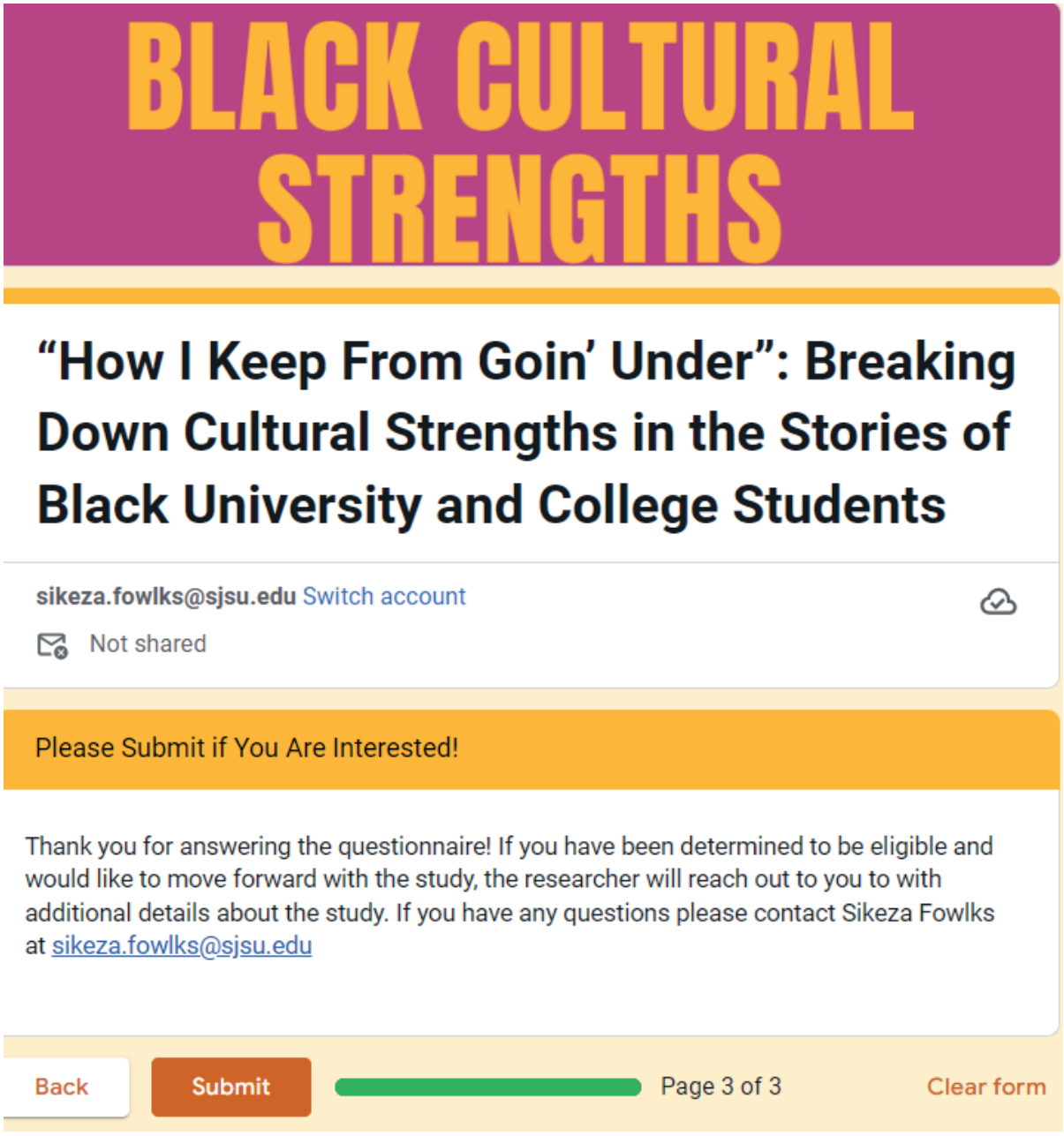
BLACK CULTURAL STRENGTHS
“How I Keep From Goin’ Under”: Breaking Down Cultural Strengths in the Stories of Black University and College Students
sikeza.fowlks@sjsu.edu Switch account
Not shared
Please Submit if You Are Interested!
Thank you for answering the questionnaire! If you have been determined to be eligible and would like to move forward with the study, the researcher will reach out to you to with additional details about the study. If you have any questions please contact Sikeza Fowlks at sikeza.fowlks@sjsu.edu
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Submit
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Clear form

# Appendix C: Study Consent Form

## REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Title of Study**

"How I Keep From Goin' Under": Breaking Down Cultural Strengths in the Stories of Black University and College Students

**Name of Researcher:**

Sikeza Chandra Fowlks; San Jose State University Master's in Counseling and Guidance Graduate Student

**Faculty Supervisor:**

Dr. Zachary McNiece; Ph.D., CTP; Thesis Chair, Assistant Professor, Department of Counselor Education

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to investigate how Black university and college students navigate systemic oppression using their cultural strengths. The aim of the study is to address the gap between Black students' experiences and the way they are perceived in the dominant culture. My hope is that through storytelling and music that we can continue to push forward literature and cultural sensitivity that eliminates barriers to services for Black people.

