“Black People Need to Frolick” : Analyzing the Impact Of “Black Space” In the Wellness and Healing Black Students in a Predominantly White Institution

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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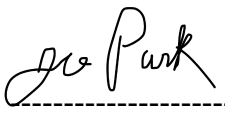

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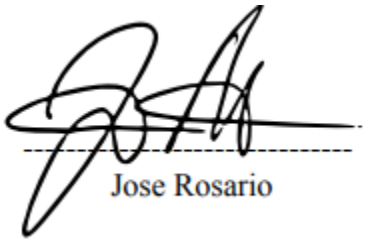

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Abstract

This piece interrogates the role that identity-centric spaces play in the success and wellness of Black students at a predominantly white institution. I am highlighting the importance of maintaining and validating identity centric communities (both formal and casual), especially in the wake of recent political administration and tense campus climate. The research centers the experiences of Black students in particular, and their relationships to the Black Student Union (BSU), as it is one of the few existing Black spaces recognized by Clark University. Analysis of six interviews suggest that Black students on campus have found an association between their "wellness" and the community(s) they are a part of. Being Black at a PWI can cause a great deal of social and emotional distress, and interviewed students have expressed a need and desire for community support. This thesis documents my experience as both a peer and president of the Black Student Union, as well as sharing my experiences of what it means to be Black and well at Clark University.

Acknowledgements

Admittedly, I'd never thought I'd ever be writing an acknowledgement statement in my life. It'd only seemed necessary for those who planned to change the world with their pen, or for those who'd left a deep and lasting mark on their community. They are typically brief yet impactful, professional yet sentimental. *This* is the beautiful curse of academia. We, you the reader and myself as the writer, are incredibly lucky to be here. I feel incredibly lucky to have been given the space, time, support, and love that was necessary to write this piece. I am incredibly lucky to be the first in my family to not only receive a Bachelor's, but to also pursue a higher degree.

It is simply beautiful that a study of what it means to love, heal, rest, and commune as Black people can exist. However, it is tragic that academia is and will forever be gatekept and intentionally cryptic to keep the lovers of learning out; it is heartbreaking that studies of passion, be it the arts, language, or activism, are rapidly disappearing from institutions around the nation. Academia *can be* extremely empowering, but it is a system rooted in white supremacy that will never fail to bare its teeth. Despite being a student soon to cross the stage, being a Black student at Clark University also meant doubting myself and the validity of both my work and space here. It has become clear that it is not simply that "acknowledgment pages" weren't meant for people who looked like me, but instead that institutions reserve this honor to those who keep their business running. As a result, I promised myself to take up as much space in this section as I'd like.

This paper is both a thank you to CYES and a call in for Clark University. Thank you to the CYES department for reaffirming my belief that in order to truly love something, it must be

challenged. CYES, despite the trials and tribulations of the praxis process, feels as if it were a major designed with me in mind (which is more than I can say for most academic spaces). Despite being such a relatively new major, its potential and value are lost on no one. This department is the embodiment of radical love, and using the privileges we hold as participants of academia for something genuine. This piece calls for Clark University to follow in the footsteps of its BIPOC students and faculty and lead with love and criticality that we claim to teach. The BIPOC, Queer, and disabled people of Clark University are undeniably what makes this school special. Threatening spaces and studies that support that which makes us unique *is* the convention and we are failing to challenge it.

I would also like to thank José Rosario and Jordana E. for being two of the most impactful mentors in my life. José welcomed me into the world of radical healing and liberation psychology, forever changing my understanding of the bounds of clinical psychological practice. My time as his research assistant has shown me that there are people that are fighting to make our stories a part of the literature, and I hope to one day join them! Jordana was my first mentor and friend on this campus. Not only did they prepare me for my transition from highschool into college, they showed what activism looks like on our campus. Jordy was the reason I joined the BSU; they showed me the beauty and power of Black spaces, they embodied the power that Black students hold even in PWIs. This paper is the culmination of that very passion and wisdom that José and Jordy have passed down to me.

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Introduction/Problem Statement

At this very moment, I could count the Black and Brown people in my life who have had a genuinely good experience with therapy on one hand. One hand for the people in my life who have seeked help and received the support they needed in traditional American therapy. Comparatively, I can't even begin to name all of the people in my life who have been harmed by the very system that was built to heal. In Black and Brown communities, there is a common sentiment that "only white people go to therapy" or that discussions of mental health are an indicator of weakness (Lorde, 2022 & Gayle, 2020). As a child, I always just assumed my family just meant that therapy was expensive and inaccessible. However, the older I got, the more I realized that this sentiment is not simply developed as a result of an access issue. After 18 years, and a cis-white-man therapist later, I realized what they'd meant: therapy isn't *built* for Black people; self-care culture is white-centric.

