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Navigating Racist Spaces through Radical Self-Care: A Photovoice Exploration of the Experiences of Black Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT
This manuscript examines the impact of racist campus climates for Black graduate students at a predominantly white institution. Using a photovoice methodological design, this study illuminates

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students' ability to thrive through radical self-care despite the many racist factors, incidents, and systems at the institution. The paper ends with recommendations for improving campus racial climate in graduate education.
Keywords: campus climate, Black graduate students, photovoice, radical self-care

You are a Black graduate student on your way to class. As you are walking you encounter a poster taped to a building wall on campus that reads, "You don't belong here." You feel a bit uncomfortable after reading this message but shrug off the sign and continue your journey to class. After all, you had to employ all of your resources (e.g., financial, emotional, intellectual, etc.) to get to this point. That poster wasn't going to get in your way. As you're walking you receive an email from your faculty member with feedback on your most recent paper. You scroll through the attached document to find that you've earned a 'C' and read a comment that says, "You need to work on improving your scholarly voice" with no additional feedback. You've tried to meet with the professor before, but they are never available during their office hours, respond late to your emails, and canceled the last two meetings you managed to arrange. You wonder if you're cut out for graduate school but proceed along the path toward the building where your class meets. You walk into the doors of a building named for a lynch mob leader who hated Black people and breathe a heavy sigh as you are greeted by walls lined with portraits of white men who led the academic college to which you belong. You finally make it to class and grit your teeth through a two-hour lecture in which the faculty member refers to Black people as "The Blacks," routinely avoids eye contact with you, but also regularly calls on you to share your perspective about diversity and equity. You leave class feeling defeated, but you know that a weekend with your friends from the Multicultural Center and time away on a hike will help you feel centered again. You receive a text from your mom that evening as you climb into bed. It reads, "Hey baby, I just wanted to let you know I'm proud of you, I love you, and I want you to keep moving forward." You wake up the next day prepared to do it all over again.

The above scenario illustrates a day in the life of a Black graduate student (BGS) as evidenced by the stories of the participants involved in the current research study employing a photovoice methodology to explore thriving and obstacles for BGS at a predominantly white institution (PWI). As the United States sociopolitical climate becomes increasingly steeped in oppressive ideologies promulgated through the highest of leaders and countless legislative actions designed to stifle progress (Spitalniak, 2024), this study centers the voices of those who resist and continue to be placed on the margins within the context of U.S. graduate education.

Although theorizing about campus racial climate and photovoice methodology emerged in the late 1990s (Hurtado et al., 1998; Wang, 1999), few scholars have taken the approach to merge the two approaches to more closely examine the experiences of Black graduate students. Further, fewer scholars focus on Black graduate students' experiences of campus racial climate (Briscoe, 2024). As racial tensions rise under the current United State presidential administration and universities continue to face threats and challenges to embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion, college campuses have become increasingly challenging places to thrive. The challenge becomes particularly amplified for Black graduate students who find themselves racially marginalized and on the periphery at institutions whose missions center undergraduates (e.g., mid-sized and large, public, regionally accredited institutions).

While the current literature has focused broadly on the experiences of racially marginalized students, a scarce amount addressed the experiences of graduate students while using visual data to represent their narratives. To truly understand such harmful and racist experiences that impact the retention and persistence of Black graduate students , scholars must more fully share and highlight Black graduate students' stories. Photovoice is one such methodological approach that

not only empowers marginalized communities but uses photographic imager to evoke powerful tied to participants' narratives. The current study addresses this gap by using photovoice methodology and campus climate theory to focus on Black graduate students, a population that has slowly grown from 1970 to 2022 (NCES, 2022), but may significantly decline in future years given the Supreme Court's rejection of affirmative action in college admissions (SFFA v. Harvard College, 2023), the Education Department's strains on financial aid (Hoover, 2025), and funding limits for federal TRIO programs (Blake, 2025).

As a team of researchers mostly composed of Black graduate students, faculty, and staff, the authors of this paper draw on the power of writing about the issues and experiences of BGS from their standpoint. Further, this study seeks to disrupt the dominant narrative that positions BGS as indebted, content, obedient, ignorant to the oppressive realities of the conditions they endure at PWIs (Blakey et al., 2024; McGee et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2021). This study demands readers pay attention to the narratives of BGS in verbal and visual formats as they describe the reality of navigating racist spaces and places on and around a PWI campus.

Background

Representation of BGS is slowly increasing in the U.S. higher education system (Council of Graduate School, 2017); however, support for these students continues to fall short (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). Diversity efforts at PWIs fail to meet the emotional, mental, and physical needs of graduate students of color (GSOC) leaving them with negative experiences in and outside of the classroom, fewer access to resources (e.g., mentorship, teaching, and research opportunities) than their white counterparts, and lack of representation in their faculty and peers (Croom, 2017; Daniel, 2007; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). That said, BGS continue to pursue their educational aspirations while creating their own small communities where they can find resources that promote radical self-care despite the hostile environment of the institution (Caringi & Pearlman, 2009).

