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## A House Is Not A Home: Black Students' Responses to Racism in University Residential Halls



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**PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND PHOTOVOICE** was used to examine 20 Black students' perceptions of campus racial climate (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1999; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012) within residential learning communities. Using a qualitative constructivist case study, we examined Black students' inventories of individual and community assets, as juxtaposed to challenges, within residential domiciles at three predominantly White institutions. For the purpose of this study, photovoice was used to allow participants to accomplish the following: (a) analyze Black student community strengths and limitations; (b) facilitate relevant discourse and understandings about community concerns via group conversations and photographs; and (c) provide a forum for the presentation of students' experiential knowledge through their ontological language and images (Wang, 1999; Wiersma, 2011). Template data analysis was used to code data, and finding "our" space(s), absent while present, and perpetual homelessness emerged as identified individual and community strengths for navigation of the campus racial climate. Findings from this study inform residential housing administrators, advisers and staff about how Black student residents perceive and respond to residential climates on PWI campuses.

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Several scholars have studied how campus racial climate shapes the lived experiences of students of color who attend predominantly white institutions (PWI) and have found endemic systemic racism to the benefits of Whites and the detriment of Black and Latinx students attending college (Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, 2014; Davis & Harris, 2016; Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Guess, 2006; Gusa, 2010; Hurtado et al., 1999). However, this also has holistic adverse effects<sup>1</sup>. For instance, Black students attending PWI endure harmful racial microaggressions as a form of racism, cultural isolation, avoidance and a lack of belongingness that have

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term, "Latinx", is a way to disrupt the masculine-centric "Latino" and the gender inclusive but binary term, "Latina"(see Scharrón-del Río and Aja, 2016)

adverse psychological, physiological and behavioral outcomes (Hotckins, 2014; Hotckins & Dancy, 2015; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). Hence, recent literature describes hostile campus racial climates as encompassing the entire institutional environment that extends beyond college classrooms into communal spaces, including residential domiciles.

## **THE ROLE OF CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE IN RESIDENTIAL HOUSING**

Modern literature, concerning residential housing and campus climate, found that in many instances race relations at colleges are microcosms of society, meaning the endemic nature of racism is present. Koehler and Skvoretz (2010) examined segregation in residential housing and found it is extraordinarily difficult “to achieve residentially integrated outcomes if race is salient at all, even when the assignment of residence is “color-blind,” (p. 23). To this point, Black students had overwhelming preferences to reside in housing where greater numbers of Black collegians already lived (Koehler & Skvoretz, 2010) due to a desired proximity near other Black students in domiciles. In this study, Koehler & Skvoretz did not control for belongingness, perceptions of safety, or a sense of cultural normalcy. Additionally, we know when Black students live on campus they maintain higher GPAs than those living off campus with family (Flowers, 2004; Turley & Wodtke, 2010). However, what is not problematized by Flowers and Turley & Wodtke is to what extent their findings directly connect the campus climate of residential halls and academic outcomes. Concerning specific

research about residential halls as a place for experiencing campus climate, studies have found participants who lived in domiciles experienced perceptions of lower racial prejudice and improved racial attitudes (Sidanius et al., 2008; Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2005). Contrarily, racism and racial microaggressions experienced by students of color in residential halls contribute to negative perceptions of interracial relations and campus climate (Harwood, Hunt, & Mendenhall, 2010; Johnson, 2003). Interestingly, research by Lowe et al. (2013) found that based on frequency and context of interactions, “interracial dining in the university cafeteria is a consistent predictor of students’ more favorable views of the campus racial climate” (p. 593), which can counteract negative experiences in resident halls if cafeterias are housed therein.

Harper et al. (2011), in a study of 52 Black male resident assistants, found participants experienced racial stereotypes, microaggressions and being hyper-surveilled by White supervisors while working in residential halls. Johnson (2003), when examining residential hall climate, found that White students had much more positive perceptions than students of color. The findings of these studies aid in problematizing residential hall climates as an extension of overarching campus racial climates, and perceptions of participants based on their lived experiences. To this point, when examining general campus climate, Worthington (2008) found despite racial-ethnic minority status, “perceptions of campus climate were found to be more positive when participants tended to deny the existence of racial privilege” (p. 9). Helm, Sedlacek & Prieto (1998), Gusa (2010) and Neville et al. (2001) confirm this

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is overwhelmingly a perspective held by those who self-identify as White.