Therapy and conversations centering wellness, as they stand currently, are based on a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) worldview and are not structurally equipped to support those who experience oppression(s). Consequently, therapy has the power to cause far more harm for those whom the system has excluded (Sue et.al, 2024). BIPOC counselors and scholars have pointed to the "colonial nature" of the American Psychological Association's ethics code and cultures of professionalism as primary perpetrators in how eurocentrism prevails in practice (Sue et.al, 2024). The standards of licensure and practice are not culturally relevant and are instead rooted in white western epistemology (individualism, objectivism, universalism, empiricism). The intrinsic relationship between whiteness and therapy poses structural barriers for BIPOC clinical candidates as well as a threat

to accessing culturally/socially relevant therapy[1]. By centering and normalizing whiteness, the experiences of BIPOC patients and their experiences are in turn pathologized (Arora et.al, 2022). A "post-racial" America does not exist (Bhambra, 2017) therefore therapeutic support and resources cannot be "post racial."Black Scholars have highlighted mistrust and discomfort in therapy among QTBIPOC clients who have experienced W.E.I.R.D therapy. BIPOC LGBTQ+ clients' experiences of aggressions/microaggression, ignorance, and apathy at the hands of white therapists resulted in a noticeable hesitance of trust and increased distress (Arora et.al, 2022). The lack of visibility and validation of queer people of color in therapy is a threat to the wellbeing of clients as well as their therapeutic alliance, could consequently lead to feelings of unsafety in therapy (Arora et.al, 2022). However, the same study indicated that if/when QTBIPOC are supported and represented in practice, therapy can be transformative and restorative. When therapists center cultural humility and work towards decolonizing their practice, QTBIPOC clients feel more connected to the practitioner and are able to heal safely as is the purpose of therapy (Arora et.al, 2022).

Eurocentrism is also reflected even in how we casually talk about care. The version of self-care we see in popular media is steeped in capitalism and white-influencer-consumerist trend setting (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). Self care culture isn't necessarily negative, as it has started a conversation surrounding the accessibility of mental health resources and care, especially in the younger generations of BIPOC communities. "Moreover, self-care is political because it challenges historical notions and assumptions that Black people lack the capacity to care for themselves. When practiced in Black communities such as our own, self-care is often executed as resistance to conditions of inequality, marginalization, and minoritization (Hobart & Kneese,

[1] "reflect cultural racism and that ethnocentric Western standards oppress POC, deny them culturally relevant treatments, and pathologize their cultural values" (Sue et.al, 2024).

2020)," (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). The assumption that Black people *can't* take care of themselves feeds into the narrative that Black people *can't* engage in self-care.

Based on these findings, it is clear that W.E.I.R.D therapy is insufficient. This obvious gap in the field has resulted in the emergence of scholarship challenging contemporary psychological practice. This has manifested in the examination and validation in different forms of healing, where/when healing may take place, and what it means to be well/unwell as BIPOC people white centric spaces. Healing can take the shape of interventions such as Emotional Emancipation Circles (developed by counseling psychologists Cheryl Tawede Grills and Taasogle Daryl Rowe) or manifest in student activism and advocacy (Hargons et.al, 2017). But at the core of addressing the harm and distress inflicted on Black people, is rooted in work with and around community.

Seeing myself and so many around me be *hurt* by resources *designed* to heal, proved to me that there is something inherently wrong with the structure of therapeutic practice and the way we frame health as a society. In response, over the past two years I have been working as a research assistant in a psychology lab that works to challenge western and normative standards of wellness and health. I have learned more about different forms of healing, where/when healing may take place, and what it means to be well/unwell at a PWI. In this praxis project, I will be using the Black Student Union as a grounding point as *a* Black space, while highlighting that we aren't *the* Black space.

The Why-

What is the connection between identity centric spaces and programming and therapy? Although therapy requires licensure and years of schooling, there is a basic focus of any given practice; to be well. Wellness and healing can happen anywhere, and for many BIPOC communities, community and collectivism *are* healing practices. Therapy in its current form is extremely white centric and frankly not built with Black and Brown people in mind. BIPOC and Queer scholars across disciplines (such as Kimberle Crenshaw [Critical Legal Scholarship], Della Mosley & Bryana H. French [Radical Healing Scholarship],) have been longtime leaders in literature addressing/highlighting a lack of cultural competence in standard practices and structural support. Especially in therapeutic practice, a lack of cultural humility is extremely dangerous and actively does more harm than good. Over the past decade there has been an emergence of psychological research that challenges what true effective and diverse therapy looks like. In this emergence, scholars and therapists that center liberation in practice suggest that collective/community justice is essential to the wellbeing and healing of Black people in and outside of therapy. Something that I will be focusing on in particular is looking at how the scholars discuss healing *outside* of the therapy room. Understandings and validation of collectivism/community support essential to decolonizing the W.E.I.R.D framings of wellbeing.

The Black Student Union in particular has been working towards rebuilding a greater relationship as a community over the course of the last few academic years. My sophomore year I joined as a member of the Black Student Union, and the experience was frankly overwhelming. I'd seen videos of the amazing activist work the club had done in 2020 (Not your Token

campaign[2], (Humanize us Campaign[3], and tuition strike)[4] and I'd hoped to be a part of this work on campus. Throughout the 2022-2023 academic year, our focus as a club was more focused on throwing/hosting events. Each meeting took the form of a task list to complete as it resembled a part-time and unpaid job. As a new member, I didn't feel connected to anyone else in the room and instead felt burdened by the space where I'd hoped to find connection. This tension and burnout resonated with all members of our Eboard.[5] Despite being a community space that works to create and spread love and joy, our spaces cannot do so if we fail to acknowledge the amount of labor that goes into community leadership and planning.