Through this study, we sought to examine how BGS make sense of the verbal and nonverbal messages from their PWI and the ways these students work to carve out places for themselves and each other in the face of these problematic practices. The purpose of this study was to draw attention to the racist campus climates BGS at PWIs experience and how students navigate such spaces through radical self-care (Caringi & Pearlman, 2009; hooks, 2015; Lorde, 1988; Nicol & Yee, 2017). Through this research, we focus on the verbal and nonverbal ways post-secondary institutions communicate their values and commitment (or lack thereof) to equity and inclusion across campus and the numerous manifestations of self-care employed by BGS. Though institutions create strategic plans, mission statements, and websites designed to communicate a sincere value for diversity, the spaces students engage with in classrooms, on campus, and in the local community represent sites of oppression, which negatively influence students' belonging, persistence, and retention.

The literature dedicated to BGS highlights the marginalizing and demoralizing experiences students encounter during their time in master's, doctoral, and professional degree programs across social sciences, STEM, and humanities disciplines. While much of this literature focuses on discriminatory interactions students experience in the classroom, between faculty, and with their peers, the vast majority focuses on relationships students have with their faculty members and graduate programs (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harris & Linder, 2018). More specifically, a major focus within the literature highlights mentoring as a significant aspect of graduate education and the neglectful, race-neutral, and lackluster "mentoring" graduate students of color receive (Brown et al., 1999; Hypolite, 2022; Opini & Henry, 2023).

Across the literature, a resounding theme for improved curricular, programmatic, and relational practices exists as scholars call for faculty, graduate education leaders, and university, broadly, to acknowledge racism and multiple systems of oppression, pour more resources into the retention and recruitment of BGS, and develop opportunities for faculty to grow more critically conscious and aware of the influence of their power and privilege in advising, mentoring, and teaching contexts (Twale et al., 2016).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study centers perspectives of radical self-care, thriving, and campus racial climate to understand how students navigate racist campus spaces. While self-care has become a buzzword consumerized by the marketplace to sell soy candles and spa vacations (Kisner, 2017; Silva, 2017), a more substantive form of attention to well-being has emerged within discussions of vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Caringi, 2009) and surviving oppressive structures (hooks, 2015; Lorde, 1988). Such expansions of the oft-cited term, self-care, warrant more nuanced and critical perspectives when calling on the construct as a strategy for navigating marginalizing spaces.

Radical Self-Care

Self-care as a concept addresses ways people "promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability without the support of a health worker" (World Health Organization, 2025, para. 1). While often conflated with relaxation tactics tied to consumerism (e.g., spa days and candles), self-care rhetoric tends to neglect the ecological and contextual (Squire & Ncolazzo, 2019). Thus, scholars have begun discourse about radical self-care that centers community, education, activism, and action. As Nicol and Yee (2017) described, "radical self-care was and is an imperative practice to resist pressures to comply, conform, and above all, to remain true to our authentic selves" (p. 133). When connected to concepts of racial campus climate, which stymies thriving for Black graduate students, radical self-care becomes a mediator, coping mechanism, and strategy for combatting racism.

Radical self-care is a "holistic praxis" for both "living through and dismantling capitalist white heteropatriarchy in its material and affective structural forms," (McMaster, 2014, p. 7). We employ the concept of radical self-care, in part, to recognize and understand the strategies and configurations that marginalized people engage to survive within and thrive despite oppressive social forces. Survival mechanisms include, "practices that keep us physically and psychologically healthy and fit, making time to reflect on what matters to us, challenging ourselves to grow, and checking ourselves to ensure that what we are doing aligns with what matters to us" (Nicol & Yee, 2017, p. 134). Such practices may include the need to disengage from, "activities and relationships that are depleting and to replace them with those that are sustaining," (Caringi & Pearlman, 2009, p. 216). Thriving is dependent upon how students are engaged intellectually, emotionally, and socially on campus and operationalized through five factors: (1) engaged learning, (2) academic determination, (3) positive perspective, (4) diverse citizenship, and (5) social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010). An equally important distinction of the definition of radical self-care that we relied upon involves resisting, thwarting, reimagining, and transforming the oppressive social conditions that structure the status quo. The construct of thriving nested in radical self-care comprises our conceptual framework, which serves as an analytical tool to center students' holistic well-being while navigating racist campus spaces.

Campus Racial Climate

In addition to the concepts of radical self-care and thriving, we engage campus racial climate (CRC) theory to examine the experiences of BGS at PWIs (Hurtado et al., 1998). A negative campus climate is not a result of a singular incident, but rather a composition of structures, characteristics, ideologies, and influences (Hurtado, 1992) that mold the institution. The CRC framework comprises external and institutional forces that shape campus climates (Hurtado et al., 1998). The external influences of a campus climate fall into two areas: (a) governmental policies, programs, and initiatives (e.g. affirmative action, financial aid policies) and (b) sociohistorical (i.e., larger societal issues and events) (Hurtado et al., 1998).