This qualitative constructivist case study examines 20 self-identifying Black students' perceptions of campus racial climate (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1999; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012) within residential learning communities and their responses to being racialized. Photovoice was applied to Black student inventories of individual and community assets, as juxtaposed to challenges, within residential domiciles at three predominantly White institutions. This paper fills a gap in the campus racial climate and environmental racial macro-aggression literature about responses to hostilities and strategies for empowering Black students to successfully navigate PWIs they perceive as unsafe and unwelcoming.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Central to this research process is the participatory research method of photovoice, which was used in this study to create an opportu-

nity for participants to capture and think about strengths and concerns of their community through critically analyzing photographs for the purpose of creating systemic change on their campuses. The photovoice process serves to encourage the development of "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1970) by facilitating the assessment of oppressive power relationships experienced by participants within dominant societies. Additionally, in understanding how race-related issues negatively impact Black students' retention, the perceived notions of campus climate and ability to persist (Bonnilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Hurtado, 1992, 1994; Hurtado et al., 1998; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000), we acknowledge previous research that framed racial microaggressions as a primary source of trepidation for Black collegians. Racial microaggressions represent subtle "non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66) that "stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (Davis, 1989, p. 1576). Although the foundational racial microaggressions literature (Davis, 1989; Pierce et al., 1978) positions the phenomenon within a Black/White binary, recent literature extends the context to include people of color (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273) and is subdivided into microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and environmental macro-microaggressions.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Site and participants

Midwest Loft University (MLU) consists of 19,306 undergraduates and has a total of 1,105 Black students, while University of Grand West (UGW) is comprised of 16,339 under-

graduate students of which 1,704 are Black. Each institution is situated within a Midwestern state. MLU is the oldest public university and The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2016) classifies both as doctoral universities with highest research activity. Study participants consisted of 20 Black collegians, 16 of which lived in residential housing while the remaining four commuted. After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board, flyers were posted on campus about the study opportunity. An electronic flyer was forwarded to approximately 1,000 Black students by the Ethnic Student Network (ESN) and Black Student Union (BSU) organizations on each campus. Of the approximate 1,000 students, 78 responded with an interest in participating, but only 20 agreed to participate. The remaining 58 declined for personal scheduling reasons.

### Data Collection and Analysis

We utilized the SHOWeD critical dialogue method (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Wang & Burris, 1997), which allowed participants to identify individual and/or community strengths and limitations, unpack their circumstances, and construct action plans based on their social analysis of the campus racial climate. Participants were introduced to the concept of photovoice and how it can be used to identify potential risks to communities while increasing well being. Participants were given disposable cameras or used personal cell phones over a period of 12 weeks. Photovoice groups met twice weekly. During our 24 meetings, participants shared and discussed the photographed pictures. Our initial meeting served to frame participants' creation of four study photo-assignments: (a) Why is residen-

tial housing problematic for Black student communities?; (b) How does the residential housing climate influence Black student community behaviors?; (c) How can our community support Black students in making healthy decisions about racial interactions?; (d) What challenges does the Black student community face in addressing racism in residential housing? Photo discussion sessions were audio recorded, and transcribed for data analysis.

Meetings served as opportunities to select photos and identify themes. First participants selected significant photos, then shared their narratives within the frame of a SHOWeD method: 1) What do you See here?; 2) What's really Happening here?; 3) How does this relate to Our lives?; 4) Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?; and What can we Do about it? (Wang, 2006). Finally, participants assisted in preliminary coding themes. Afterward, template data analysis, in which an initial "template" coding structure is created and refined across iterations (Brooks and King, 2012; King, 2004), was conducted using photo discussion transcripts. We finalized the template analytical process after identifying themes that were relevant to the study's research questions (King, 2004). We then finalized the coding template after five successive iterations. Two months after concluding data analysis, 17 of the students participated in a member checking focus group to ensure credibility and act as a point of triangulation.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we report findings pertaining to individual and community strengths, as contrasted by identified concerns. Findings are as follows: 1) finding "our" space(s); 2) absent

while present; and 3) perpetual homelessness. The thematic descriptions below were present across both institutional context and were resonated with most or all of study participants.

### **Finding "our" space(s)**

Much of what participants expressed in their photography and group discussions concerned creating or joining spaces absent of White peers (e.g. Black Student Union) to distance themselves from racial microaggressions experienced in residential halls. This finding is consistent with previous research that found Black students are made uncomfortable with the exclusive normalcy of Whiteness and practice White peer avoidance strategies as a form of coping (Armino et al, 2000; Dancy & Hotchkins, 2015; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). Specifically, participants documented and described numerous organizations that served Black students, addressed activism, and promoted academic excellence outside of residency halls. Nat explained the need to join culturally congruent organizations by stating, "There are no orgs in my hall for Black students, and because the dorms are basically separated from lower campus, I need to feel connected in meaningful ways to people who get my Black." Sharon elaborated, "At UGW we don't even have multicultural floors in the res halls, plus, I have an insensitive roommate so I spend the least amount of time there. My sorority is my place of solace on this campus!" Every participant expressed examples like these, even those who visited and were not residents on campus. "Even though I don't live on campus I rarely hang in the dorms with my friends because you always hear racist comments, or something ignorant. Since most of us are engineers, we kick it in

NSBE instead!" Further contributing to the abovementioned perspectives were participants' perceptions that residential life lacked employees who were culturally competent or able to create opportunities for Black students to exist holistically without experiencing racial incidents.