Through 2023-2025 the club had dedicated its energy to re-define the community we'd hoped to build. Over the last two years the BSU has shifted its focus to facilitating a space that feels welcoming for all Black students on campus, while also serving as a space of relief and joy for our members. American university students as a whole often experience burnout, tension, and other forms of distress throughout their university experience. This distress is exacerbated for Black students as a result of systemic racialization so it was really important that the BSU didn't

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[2] The "Not Your Token Campaign" was carried out by BSU members 2020-2022 addressing the misleading and overrepresentation of BIPOC students on our campus. The online movement called on Clark University to stop actively seeking and photographing students of color, effectively using BIPOC students for marketing opportunities on our campus. The movement included a media blackout as well as a call for Black students to email the university to have their photos from Clark marketing platforms (instagram, the website, etc).[As there is sparse written history of the BSU, information of this campaign pulled from BSU official instagram]

[3] The Humanize Us campaign was a submovement in the wake of a "Blue Lives Matter" movement on campus after George Floyd's murder in 2020. The BSU called for the university to divest, detach from, and address police presence on campus as University Police had a heavy hand in the feelings and reality of unsafety among Black students. In response, police aligned students on campus launched the "Humanize UP" campaign in efforts to garner support and empathy for university police officers. BIPOC students on campus took the phrase and re-titled it "Humanize Us" launched as a reminder that the brutality against Black people exists as a result of policing culture in the US, urging students to remember there are lives,humans lost as a result of it.

[4] Another subsect of the "Not Your Token" Campaign. BSU and Student council members called on students to withhold tuition as an act of resistance against both the raising of tuition and also urging the university to acknowledge the demands of multicultural leaders and clubs on campus

[5] Eboards (aka Executive Board) are typically the organizers and leadership teams in Clark clubs/student organizations. To be recognized by the university, the Eboard must have at *least* a president (or equivalent position), a vice president (or equivalent position), treasurer, and secretary. Outside of these roles, student organizations have the autonomy to create and implement roles as they see fit for the club (ie: event planner, costume designer, liaison, cultural chairs, etc).

become a space that does the same. Instead, it became abundantly clear throughout my time on BSU eboard that identity centric spaces in predominantly white institutions/spaces have the potential to serve a unique role (and in some capacities already do) in the wellbeing of marginalized students. This is supported by stories you will read and experience in this thesis, it is clear Black students explicitly cite a connection between their wellbeing and a variety of communities that they are a part of. There is power in gathering to simply gather, and for some it is a more accessible way to "be well." Clubs and university recognized spaces such as the Black Student Union were extremely integral to Black student health and wellbeing on campus.However, the Black Student union is not the *only* place that Black students can find support.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to hold space for discussion about race and racism's impact on students on campus, it is important to lay a groundwork of understanding for the ways in which racism is embedded into American culture, systems, and structure. Critical Race theory is an anti-racist framework based in critical legal studies that calls for the acknowledgement of the social construction of race, the normalization of race and racism in our society, intersectionality, the purpose/intentionality of racism, as well as the value of counter-storytelling (Bhambra, 2017). The idea was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and 5 other leading scholars in the 1980s to highlight the power that the interests of America's white elite had over civil rights legislation, aka interest convergence (Bhambra, 2017). The framework most notably is used to surface the reality that race and racism are not naturally occuring in nature and have been developed to maintain the dominance of white supremacist culture in our social structure (Bhambra, 2017). Critical legal scholars used this framework as an axis to interrogate the role

that the legal systems plays in the maintenance of racial, gendered, and economic oppression (Burrell-Craft, 2020); how are these oppressions inherently linked? CRT is beautiful because it is not just a method of understanding, but also an active movement and compilation of scholarship. The principles of CRT both represent the theories that assist us in how race and power functions systemically, but are also a testament to the reality that "everything is about race." The tenets of CRT principles include (Burrell-Craft, 2020):

- Intersectionality (Crenshaw)
- Counter-storytelling
- Interest convergence
- The social construction of race

As a term, CRT has be in the limelight of American media as it is being painted with

In the context of my thesis, it is crucial to understand that race and racism cannot and will never be able to be separated from Clark University's legacy. As an institution, it is built on and benefits from racism. And as students, faculty, etc we will continue to reflect the constructed social hierarchies by racism. However, the conversation of interest-convergence often arises in the context of Black solidarity and activism on our campus. Because we are the numerical and social minority at Clark, how and when are others invested in anti-Blackness?