The institutional contexts of a campus climate consist of four dimensions. The first dimension, historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, focuses on an institution's past of access and participation for students of color. For PWIs, their historical context of segregation, in particular resistance to desegregation, can result in hostile climates and impact how institutions support students of color (Hurtado et al., 1998). The second dimension, structural diversity, is the numeric representation of students of color and how it shapes the climate. While increasing the number of students of color at PWIs is a positive step to improving the climate, it can also result in increased racial tensions and competition for resources. The psychological dimension consists of how individuals perceive group relations, racial conflict, institutional responses to diversity, and attitudes toward other racial/ethnic groups, which overall impacts students' academic and social experiences. Perceptions of racial discrimination and negative encounters can deter interaction with other groups and result in isolation and social alienation, which produces a reduced sense of belonging and detachment from the institution. Lastly, the behavioral dimension focuses on social interactions among different racial/ethnic groups, individually and collectively. White students have the least social interaction with students of color and believe racial and ethnic affinity groups and programs are forms of segregation (Hurtado et al., 1998). However, students of color, including those who participate in affinity groups and programs, have higher social interaction with white students, despite a negative campus racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1998). Thus, institutional leaders must address all four dimensions to improve the campus climate.

As a framework, CRC takes into consideration campus policies and practices within the larger context of governmental and societal forces around institutions, as well as institutional contexts of historical legacies, compositional diversity, perceptions and attitudes, and social interactions that contribute to the overall campus environment. CRC is an ideal framework to examine the external and institutional factors that negatively or positively impact the experiences of students of color at PWIs. Attention to campus climate has led PWI leaders to create mission statements and goals that express their value and commitment to diversity. When partnered with radical self-care, these two frameworks allow us to see the gaps in diversity efforts and how PWIs fail to meet the needs of BGS.

Methods

As a research team, we employed critical participatory action research (CPAR) (Fine & Torre, 2021; Mohajeri et al., 2026; Walker, 1993; Wang 1999) coupled with photovoice (Latz, 2017) for the study. CPAR uses experiential knowledge to foster partnerships within communities to move away from the traditional hierarchical structure of the researcher and participant (Walker, 1993). Further, "CPAR offers a way to think about how, with whom, and for whom we design research, analyze our findings, and disseminate results" (Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 6). Photovoice is a methodology that uses visual representation as a tool to enable people to identify, represent, and

enhance their community (Wang, 1999). Based on a CPAR approach, photovoice promotes critical consciousness through dialogue and knowledge about issues affecting the person and community with the goal of impacting policy (Wang, 1999). Together, these disruptive methodologies allowed the research team to understand the lived experiences of BGS. Moreover, the research team consisted of an interdisciplinary group of graduate students, faculty members, and staff who shared a common purpose of enhancing the quality of life for BGS. This partnership provided a space for the research collective to brainstorm contemporary issues of practice. Over the course of its first year (the team is now in its fifth year at the time of originally authoring this manuscript), the research team designed a research protocol that sought to answer the following research questions: (a) what obstacles do BGS face at a large southeastern PWI? and (b) How do BGS define thriving at a southeastern PWI? We defined a graduate student as any person enrolled in a graduate level course at the time of the study and a Black person. These criteria included multiracial and international students.

Recruitment

We recruited graduate students of Color in 2018 at Hill University (a pseudonym)—a large, predominantly white institution in the Southeast—using multiple avenues such as: personal invitations (e.g., email, listservs, word of mouth), recruitment at graduate organization meetings and events (e.g., Graduate Student Government, Black Graduate Student Association, International Student Association), and through social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and focused on the Black graduate students for the current analysis discussed within this manuscript. Once students expressed interest, research team members connected with potential participants to discuss the instructions for participation, informed consent form, and complete a demographic questionnaire and photo release form. Sixteen participants (eight women and eight men) successfully completed the study, and the research team deemed this number was sufficient during the data analysis when we met saturation (i.e., a qualitative phenomenon when no new narratives emerge expressed across the participant data [Glaser & Strauss, 1967]). This participant pool consisted of master's and doctoral degree programs across the university in the fields of education, engineering, and social sciences who identified as Black, African American, or a descendant of the Black diaspora.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data sources for this study included participants' photographs, personal narratives from audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, researcher fieldnotes, and completed demographic questionnaires. Participants submitted up to 12 photographs that illuminated obstacles they faced and their depictions of thriving as a BGS. After submitting the photos prior to the initial instruction interview, research team members arranged in-person, audio recorded, one-on-one interviews. These interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. During interviews, research partners shared the submitted photographs from the participant and invited them to discuss the meaning behind their photographs. Next, the interviewer employed a semi-structured interview protocol which empowered the participants to highlight their personal narratives on campus relating to their identities (e.g. race, religion, gender, class, citizenship, marital status, etc.) and their experiences as graduate students navigating the institution. The interviewer developed fieldnotes which described a profile of the participant, synopsis of the interview conversation, environmental conditions of the interview setting, and reactions to the interview process. To support the

trustworthiness of the research design, research team members recorded and uploaded fieldnotes in a shared electronic space and debriefed after interviews as a team.

Having participants in the study who also served as co-researchers on the research team who were part of the data analysis process afforded the study two main benefits. First, participants with insider/outsider status provided immediacy in the member checking process. Whereas a research typical would need to return to a participant via email and request a follow-up conversation in an attempt to gain clarity, ask follow-up questions, or confirm accuracy of an interpretation, the participant-researchers (co-researchers) in the current study were able to almost instantaneously add additional context and further describe their interview narratives and meaning behind their photos. Such immediacy led to dialogue among research team members and other participant-researchers who also shared their own narratives as data for the study. This process aided in the crystallization process as the team could gather a fuller picture of participants' experiences.