### **Absent while present**

The absent while present theme included group discussion data and photographs reflecting a lack of Black cultural presence in residence hall pictures, art, and namesakes. Kizzy lamented, "I feel like I don't belong in the res hall because I don't see myself reflected in the staff, or anywhere else. Not even a picture of a Black athlete! What message does that send?" Jason added, "I pay tuition like everyone else, except I don't see Black names on the buildings, professors in my major or even in the art on the walls. I don't see an appreciation for difference, only White culture." One aspect of the absent while present theme was Black students' belief that as residents they should see themselves reflected throughout domicile aesthetic as well as physically in organizations like the Resident Housing Association (RHA). Jan spoke to this point, "At MLU you have to run for a RHA office. I have done so three times and was never elected. If there were more students of color, I'd have a chance because all the White students vote for each other." Participants were offended by the absence of Blackness, not necessarily due to direct racial conflict. This absence was perceived as a form of physical, cultural, and intellectual discarding of Blackness and a form of environmental racial macroaggression (Sue et al., 2007). These perceptions confirm research by Gusa (2010) that White institutional presence is holistically det-

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rimental to Black students who experience it due to White ascendancy, estrangement, blindness and monoculturalism, and serves as an impediment to academic and social advancement within PWI residential hall learning environments and the campus at large.

### **Perpetual Homelessness**

The final theme, perpetual homelessness, addressed participants' experiences with place and space exclusion and/or attempts to locate a racial authenticity. For instance, Nat recalled peer residents' re-naming of him as "not Black, Black" as a way to assume Black identity as monolithic. Fatimah was frequently asked to clarify about where she "really lived" on campus. She elaborated, "No matter how many times I explain myself, I keep getting asked to show identification when entering the hall after hours and sometimes by the same desk clerk. My White friends never get asked." Mike also provided a pertinent example:

I am the only Black RA in the freshman quad at MLU and even though I have keys, a badge and wear a school lanyard, security have asked me numerous times to justify my access to the building. One time I had to call a fellow White RA to speak on my behalf, I mean, basically vouch that I was a student employee. After a while I just don't want to be here and would quit if I could afford it.

These types of clarifying exchanges with White peers and police were admittedly stressful and violent for participants. They confirm previous postulations by Smith, Allen and Danley (2007) that Black students, males in particular, are considered out of place when attending PWIs and under continual hyper-surveillance due to potential source of criminality assumptions. Although continually clarifying

was a source of trepidation, nothing was as frustrating as participants having to explain their Blackness. Neisha explained, "Prior to moving into the dorm I had plenty of phone conversations with my roommate and once I arrived she was shocked that I was Black and even voiced that she thought I was White based on how I sounded." Most participants had similar clarifying experiences like Cookie who recalled, "I remember when I attended the residential ice cream social. Jill, my White RA, said 'You're cool is so different than the rest of the Black girls who are unapproachable.' What does that even mean? I stay angry!" The process of repeatedly being racially confronted by White peers, staff and police had a cumulative, deleterious effect on study participants who frequently expressed regret with living in the residential halls on their campuses.

Employing the process of photovoice facilitated participants identification of Black student community strengths and cultural supports found in academic, fraternal, and activist organizations like the National Society of Black Engineers, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and Black Student Unions. Students associated limitations with an inability to obtain positions in housing and offices in RHA due to a perceived exclusionary racial prejudice. Furthermore, photovoice facilitated an understanding about community concerns with what participants attributed to resident halls as hostile places for living and spaces where they come to rest, eat and head to class. In accordance with photovoice creating empowering forums for the presentation of student's experiential knowledge (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005), findings were presented to each Black Student Union at the beginning of the

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subsequent semester to strategize about best navigational practices for avoiding racial microaggressions in residential halls, throughout campus and within the surrounding cities. As a preventative intervention of sorts, the compiling and sharing of Black student communal knowledge, through photovoice, allowed for identifying locational racial microaggressions on campus represented by individual persons or specific residential halls. In similar ways that Delgado Bernal (2001) described passing generational community memory to “help us survive in everyday life by providing an understanding of certain situations and explanations about why things happen under certain conditions” (pp. 624-25), Black students in this study knew to “spread the Gospel about when and where not to be on this campus” (Jason) as a daily ritual. The value of applying photovoice on PWI campuses as a research practice is found in being able to visually identify sources of racial angst, locate institutional agents who prevent Black students from progressing in the residential life and promote collective communal empowerment. Additionally, previous studies by McGowan (2016) about African American male collegians’ experiences with interpersonal relationships with men at a PWI and gay Black male experiences at HBCUs concerning navigation of internalized homophobia while learning to locate campus support (Means & Jaeger, 2013) provide pertinent examples of how to apply photovoice and photoelicitation to assess how campus climates are interpreted.