Psychological Radical Healing

Through my capstone and research in clinical psychology, I have fallen in love with liberation psychology. As of right now, traditional therapeutic theories and studies are based in W.E.I.R.D (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) societies (APA,2010). This understanding of the human psyche applies a Eurocentric and incredibly generalized frame to the

way we approach healing. Liberation psychology particularly focuses on the psychology of oppression, oppressed people, and our communities (Torres - Rivera & Comas-Díaz, 2020). "Liberation psychologists view oppression as the interaction of intrapsychic factors with systemic factors, such as socio[-]political injustice," (Torres - Rivera & Comas-Díaz, 2020). This approach to understanding the marginalized experience has contributed greatly to the way we conceptualize healing and therapy. Liberation psychology, as its name suggests, works as a means towards liberation through lived experience, everyday reality, and the unpacking of "historical memory" among marginalized communities (Torres - Rivera & Comas-Díaz, 2020). It is important to note that this is not a psychological paper. However, liberation psychology suggests that

Particularly in the context of this project I will be focusing on Radical Healing and "Love Politics." The Psychology of Radical Healing Framework (PRH) is based in liberatory, Black, Ethnopolitical psychology and intersectionality. Radical healing framework that works to directly address the consequences and "Wounds" of identity based traumas (hate-based violence, homophobia, racial traumas, etc). Healing through social justice (action and literature) refers to the active resistance of oppressions (via culturally competent practice, activism, community, etc) as a therapeutic approach to heal from racial trauma. PRH is rooted in 5 core tenants: collectivism, critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge (. As a framework, radical healing urges practitioners to diversify what is viewed as "healing," in order to be more inclusive of the unique marginalized communities (French et.al., 2020). As it stands, therapy and health care lack the culturally competent structure necessary to support patients that experience racial and cultural traumas. A central tenet of radical healing that I will focus on is critical consciousness (see conceptual framework).

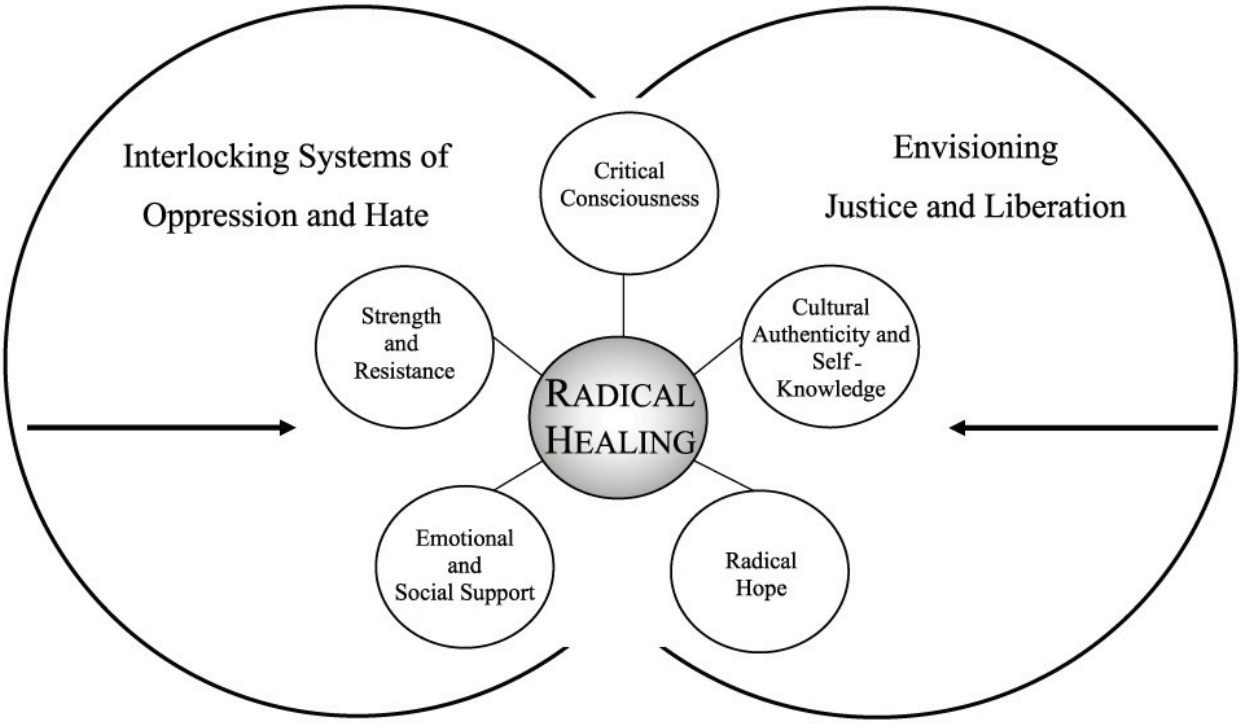


Figure 1: Diagram used to aid in visualizing the psychological framework of radical healing (French et.al, 2019)

It is no secret that the vast majority of universities and colleges across the United States are Predominately White Institutions (PWI) (François et.al, 2024). PWIs are identified as institutions that have more than 50% students that are white (François et.al, 2024), with little to no public statistics regarding how universities *are* considered PWIs and instead far more about the ones that are not. Historically PWIs have failed to adequately include and make space for marginalized students on campus socially and academically through the institutional and social centering of witness. This has indicated a lack of infrastructure to catch Black and Brown students in their times of distress (François et.al, 2024) . As a result, we are left to create our own community and spaces as a form of resilience and resistance.The resilience of Black community is born and embedded in our communal structures as both a symbol of community capital as well as a necessity (Averett, 2021). In a piece that interrogates this very subject, participants said that we take care of ourselves and each other because, “Black people, in my opinion, and all

nonwhite people have this sense of community embedded in our DNA out of necessity that says we have to share what we have in order for everyone to be okay," (Averett, 2021). Collectivism and care are deeply embedded in how we heal from racial trauma.