Another benefit of research team members who held an insider/outsider status as part of the study existed in the form of alignment with the original values and principles initially outlined as part of photovoice methodology. Too often, researchers claim to engage photovoice as a research methodology, but do little to empower participants, center their needs, or fully involve them in the research process and decision-making. Such misalignment was not the case within the current study. Graduate students defined the study, engaged as participants, and led the data analysis process. While positivists might claim such a practice could break down the reliability of the study, we argue as critical constructivists, that the presence and participation of participant-researchers as part of the data analysis process aided in the goodness and trustworthiness of the study because they had power to frame and scaffold their own narratives; power not typically given to participants in either qualitative or quantitative research. As scholars aim to engage in research that advances liberation, we advocate for more instances of participant-research configurations to more accurately and justly represent the voices, stories, experiences, and issues associated with communities being studied for the purposes of academic research.

The research team analyzed the data using thematic analysis phases aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. After reading through all of the data and examining the participant's photos, the larger research team open coded the data in pairs using a codebook that described relevant, included examples of the coded within the interview transcript, and offered abbreviations so coders used consistent coding mechanisms. To support inter-coder reliability, the team met over a weekend for a coding "party" to learn more about qualitative analysis and reach a consensus about procedures. After education and pair coding, the pairs came together collectively to share insights and member check as the participants were also co-researchers on the team engaged in the data analysis process. After this initial round of open coding, the team began reducing codes within categories of obstacles and thriving. In the third phase, a smaller team of researchers employed theoretical coding using the CRC framework to identify connections across the data and discern emergent themes.

Scope of the Study

Although we endeavored to understand the obstacles and thriving of BGS at a PWI, the specific sociopolitical and institutional context tied to the site of the study may prevent full transferability of findings to additional context outside of those steeped in a geographic, political, and historical climate like Hill University. This study focused specifically on the experiences of BGS at one PWI. While our sense is that BGS at other PWIs experience similar phenomena, our findings cannot be transferred to all BGS at PWIs. However, this study can be used to inform future

inquiries that seek to understand the broad experiences of BGS at multiple PWIs as they relate to thriving and radical self-care.

It is worth noting that the majority of the students in the study also served as research partners and members of a formalized research team centered on community, critical-consciousness raising, and collective growth. Such a feature within this research study adds benefits and complexity. The benefits included the ability of participants to add clarity and context to aid in the analysis process describing their photos and interview narratives in more depth. The complexities emerged in ensuring non-participant study research team members could also weigh in and add their interpretations to the larger analysis conversation. As is common with qualitative research, our subjectivities and social constructivist epistemology regarded the inclusion of participants as research partners as an asset and opportunity to enhance the rigor, authenticity, and goodness of the research by distributing power and lessening the distance between researcher and "subject." Through the activities of learning about research, engaging in reflexivity, and regularly discussing the campus racial climate, the data collected for this study is rich and likely tied to the students' connection to the research topic as well as their regular and consistent engagement in critical conversations. Finally, this study also represents the narratives and experiences of a group of BGS, primarily in education-related fields. The sample was not entirely representative of the BGS campus population; however, we believe the obstacles addressed and methods for thriving showcase a diverse array of perspectives.

Findings

The analysis of data led to three overarching themes related to verbal and nonverbal messages of racism, and radical self-care to thrive. The themes of verbal messages, nonverbal messages, and radical self-care represent the racist spaces BGS navigate and their strategies for resilience. The next section describes each of the major themes from the data across students' experiences and their connection to the conceptual framework, which provides a lens to examine the role of racist campus climates and students' resistance to it.

Verbal Messages

BGS experienced verbal messaging that revealed the extent to which racism permeates the campus and threatened their ability to thrive. Students described verbal messaging of racism on and off-campus through signage, interactions with their white peers, and through norms of whiteness in academic and professional spaces. Students described the verbal messages of racism as circumjacent. Tre, a master's student, explained how his observations of racist messages not only informed his perceptions of the psychological climate on campus and the surrounding geographic region, but governed his behavior and how cautious he should be when interacting with white people. Describing a local restaurant, he shared:

> …this is a very conservative part of the state...and while this doesn't directly attack me as a person of color (POC), it's that the same ideals are here in the location where I live, [am] educated, and working. This is a quick visual that people don't understand and very insensitive [about]. And as a POC here that is very easy for me to really get down or feel like I am not enough and feel like I am not wanted or supported.

Figure 1

Photo of a sign outside of a restaurant near campus describing their sandwich of the day the, "Tijuana Chicken Sandwich: Big enough to feed a caravan. Built high with smoked chicken, lettuce, tomato, pepperjack, bacon + guac. Bordered with a side of pub chips. So good, it should be illegal." On top of the photo is a Snapchat description that reads, "Only in this [U.S. State] would this be the description of a sandwich."