**Procedures:**
After the researcher obtains your consent through Docusign that the researcher will send to you via email, they will reach out to you to schedule an interview about your experiences and perceptions of Black culture. Prior to the interview, you will be asked to share via email two songs of your choice; one that represents what you are most proud of about Black culture and one that demonstrates Black cultural strengths. These songs will be listened to by the researcher during the scheduled interview, and you will be guided through questions and a reflective process about the songs you chose. Interviews may be conducted via Zoom or in person at a study room reserved for you and the researcher at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library on 150 E San Fernando Street, San Jose, CA 95112. Interviews will last no longer than 1.5 hours of time at a time coordinated for your convenience between you and the researcher. Interviews will be audio and video recorded using the Zoom recording feature.

**Potential Risks:**
Participation in this study is not to result in risks to your emotional, physical, or psychological well being. Given the purpose of this study is to explore culture and systemic oppression, you may feel emotional discomfort depending on your level of comfort around discussing your perceptions and experiences in relation to these topics. To mitigate your experience of discomfort, interview sessions will include scheduled and as needed wellness breaks that may be facilitated by the researcher if you so choose. If at any point you feel discomfort during the interview you have the right to withdraw your participation in part or in entirety. If you feel any emotional discomfort after the interview you may reach out to the listed warmlines and hotlines

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designated for emotional and crisis support. Similarly, you may reach out to the researcher to assist you with making contact to the listed organizations or to discuss further.

Please see the warmlines and hotlines for your convenience below:

**Mental Health America San Francisco Peer-Run Warm Line available 24/7**

The Peer-Run Warm Line 1-855-845-7415 www.mentalhealthsf.org/peer-run-warmline/

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Helpline available 24/7**
https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

1-800-662-4357

**National Alliance on Mental Illness Helpline available 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET**

Online Chat Available here

1-800-950-6264 or text "Helpline" to 62640

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Crisis Line**

Dial or text 988; or chat 988lifeline.org

**Potential Benefits:**
The study is not designed to bestow any benefits for participation, however in its effort to create an opportunity for sharing your personal experiences and perspectives you may experience an increased sense of belonging and emotional well being . Additionally, in sharing your experiences you may feel an increased sense of pride in having contributed to resistant efforts against systemic oppressions.

**Compensation:**
To show appreciation and value for your time and perspective, your participation in the entirety of the study will be awarded with a $10 gift card to a local coffee shop. The researcher is in no way affiliated with the establishment that this gift card will be respective to, and will provide compensation upon completion of the interview for the study.

**Confidentiality:**
Given that the nature of this study expects you to share about your personal and cultural experiences, the researcher will protect any information potentially identifiable to you. Your name, age, and any other specific information related to you that may identify you as a participant in this study will be protected under a pseudonym. Any contact information, audio and video recordings, audio transcriptions, and reflection materials used in the study will not be shared to any other individuals or parties, and will remain securely stored. Only the researcher and the researcher's faculty supervisor will have access to this information. In guidance of San Jose State University's mandated reporter policies; if it is revealed during the study that you, or someone you know is in immediate danger concerning life or death, then I will report the incident to the appropriate services. In addition, if it is revealed that any child or elder abuse is currently occuring, I will have to make a report to the appropriate services.

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**Participant Rights:**

In providing your signature to this consent form you are indicating that your participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your participation in whole or in part at any point in this study without any penalty on your standing with the higher education institute you attend. You are not obligated to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and may skip any questions you choose. This consent document is not a binding contract, but is only a written explanation of the purpose and events of this study. You are not to be penalized for waiving your participation or stopping your participation in the study.

**Questions or Problems:**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, please contact Sikeza Fowlks at sikeza.fowlks@sjsu.edu or Dr. Zachary McNiece at zachary.mcniece@sjsu.edu
- Complaints about the research may be presented to the Dr. Jason Laker, Counselor Education Department Chair at jlaker@sjsu.edu
- For questions about participants' rights or if you feel you have been harmed in any way by your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Richard Mocarski, Associate Vice President for Research, San Jose State University, at 408-924-2479 or irb@sjsu.edu

**Signatures:**
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to be a part of the study, that the details of the study have been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this document, and that your questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

**Participant Signature**

| Participant's Name (printed) | Participant's Signature | Date |
|---|---|---|

**Researcher Statement**
I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to learn about the study and ask questions. It is my opinion that the participant understands his/her rights and the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures of the research and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

| Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent | Date |
|---|---|

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## Appendix D: Semi- Structured Interview Protocol

**Pre-Interview Questions for Demographics:**

What is your gender identity:
What are your preferred pronouns:
Do you identify as multiracial?:
What is your age:
Where were you born?:
Where else have you lived:
What region/city do you currently live in?
What is your school of attendance:
What is your area of study?:

**Interview Instructions:**
Welcome to the study's interview. To protect your identity in the study's findings, please choose or create a name that you would like to use when referencing your experiences. For example, my name is Sikeza, but for the purpose of this interview and the study I would like my name to be "Erykah Badu."