Conceptual Frameworks

Blackness :

This study focuses on those who identify racially as Black. Despite being a social construct, race has a very tangible influence on our societal culture. As a result I will be using it as a framing for the experience of the participants. As a researcher, I accept and interviewed anyone who identifies as "Black"; this usually means anyone of the African Diaspora. In student interviews, dialogues around what it means to be Black were incredibly central to how they value identity-centric spaces, and how they identify which spaces serve them. The African Diaspora is incredibly vast and complex, but is typically defined to encompass those who are the product of both voluntary/involuntary displacement Africans along with their descendants (ie: African American, American African, Afro Latinx, etc.) (Defining Diaspora, n.d.). Participants had the opportunity and were encouraged to share how they racially identify as well as any other identities they hold.

Critical Consciousness : Critical Consciousness theories were an incredibly central inspiration for this study. This theory is introduced in Paulo Friere's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he highlights the importance of encouraging marginalized communities to liberate themselves from hate and oppression. Critical consciousness refers to one's awareness of their socio-political environment as well as the ways in which these systems impact them. This acknowledgement is called critical awareness. When we are actively engaging with and

understanding identity, we can then engage in critical action, which is the stage in which we take some form of action in response to the system that oppresses us (Mosley, 2021). Radical healing posits that the processes of developing and engaging with one's critical consciousness involves the betterment one's understanding and awareness of systemic inequities (in this case racism), thus a greater propensity for critical action, and ultimately an increased ability to prevent and heal from trauma (Mosley, 2021). Spaces of community and action (much like the BSU) bring awareness of the social identities we hold as a community and have a long history of taking action.

Racial Trauma:

The experience of "racial trauma" is often discussed in the context of psychological distress caused by racialization and the actively experiencing racism/racist systems (Mosley, 2021). Symptoms of racial trauma can manifest quite similarly to those of PTSD. Racial trauma can manifest in various experiences of racism (ie: generational, active) (Mosley, 2021). The experience of being racialized is traumatizing, being a person of color in a predominately white institution is traumatizing as PWIs are built on a foundation of whiteness and white supremist culture. As a result of racism, BIPOC people who experience racialized traumas can suffer long lasting distress both psychologically and physically.

Context

Clark University is a liberal arts PWI university in Worcester, Massachusetts. As per the official website, Clark University hosted 2,361 undergraduate students, 26% of whom identify as BIPOC. Black Student Union was founded in 1969. The club has historically served as a space

made for and by Black students to engage in activism, reflection, joy, but most importantly: to have a space. The club current;y meets weekly, alternating between Eboard and general meetings. Meetings range from reflective dialogue about race to movie nights. Over the past few years, the BSU has been reevaluating the impact and space we hope to create together as a student organization. In the academic year 2022-2023, there was a heavy emphasis on *events* (larger scale programming, parties, etc) with 1-2 general interesting meetings per semester. This took a drastic toll on our wellness as students as well as our perceptions of our community. As of the 2023 academic year, the club has drastically scaled back its event capacity, placing more of an emphasis on building a relationship with general interest members and developing more of a space for reflective, critical, and joy-centric meetings. The executive board of the club currently constitutes 14 elected students, and our general interest meetings generally see anywhere between 5-20 attendants.

All participants are current undergraduate Clark students who are at least 18 years of age. Ideally, we'd have a variance of cultural and social backgrounds among participants. However, historically the BSU has been an extremely gendered and female-led space. Because of this, the data is likely to reflect this gender disparity as I am the only gender-queer executive board member; 5 identify as cis-gender men and the rest identify as cisgender women. The larger BSU community tends to reflect a similar pattern, with the majority of our consistent members being cisgender women.

Study Context

Clark University currently has no explicit policies or rules that explicitly bar BIPOC students from attending, there are a plethora of structural and social barriers that keep higher

education institutions such as our own, rich and white. Racism is alive and well on our campus. This, in combination with the overturning of affirmative action,[6] reaffirms my belief that identity centric community spaces are particularly crucial in the success and wellbeing of Black Students on our campus. The Black Student Union over the last few years (2020-2025) has gone through several phases; ranging from a focus on fostering a sense of community by hosting a variety of social functions and events geared towards Black students and faculty, to an emphasis on creating radical social and policy change that will create a safer community for Black students on campus. However, the core of the BSU's goals and mission has not changed: building community for Clark's Black students, uplifting Black people/community, education, and building community beyond Clark's walls. CRT and PRH are alive and well in the BSU as they are foundational in maintaining Black space in white contexts; the acknowledgment and interrogation of race as a system in our university, and making the conscious/active effort to care for one another as Black people.