While the message was not directed at Black students, Tre interpreted it as part of a broader cultural atmosphere of exclusion. One that blurred the boundaries between campus and community. This xenophobic framing, even when seemingly playful, underscored for Tre that the surrounding environment was not welcoming to people of color, including himself.

Another master's student, Bee, recounted a microaggression embedded in a text exchange with her white roommate, which reinforced a recurring pattern of unequal treatment. She reflected on how the experience made her feel unseen and undervalued:

> I really want to get to a position on campus where I don't feel like I'm always having to like, to prove myself worthy of you know being accepted or whatever as a Black person or that I wouldn't be denied things that white people get...even in a simple picture of a workout class like I was denied, and she was let in.

Figure 2
Screenshot photo of text interaction between Bee and her roommate.

None of the verbal messages of racism depicted through signs, interactions with peers, and norms of whiteness communicated through faculty are wholly verbal (i.e., lack a nonverbal component). However, these more overt messages of racism signaled to graduate students in the study that they did not belong and must take on added stress (in addition to pursuing a graduate program) to simply exist at the institution. The next theme of nonverbal messages highlights the more covert and abstruse forms of racism within the campus climate, which students in the study cited as clearly identifiable obstacles along their path toward earning post-baccalaureate degrees.

Nonverbal Messages

Nonverbal messages of racism took the form of inequitable, demographic representation, racist campus buildings and names, and racist images on campus and in the surrounding community. Such nonverbal messages of racism called attention to the institution's lack of structural or compositional diversity in the numbers of students, faculty, and staff. These nonverbal messages also made the institutions' value and commitment (or lack thereof) to diversity, equity, and inclusion apparent to the students, and this made them feel isolated and frustrated.

For Gen Intel, a doctoral student in the sciences, the absence of faculty diversity in his department was quite isolating. A rare opportunity to connect with a Black faculty candidate during a research talk, stood out to him, and he described the moment as follows:

> Other than her there's absolutely no POC in my department. None. …. So, it's uh, you know for her to come out, you know, and be able to relate to her and talk to her while she still has that, you know, that advanced knowledge. So, to see her, you know come out here give her talk and she's Black and she's young and, she's you know sort of relatable, she went to HBCU. I went to HBCU. You know, she's overcame all these obstacles so we can sort of relate and have that conversation. She can, you know, help me on my journey whereas, you know a lot of other people in the department it is kind of hard to have those types of conversations with.

Gen Intel discussed the importance of having faculty with whom he had shared background, similarity, and perceived liking. However, this was not a resource he had access to due to the lack of faculty diversity in his department (i.e., majority of faculty were white men). Gen Intel explained the significance of having mentors who looked like him. He stated, "you're not [going to pursue

faculty life] if you're not really self-motivated, and you come here, and you know you have these white, typical white introverted faculty that you try to you know interact with and they don't really show you". Along with the need for structural diversity in the form of Black faculty, Gen Intel described the significance of faculty who are willing and able to mentor.

While the nonverbal message of low numbers of Black faculty communicated a nonexistent value for the retention of BGS, campus buildings also represented nonverbal messages of racism within the university's campus climate. Justice, a doctoral student who served in a staff position on campus working with students, shared his feelings about the buildings on campus and discussed a plantation house on campus.

> I never imagined that I would work on a plantation or go to school in a plantation where the plantation house is a living structure in the middle of campus. Most people just walk past it without thinking twice about it, but it's something that I, and something that I know the students that I work with, I mean, there's just this feeling that you, there's their energy that you get when you walk past that house.

Figure 3
Photo of Fort Hill

Finally, students discussed the presence of racist messages within the community. Such messages and images manifested in Confederate flags on vehicles, homes, signs and other places. Additionally, fliers on and off campus like the one T'Challa described (Figure 4) served as psychological barriers.

> [This was] a flyer that was posted around campus recruiting people to join the alt right, which is in essence a hate movement. … This just says hate and I'm anti-hate so just psychologically experiencing this over and over

> and over and over on Hill campus is just mentally wearing. I actually emailed this to the university president, and I was like, "hey, does this represent the uh, the views of Hill, being that the Hill University strategic plan specifically talks about diversity and it's just ironic, you know. I don't fault him, but the university picks and chooses what they want to talk about. ... I don't want to hear your public relations crap, like you could [have] easily said, "this is not a of reflection of Hill's views" and left it. … You know, we believe in diversity, but this specific diversity is white.

Figure 4

A printed sign on white paper taped to a wall that reads, "Attention: WHITE PEOPLE. Are you? Tired of being blamed for everything? Wondering why only white countries need multiculturalism? Realizing diversity means 'less white'? Tired of being called racist for wanting an identity? Do you see a future for you and your family? Tired of political correctness? JOIN THE ALT RIGHT" with underlined a series of websites below (redice.tv, radixjournal.com, therightstuff.biz, dailystormer.ai, altright.com).

The Alt-right sign mixed with the inability of the university's leadership to denounce the hate speech students perceived, served as yet another example of the nonverbal racist messages that served as obstacles for the students represented in the study. Though potentially subtle and unapparent to white students, faculty, and staff, the BGS who participated in this study discussed the insidious, pervasive, and taxing nature of racism across multiple campus contexts.