**What comes to mind when thinking about black culture?**

**Tell me a story that symbolizes Black culture for you.**

How do you define it?

What parts of your culture are you most proud of?

Tell me a story about how you have celebrated your culture. Who do you celebrate Black culture with?

Who embodies or symbolizes Black culture to you?

What misconceptions exist in Black spaces about Black culture?

What misconceptions exist in non-Black spaces about Black culture and strengths?

What is a strength or positive of Black culture that no one talks about enough?

What is something you wish that other people could understand about being Black?

**Tell me about how you have experienced Black Joy.**

How do you define Black Joy?

Where does it come from?

How do you experience it?

What do you do to experience it?

When have you felt Black joy most strongly?

**What comes to mind when considering cultural concepts like Black Boy Joy or Black Girl Magic?**

How do you define them?

How can one experience these things?

Tell me a story about someone you know who experienced Black Boy Joy or Black Girl Magic.

**How have you experienced privilege and oppression?**

**Tell me a story about a specific time you experienced systemic oppression.**

How has the role of your culture supporting you through oppression changed over time?

What parts of Black culture have helped you navigate life up to this point?

How does Black culture help you cope with systemic oppression?

How do you express the pain you feel from experiences of systemic oppression?

To whom or where do you go to express that pain?

What do you do when your pain is not being understood?

How has it changed across settings (considering geographic location, school, work, home, etc.)

**Wellness Break inserted at the halfway point of the interview (at least 3 minutes):**

I'm noticing that we are about halfway through the questions that I have for this portion of the interview. I would like to give you the opportunity to take a moment to get grounded or to take a moment for yourself. You are welcome to do some triangle breaths with me, you may have your eyes closed or lowered during this exercise where from the countdown of 4 seconds we inhale, hold the breath for 4, exhale for 4 seconds, and then repeat the cycle again. Feel free to breathe along with me, or to use this time to take a drink of water, step away, or to have a moment for yourself in whatever way feels most comfortable to you.

**Song Elicitations**

**Prompts For Song Listening:**

You will see a printed set of lyrics to the songs you decided to listen to with me today about Black pride and Black strengths, respectively. What I would like to do with you today is listen to and experience the song with you. One of the goals of this exercise is to reconnect with the experience you have when you hear this song. As we listen along to the song, please use the Zoom annotation feature highlighters to highlight any lines in the song that stick out to you the most. In addition, please note any sensations in your body as you listen by marking a scribble with the annotation pen next to passages of the song where you feel any physical reactions; this, for example, could be you noticing when you feel warm, cold, sweaty, a faster heart rate, or changes in breathing. Using the same pen provided, please circle any Black strengths you see in the lyrics. When we are done listening, I have a few questions to help you share a little bit more about why the song is meaningful to you. We will do this for both songs you chose today.

**Post Song Listening Interview Protocol**

**Tell me a story about Black culture with this song in mind. It can be about whatever you want, set wherever you want, and with whatever characters you want. Take as much time as you need to create your story.**

What does this story mean?

How does this story showcase Black strengths?

What lesson would you want someone to take from this story?

Who would you tell this story to?

**Now tell me about the first time you heard this song.**

What feelings came up for you?

What was going on in your life at the time?

What did this song mean to you at that point in your life?

What feelings come up as you listen to this song now?

What does this song mean to you now?

When you hear this song, what does it make you feel like doing?

**Tell me about how this song has helped you cope.**

How does this song showcase your ability to cope with systemic oppression?

How does this song make you feel proud of being Black?

What strengths in Black culture did you circle in this song's lyrics?

Where do these strengths come from?

If you wanted someone else to remember a line from this song, if nothing else, which line would you say they should remember?

**What about the section that you highlighted is meaningful to you?**

What physical reactions did you experience in the sections that you scribbled next to?

What about this section made you feel that way?

**Wellness Break at least 3 minutes (inserted after the post-song questions):**

Now that we have listened to this song, I would like to give you the opportunity to take a moment to get grounded. You are welcome to do some box breaths with me, you may have your eyes closed or lowered during this exercise where from the countdown of 4 seconds we inhale, hold the breath for 4, exhale for 4 seconds, and then let our body rest for 4 seconds before repeating the cycle again. Feel free to breathe along with me, or to use this time to take a moment for yourself in whatever way feels most comfortable to you.