As a Black student and President of the Black Student Union, I have seen a persistent desire for communities in which students can see themselves. My project and observations are effectively a combination of participants' perspectives of Blackness, healing, wellness, with the context of what the BSU as an organization does as a collective to embody my theoretical frameworks. However, as a member of the BSU and as a researcher, I am particularly interested in what has become essential in how Black students engage in healing, and whether this may or may not be experienced as a result of being members of the space. In this section I will work to define critical consciousness more in depth, Blackness, and what healing typically looks like.

Positionality

[6] In June of 2023 the US supreme court made the decision to overturn affirmative action, a ruling that put a halt to diversity and race conscious admissions in higher education. Universities are not barred from acknowledging race in admissions, however institutions are encouraged to take a colorbind approach (Totenberg, 2023).

Growing up I've had the privilege of attending private school all throughout middle and highschool despite my family's economic status. My private high school was small and community oriented which encouraged me to be a more critical and conscious student, as I was afforded the opportunity to have incredibly small class sizes, project and dialogue based curricula, and challenging class content. I see my ability to attend and continue attending private institutions as a privilege because there are financial and structural barriers that make this form of schooling inaccessible. To have small attentive classrooms, test prep, project based learning are all luxuries in our current day that would be wrong of me to ignore. This privilege is also paramount to how I show up at Clark as I've been attending PWIs for the past 10 years. However, despite being BIPOC in a PWI, the educational experience I received encouraged me to be and continue to be critical of the identities I hold and how I understand/engage with them. Even if I was the "only" in a space, I was encouraged to interrogate why and where that left me.

I am a gender queer Black Afro-Latinx, first(ish)-generation American citizen. I also am neurodivergent and relatively able-bodied, but I have always struggled to get consistent and reliable access to therapy/mental health resources. This led me down the path of both falling in love with and relying on identity-centric spaces and literature. I was always particularly aware of the lack of doctors that looked like me, or the inaccessibility of support for those who didn't have money. Not only was it nearly impossible to get access to therapy, the therapy I did receive was typically someone who doesn't share nor was educated about my social context.

As a result of these experiences, I've found myself on the path of one day pursuing my PhD in a clinical program that centers liberation-based research to learn more about radical healing therapy in practice.

When coming to Clark, a mentor of mine suggested I join the BSU. From what I'd seen and watched, it was a space for Black activism and advocacy. I'd watched a short film created in the wake of a vigil in honor of George Floyd. I was so excited to join a club full of such beautiful thinkers and future change makers. When I joined the BSU this was still our truth but it just… looked different. I have been an active participant of the Black Student Union 3 out of my 4 years at Clark University. I began as a community outreach chair, transitioned to secretary, and I am currently serving as the club's president. Over the past few years I've watched the club shift and felt my relationship with/definition of community as a concept shift with it. I am the child of an immigrant from Jamaica, and a Puerto Rican mother who was born in the US. As a result of my cultural context, my relationship with "community" has ranged from individualism, to collectivism, to a place that I have yet to name. However, as a first-generation college student, I found myself gravitating towards the BSU as it felt familiar and familial to me. The BSU teters on the edge of collectivism and individualism; the natural club culture fosters cultures of collective care and resilience, but we still exist in the context of an individualist PWI. As people enter and leave our space, the social contexts in which they exist come and go with them. I see the BSU as my family (a lot of us do) and so I enter the space with the care that I would with my family. However, this isn't an established/offical aspect of our organization, so it has absolutely caused dissonance that influences how I have found myself showing up in the space and expending energy.

I've attended PWIs since middle school, but within my first month on this campus I'd experienced racial isolation like never before as a result of both the sheer number of people and the fact that I've never spoken to anyone who couldn't name any BIPOC folks in their life. Being born and raised in Boston, but I quickly learned that whiteness simply looks different elsewhere.

Boston is a relatively diverse community (as is worcester), but the nature of attending college is engaging with people of all walks of life and experiences. It wasn't my first time engaging unexplored whiteness and being placed in uncomfortable situations at the hands of white guilt and ignorance. However, I truly do not believe anything could have prepared me for the culture shock I experienced upon arriving at Clark, and my participants shared similar stories of shock and isolation. However, I don't think I was prepared for just how important the the multicultural clubs (Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization, etc) would become to me wither. I didn't necessarily have places I could turn to when I was microaggression back home outside. In turn, my BIPOC friends and spaces are the people places where I sought refuge and connection from racial aggression at Clark.

Throughout this research process, you (the reader) and I will grapple with my desire and reality to be a community member, being a leader in the space, while also conducting research. I particularly struggled with the discomfort of potentially abusing my position as president to create an experience for club members that feels extractive and exploitive. Research in Black spaces often feels and often manifest as if it were research *on* Black people. Holding positions as both an insider of the BSU and person-of-power in this organization has made my relationship to this research considerably difficult as I wanted to avoid this being an extractive experience for myself and participants. I

The Current Study

In this study I explore the role of Clark University's Black Student Union (BSU) on .Black students' sense of wellness on Clark's campus. Over the past 3 years I've been in club, we have hosted events ranging from study nights to formal balls, and are committed to the

empowerment and wellbeing of Black students on Clark's campus. However, BSU members also know that not all Black students feel like they belong in BSU and Clark University. There are more Black students on our campus than our 20-25 biweekly general members. This is the problem that I wish to understand. My research questions are the following:

1. *How and where do Black students heal?*
    a. *What role does BSU play in Black students' sense of wellbeing at Clark?*
2. *What are indicators of being well/healing*
3. *What role do our **community** spaces play in our health/wellness/healing?*

This research works toward addressing the expressed concerns and experiences of my peers on Clark's campus as Black students as well as members of the Black Student Union . Being at a predominately white institution is known to bring some level of discomfort and stress for students of color. Reportedly, Black students at PWIs are experiencing higher levels of distress as a result of both racialized trauma and an institutional failure to acknowledge/address the intersectional social distress that Black students may face in a PWI (Francois et.al. 2023) Over the past year, the BSU has made strides to diversify our programming and while also taking an active step back from the high volume of events. The high paced/high volume structure of the BSU was described by the members a the time to be incredibly fun yet unsustainable and exhausting. However, not all Black students participate in BSU, and not all students who participate in BSU feel like the organization/club is fostering a sense of inclusion. Therefore, my research will investigate who participates in BSU events, how Black students on campus view BSU, and what role BSU plays in creating a sense of belonging for Black students. Members of the BSU will be defined as Black students on our club emailing list; participants will self identify as "actively involved" or "minimally involved" members. This research can inform BSU's

executive board with understanding the club/organization's impact on Black students, and creating action steps that can make BSU even more inclusive for all Black students.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The research involved working with 6 students, 3 self-identified members of BSU who say that they are involved and 3 self-identified BSU members with minimal involvement in BSU's events and programming. "Involvement" is defined as having attended four or more BSU events/programs per semester (minimal involvement would be 3 or less events). This gave me a better understanding of who is attending BSU events and to what capacity the programming may or may not affect their feelings of community on campus. These interviews typically lasted anywhere between an hour to an hour and a half and were intentionally conversational and casual. All data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Through inductive analysis, I was able to identify themes and patterns throughout the interview transcripts. Using this form of analysis, in my perspective, allows the stories of participants to speak for themselves instead of using preconceived categories. The coding was guided by an interest in critical action and reflection. I was particularly engaged with reflections that centered one's *awareness* of their social identities as they provided the insight into the relationship that our students have with the culture of predominantly white institutions like our own. Displays of critical reflection appeared in discussions of chosen community spaces and values in/of community. Displays of critical action were reflected in how Black Clark students *responded* to this racialization at Clark(ie: increased seeking of community support, activism, art, etc). My coding was rooted in my understanding of community healing theories and practices, my themes are compiled based on common sentiments and practices.

Participants

Those who chose to participate in this project were all undergraduate students at Clark University between the ages of 18-23 during the 2024-2025 academic year. The 6 participants self-identified under the umbrella of the Black diaspora (Black American, African American, Caribbean American, etc). During the interviews, all participants were asked to answer the same 14 questions, and were then asked to identify themselves as either an active or non-active member of the Black student union. To be considered "non-active" but still a member of the BSU, participants must have attended at least four meetings/events this academic year. Invitations to participate in my project were extended both during Executive Board (Eboard) meetings as well as during general meetings and events. Eboard members didn't always necessarily consider themselves active members and there are some general members that attend the vast majority of meetings/events who consider themselves to be active members. This vagueness and ability to self-identify one's involvement was extremely intentional in order to gauge how members of the BSU perceive their own engagement with the BSU.

It is also important to note that there was only 1 cisgender man in this study, with the vast majority of participants being female aligned and/or gender queer. Historically the BSU has been a visibly matriarchal/ woman-led space. In previous studies involving BSU and work done within the BSU, it has been a notable struggle to maintain the investment and membership of Black men at Clark. I will admit, the club is visibly and demographically more gender diverse than it's ever been throughout my time at Clark. However, numerically comparing who volunteered for my research (2 male-aligned vs 2 female aligned members vs 2 non-binary members) is frankly unsurprising and representative of what membership of the BSU looks like.

It is also important to note that, although there is a relatively even 2:2:2 split among the gender expression of participants, the 3 gender-queer members highlight that their gender socialization plays a *huge* role in the ways in which they show up in the space. Throughout this piece, participants will be referred to under a pseudonym when presenting quotes or referencing specific moments in our interactions. Naturally, as a long time leader and member in the space, I was familiar (if not friends) with all 6 participants. These reestablished relationships initially caused some anxiety as I was concerned that participants would say what they thought I wanted to hear instead of staying true to the truths they hold. However, it became evident that participants were eager to share their experiences both with the BSU and our larger Black community.