In examining the nonverbal and verbal messages of racism, the campus racial climate framework provided a lens to examine the structural, psychological, behavioral, and institutional elements at work within the students. Through the findings, it is clear that the structural diversity is minimal given the compositional lack of faculty and students who share the racial identities of students in the study to extent that they had to seek such support through spaces like the Black Graduate Student Association and Multicultural Center. Further, instances and symbols of racism on campus and in the local city in the form of flyers on walls and existing campus buildings where enslaved people lived represent the inability of institutional leaders to sufficiently acknowledge and address the legacy of exclusion and racism that still exists on the campus. The students' stories of covertly and overtly racist interactions with peers and faculty highlights the behavioral climate with which GGS in the study had to contend and the psychological perceptions such a climate created whereby students felt isolated, excluded, discriminated against, and othered.

Radical Self-Care

Despite the numerous obstacles the students experienced, most discussed ways they managed to thrive. The BGS in the study found ways to practice radical self-care as a means for survival in the face of consistent racist messages. Upon receiving harmful verbal messaging from peers, faculty, and administrators, students sought reprieve through digital communities, student organizations, specific institutional spaces (like the Multicultural Center), and mentoring opportunities. In these areas, students were able to build relationships with others who understood their experiences and find ways to safely navigate the campus racial climate. One of these spaces was the campus's Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), which multiple participants cited as an integral part of their graduate student experience. One of those students, Toni, an engineering master's student, states:

> … [BGSA] is one of the outlets that I do have here at [institution], um, with a group of Black graduate students who I feel that I can connect with and belong to. There's not that many of us, and I feel like, [institution], they need more programs like this.

T'Challa further discusses the impact BGSA has had on their graduate school experience. They initially discuss the negative experiences they had early on before going on to reflect on how he found out about BGSA.

> So [BGSA] is my community. When I first got here to come to [institution]... I was feeling isolated. Worst feeling I ever felt in life. I've never felt that feeling a day in my life till I got here. And it was just rough... So I first found out when I attended like the program orientation. They was like, "Oh, yeah, we got this Black folks group" and they added me into the Black folks group and that's when I kind of started talking and meeting people.

He then praises one of the first friends he made because of BGSA and discusses how they want to pay this experience forward.

> Um, so they're [the friend] pretty awesome. They kind of got like brought me in and showed me the ropes, introduced me to the people I needed to be introduced to, and it really made my transition here smoother and it made my academic experience. Like I haven't ran into typical roadblocks that I've seen other doc students run into, just because they've [the friend] shown me the ropes. And so, what I've decided to do is, every new doc student I can take up under my wings, I want to do that for them, too. You

> know, introduce them to the right people that you know. Like, this is what you should be doing.

Participants also distanced themselves from nonverbal messages by retreating to nature, engaging in exercise and wellness activities, and developing strong intrapersonal communication tools. Through each of these methods, students practiced agency either externally or internally within a racist campus climate that consistently felt unwelcoming and even hostile. This commitment to building communities and carving out intentional spaces in which they found acceptance and encouragement demonstrated their immense strength and fortitude. April, a doctoral student in behavioral sciences, explained how seeking out time in nature helped her counteract the obstacles of being a student at a university that refuses to remove symbols of racism on campus.

> That's the plantation house and the one next to it, it shows a slave picking cotton, but that's a list of names of slaves and what they were worth back then. And all that is still here on Hill's campus instead of in a museum or something. It's part of the botanical gardens that's supposed to be beautiful and captivating and then you get here and it's like a dark cloud that is a part of something that's supposed to be so nice and beautiful. But it's not nice and beautiful to Blacks. … you see a bunch of Confederate flags flying outside of campus, or you have people that are workers, I would say employees of Hill allowed to come to campus with confederate flag license plates and park on campus.

Unable to fully disconnect from the weight of campus symbols steeped in racism, April sought solace beyond the university grounds. Her visit to a state park became a spiritual retreat (Figure 5) and a way to reclaim peace:

> That's just [me] looking out and just thanking God for helping me get to where I am and not giving up. And I'm on top of the mountain. This is where I'm going to continue to climb and stay there. So, all the other issues are beneath me. … It was just so peaceful and then you're up there you're elevated thousands of feet above sea level and it's almost like you're quiet enough you can hear God speaking to you and it was just, it was this calmness and serenity and knowing that everything is going to be okay, and there's no need to worry.