These photovoice findings are relevant because they directly speak to participants’ inability to locate diversity across campus environments, not just within residential halls.

This further contributed to individual and environmental racial microaggressive experiences. As students who owned their Black identities, heightened salience was experienced as coupled to perceptions of institutional campus racial climates as hostile. Basically, the more Black students experienced racism on campus the “Blacker” (Cookie) they felt, which led to their determination to help other Black students “locate places and spaces just for us” (Fatimah). This particular realization was followed by direct action, which is connected to Hurtado, Alvarado and Guillermo-Wann’s (2015) postulation that campus compositional diversity, historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion and organizational structures like residential domiciles shape students’ perceptions and influence how they are involved and engaged at PWIs.

## CONCLUSION

Black student resilience is a tool used to attempt to survive, persist, and thrive amid persistent racial macro- and microaggressive stressors, whether interracial, intra-racial, internalized, or environmental. Communally informed resilience as, exhibited by participants in this study, served as a valued form of group self-care through providing navigational information about how to literally avoid being traumatized. Further, the process of identifying locational racial microaggressions is not only beneficial to Black students, but could serve to inform other students of color about potentially threatening persons and places. As a tool for residential staff, photovoice informed how programming can provide not only a map for avoiding racial aggressive stressors, but also identify allied locations where Black students perceive safety, similar to those identified in

“Safe Zone Trainings” for the LGBTQIA community. As the findings indicate, participants suffer from a perpetual homelessness due to an absence of Blackness reflected in residential halls and having to locate safe spaces away from domiciles. Although the process of passing campus communal memory proved beneficial to incoming Black students, informed residential staff should also become knowledgeable so they, too, can participate in warning others about hostile campus racial climate locations. If residential staff understand their halls to be sources of environmental racial microaggressions, as experienced by Black students, accountability can take place, followed by thoughtful, informed program trainings designed to identify and lessen or eliminate racial trauma.

While we recognize that Black student engagement in acts of self-preservation work to ensure that communal enclaves, like ethnic organizations, thrive, we also acknowledge the task of doing so is not solely that of Black collegians. To decrease Black student exposure to hostile residential climates, it is essential that White staff educate themselves about practicing visual, cultural inclusiveness in geography and place, re-centering historically marginalized group narratives through Afrocentric event programming and by restructuring housing organizations like RHA to include representations of communities of color. Further, in an effort to counteract the adverse effects of hostile racial climates in residential halls, we call for increased hiring of Black students in positions like residential assistants to provide nuanced perspectives about ways to better housing environments and to serve as evidence of an active marker

for the pursuit of inclusion through employment. Since Black student residents utilize historically Black organizations to share communal memory about their holistic needs on campus, we recommend the formation of collaborative partnerships with organizations like RHA to determine the most effective ways to serve this particular demographic. We offer these interventions as essential to the meaningful participation of Black students on PWI campuses. Finally, once the abovementioned is accomplished, Black students can begin to experience PWI residential halls as possibly safer places where their voices and presence are appreciated, valued and welcomed.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. In their overview of findings, the authors discussed the theme of “perpetual homelessness.” How do you make meaning of this finding on your campus? How does this concept disrupt, problematize, or complement community development within your residence hall community?
2. In each theme presented in the findings, the authors describe the ways in which Black students feel out of place, unwelcomed, and challenged within Residential Communities. Identify strategies that RAs can take to ensure Black students feel at home within the residence halls.
3. The authors mentioned that their study helps illuminate ways in which housing departments should be more accountable for increasing inclusion and support for Black students within their residence halls. How can your campus get to know the experience of Black students within your residence halls?
4. The participants in the study discussed feeling “absent while present.” Essentially, they addressed the marginalization and erasure of Black culture on college campuses. In what ways can your campus work with students of color to ensure their community and experiences are culturally present within your campus community?
5. Finding safe spaces that center the experiences of students of color is not a new phenomenon; however, this study helps illuminate the nuanced need for Black students living-on campus within PWIs to find a space where Blackness is central, or at least where Whiteness is absent. In what ways can we help students find and create these spaces within the residence hall community?
6. What ideas do you have to use this study to increase inclusion, equality, and safety for Black students within your residential community?