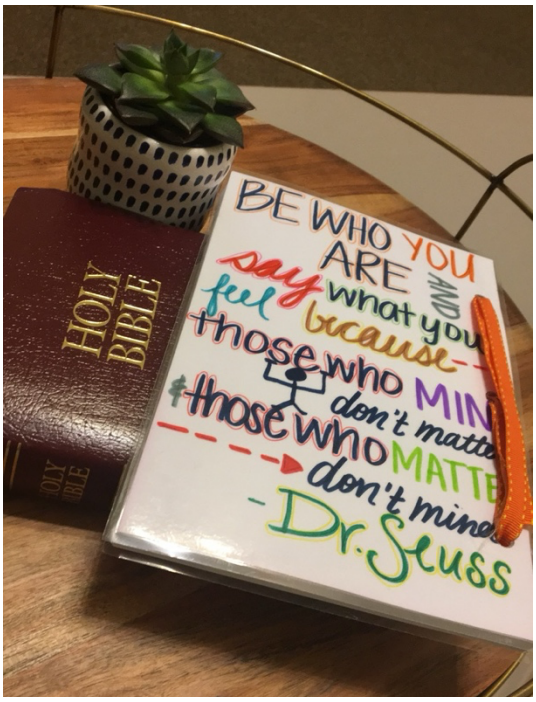
Figure 5
April gazing out over the mountains

Similarly, Annalise, a master's student majoring in counselor education, shares the importance of connecting with her spirituality to thrive and keep her spirits up as she navigates being a graduate student at a PWI. In addition to discussing her relationship with Christianity, she also discusses the value and impact of having positive and affirming quotes nearby to recenter her and keep her motivated as she pursues her degree. As she talks about this experience, Annalise first shares a photo of her Bible and a quote journal made by a friend, both of which she cherishes and revisits regularly (Figure 6).

> And so, within this, I feel as though it represents my thriving being in grad school because I want to become more in touch with my religion. I feel like I didn't do so as much in undergrad. So, it's something that I want to learn more about and really get in touch with…. I do really love quotes, and it's just a way for me to be expressive through quotes and not necessarily…in a way, I guess, journaling. So not necessarily writing down, you know, what has happened, but instead making it positive through quotes to represent my feelings and emotions, or whatever it is.

Figure 6

Annalise's Bible and quote journal, which reads "Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind, don't matter and those who matter, don't mind. – Dr. Seuss"

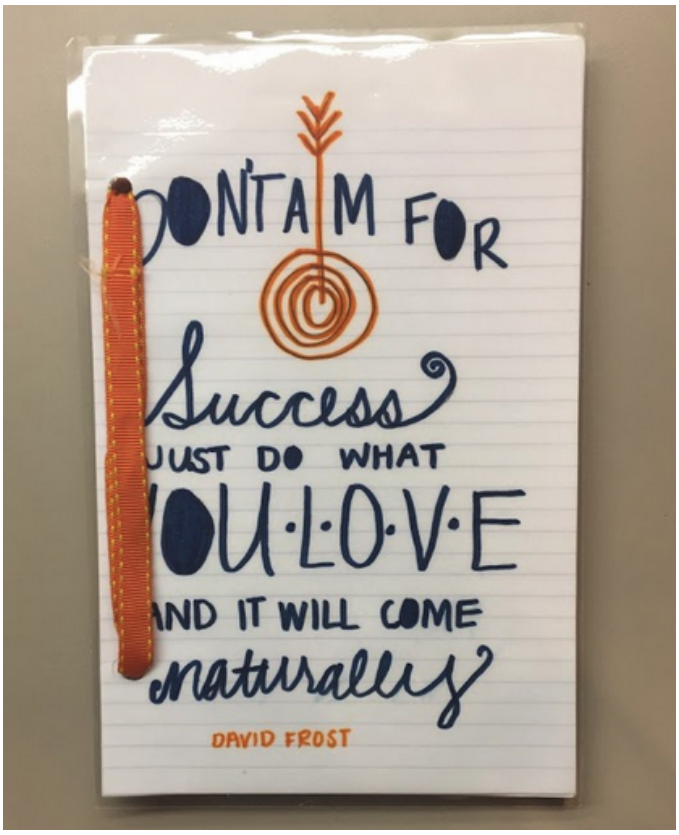


As she continues to talk about her quote journal, she also shares a photo of the cover with another quote, this one specifically reminding her of her reasoning for being in graduate school and the impact she wants to make by supporting students of color on campus (Figure 7).

> And then another one is the front of the quote journal… So, I think for this just reminding myself, especially in this profession, that, and being at a PWI institution, that I should just do what I think is best for the individuals that I will be affecting. Because I do love to be in this space and be bettering experiences for students, all students, but especially students of color in this space, because they don't get that everywhere. But I think just, you know, don't, don't aim for something specific, just do what you believe in, and then the rest will just come naturally. So, I think that's just something I want to continue to try and do within my work.

Figure 7

Annalise's quote journal cover that reads, "Don't aim for success, just do what you love, and it will come naturally."



Discussion

The findings from this study align well with existing literature from scholars who have found that BGS are constantly excluded, tokenized, isolated, and left to fend for themselves (Blakey et al., 2024; McGee et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2021). However, this study expands the literature dedicated to understanding the experiences of BGS in three major ways. First, this study examines not only the experiences of BGS with peers, faculty, and the community, but their perceptions and interactions with the larger campus climate, which includes behavior, symbols, and communication within and outside of class. An expansive view engaging the campus racial climate framework provides an opportunity to locate the numerous forms and sites of oppression BGS must navigate. Oppressive behaviors are not just happening when students walk into buildings, these behaviors happen via email, in class, when walking across campus, and even when driving off-campus. As the critical race theory tenet reminds, racism is endemic and common within everyday life (Muñoz, 2009). Hurtado (1992) noted that "institutions may foster racial tension when they support priorities that work against promoting a better climate" (p. 561). Nonverbal messaging noted by both Gen Intel and Justice speak to the university's commitment to overlook, ignore, or blatantly refuse to acknowledge the racial tension they foster. As Gen Intel pointed out in his discussion of witnessing the rarity of faculty of Color, seeing scholars who look like him could be a source of empowerment and potential mentorship to assist him in his educational journey. By overlooking disproportionate representation in faculty and staff, the university supports "traditional notions of quality based on resource/reputation priorities are

associated with perceptions of high racial tension" (Hurtado, 1992, p. 561). Therefore, by following Hurtado et al.'s (1998) recommendation to increase representation at all levels across the university, students such as Gen Intel can begin to see their campus in a more welcoming and inviting light.

Justice's discussion of the plantation house located in the middle of campus surfaces a more intentional choice made by the university to focus more on the future of the institution as opposed to acknowledging the historical legacies still at play in the very blueprint of the institution (Hurtado et al., 1998). As Justice shared, even though students may never be forced to venture into the building, for those students who are paying attention "there's their energy that you get when you walk past that house." Maintaining these historical sites that clearly connect to a legacy of racism and oppression send clear messages to students of Color about their worth and value. Instead, rethinking the presence and prominence of these historical sites could go a long way to break down the silos and exclusionary practices surrounding students of Color (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Second, this paper contributes visualizations of life through the eyes of BGS. Though scholars have amplified the voices of BGS through numerous articles, few visually show what it may be like to walk in their shoes. Through photovoice, a method seldom engaged to explore campus racial climates (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Minthorn & Marsh, 2016), this study offered (re)presentations of students' experiences in a visual form to illustrate and draw awareness to the realities of navigating graduate school as a BGS at a PWI. Photovoice offered a way to bring the counter-workings of participatory action research to surface strongly in this study (Latz, 2017). The participants, such as April, were able to see themselves in their spaces. By sharing herself in her photos along with the restful and relaxing space she claimed as her own, she was able to control her narrative and her location. We see the world as she wants it seen, not as she is told to view it by outside forces.

Finally, this study is part of the growing body of literature dedicated to examining radical self-care as a framework mobilized by numerous marginalized communities to resist oppression. First, the stories shared by our participants also contribute to the growing discourse on rest and self-care in academic spaces (Frazier & Cotterman, 2024; Nicol & Yee, 2017; Seth & De Ciantis) as participants reflect on moments where they distanced themselves from the harmful, racist messaging they received overtly and covertly. For example, April highlighted being able to escape to an off-campus state park to (1) distance herself from a campus filled with symbols of racism (e.g., confederate flags, the campus' plantation house) and (2) spiritually connect with God to ground herself, be at peace, and express gratitude. For April, this grounding was essential to their well-being as they continued to navigate graduate school.

Additionally, BGS's reflections emphasize the importance of mentorship, culturally affirming institutional spaces, and student organizations as resources that provide them with a sense of safety, support, and validation while navigating a racist campus environment. These experiences contribute to the existing literature on the experiences of graduate students of color by further highlighting the impact of mobilizing counterspaces as a space of solace, healing, and a means of being in community with those who shared their identities and experiences (Bowers et al., 2020, 2020; Brunsma et al., 2017; Gomez & Cabera, 2023; Hypolite, 2022; Jason et al., 2022; Ramirez, 2024), further emphasizing the importance of community being integral to self-care and preservation. Moreover, this research also extends the research on rest, care, and healing within the academy by emphasizing Black graduate students' experiences, which is currently scant (Jason et al., 2022; Mills et al., 2025; Phelps-Ward et al., 2021).

Significance and Implications

Our research confirms the notion that universities play a critical role in the onset and upholding of the racist experiences and obstacles Black students face as they matriculate through their graduate school experience. Although the study included a modest sample and the findings relate to one institutional context, we offer the following set of conclusions given the transferability (Shenton, 2004) of such recommendations to additional predominantly white university contexts, particularly in graduate education. The feedback from the study's participants is crucial and presents real examples of verbal and nonverbal messages to the university's administration, who have the power to rectify existing barriers. Furthermore, this information helps university leaders pinpoint barriers, such as the names of campus buildings and lack of demographic representation, so they may address them, correct them, and create more inclusive learning environments for the BGS on their campuses.

It is also important to note that our participants confirmed the necessity of creating and engaging in radical self-care, with minimal to no assistance from the university writ large. Instead of BGS being able to complete their graduate work in an environment that values and supports their racial identities, they are forced to make the best of negative situations, or campus environment in this case, they did not help establish and must create ways to maneuver around these existing barriers. As a result, these forms of radical self-care aim to achieve a sense of "thriving," thus thwarting the onset of a racist campus climate. By analyzing the communities of support students build to resist institutional climate, educators and administrators can better understand how to address and eliminate the obstacles that obstruct and inhibit BGS from thriving.

Authors' Contributions

Adelson, Fine, Harry, Harrington, Smalls, Smith, Green, Allen, and Phelps-Ward were involved in the conceptualization, investigation, and writing of the manuscript with Phelps-Ward as the project administrator and Bankole as part of the writing, review, and editing process according to the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT).

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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