Interviews

All of the interviews were expected to be 60 minutes with the option of either a zoom or in person session. All but one interview exceeded the allotted time frame. These interviews were intentionally conversational and familiar, resulting in rich peer reflection and introspection. I actively tried to encourage participants to choose spaces that felt the most comfortable or spaces that spoke to them. These interview sessions took place in empty green spaces, study rooms, identity centric spaces (ie: Affinity House or Dana commons). Although there was a pre-established list of questions, they mostly served as guiding talking points. A portion of the interview questions were tailored to active and non-active members (red text) to get a better sense of the impact of their involvement status on their perceptions of the BSU. The Black text questions will be asked to all interview participants. Some examples of questions I asked in the interviews included:

- What is the purpose/value of having identity centric spaces on campus?
    - What role do these spaces play in the larger Clark community?
- Where are some other places you find community on campus?
    - What makes this space special to you? Why'd you join
    - How do people care for each other (if at all) in this space?
- What where some expectations you had about

"Name"	**Active or Non -Active**	**Diaspora Identity**
Lilly (They/Them)*	Non-active	"Black American"
Sammy (She/her)*	active	"Caribbean American"/ "African American"
Henry (hey/they)*	active	"African American"
Saoirse (They/them)	Non active	"Caribbean American"
Kempton (He/Him)	Non active	"African American" "Caribbean American"
Kendall (she/her)*	Active	"Black American"

Lets Talk; Reflections and Findings

In discussions with my peers I'd hoped to parse out the ways in which Black students perceive their identities/communities in the context of a predominantly white institution; do they experience racial trauma as a result of attending a predominantly white institution? How do students define healing/do they see a need to heal? What are we healing from? However, I also wanted to allow these interviews to simply be conversations about Blackness led by interviewers. Throughout my findings, it will become apparent that there is no single way or experience of Blackness at a PWI. I also expected to gain a better understanding of participants' relationship with their own mental health and wellbeing through psychology of radical healing and critical race theory lenses. The following stories of participants' responses would are representative of a need for diverse spaces/resources, as well as evidence to support a natural gravitation towards peer support as a means of healing. To corroborate the data, I am using a combination of literature, personal experiences as a member/leader of the spaces, as well as information from the interviews.

Theme 1: To Be or Not To Be Well; How do we Conceptualize Health and Wellness Individually/Communally?

How do Participants Define Wellness in Relation to Self Care ?:

Healing and wellness are, in of themselves, extremely variant among participants; what it means, how it's done, and why. However, it is clear that when participants engage with and recover from racial traumas, they heal best together. When gauging the relationship between identity and BSU members' healing and wellness, it became clear that the two are intrinsically linked whether they explicitly acknowledge it or not. Initially, some students discussed wellness in reference to "self-care" culture as well as in relation to the *how*; the action of taking care of

themselves. We unpacked what "self care" to participants. Especially in Sammy's case, she talks about having to navigate self-care and mental health discussions on her own rather than something she was taught. When asked about how she'd developed her understanding of care, she responded:

"How do I phrase it? We weren't that mental health centric a lot growing up for me personally because we had other things to worry about. And I know that sounds kinda mean in a sense but people were more worried about like. How they were going to eat sometimes rather than how they felt at that moment."

The hardships in her life made it sometimes difficult to *always* center the collective, but she also emphasized there wasn't an absence of care, but rather simply manifesting differently. Sammy's relationship with mental health dialogue points to a dissonance that arises in Critical Race Theory as the barrier isn't simply about access. There are larger intersecting structural barriers (economic and cultural) to how she and her family engage with wellness. The association between time, language, food, and capacity of holding these conversations is proof of that.Coming to Clark was an extreme cultural shift as care culture was never a conversation they'd explicitly had as a kid. Despite the shift, developing the language to talk about her wellbeing provided stronger tools to identify what she needed to be well; how to navigate interpersonal relationships, how to advocate for herself, etc.

Kendall talked a bit about the fact that self-care as an act is rooted in justice as it is a necessity. She highlights the beauty of doing something for the sake of slowing down as a conscious act of resistance. In a capitalist and production society/institution, self care is a baseline need point-blank period. For the interviewees, the act of "self-care" included acts such as engagement in the arts, spiritualism, taking days off, and tea before bed. On the surface these

actions can seem like simple things we do to feel grounded/rested/better. Frankly, that should be enough! In the conversation with Henry, he talks about the sheer amount of stress he experiences as a Black student, student leader, student worker at Clark University. He voiced a feeling that he constantly needed to remind himself and his peers that it is okay and necessary to take time for themselves. BIPOC students are the faces of action and movement on our campus, and Henry discusses how selfish it can feel to simply "not want to" especially while being incredibly conscious of the work that needs to be done. Taking care of himself has become a necessary learned skill in order to avoid further burnout and to continue showing up.

Self-Care/Wellness Culture in Student Organizations[7]

When asked to define wellness and identify when they are "well," the responses tended to take a more communal form. In their definitions of wellness, all 6 BSU members mentioned the communities they cherish. When asked why, participants consistently noted that they feel well when *both* their personal and communal needs are met; are "*we"* joyous, are *"we"* fed, are "*we"* rested? Across the board, members identified in their own lives that the people they love and choose to care for are a part of their wellbeing. Some of the active members identified this in the context of the BSU as they choose to spend time together and show up for each other outside of the club; they are friends! This indicated that is a genuine investment in the wellbeing of BSU peers despite being an extracurricular space. They don't *have* to care for each other, but they do. Three of the participants mentioned that they are performers and talked at length about

[7] While talking about community and wellbeing, I wanted to be sure not to limit the discussion to simply center the BSU. I am entirely aware that the BSU isn't (and can't be) the only space in which Black students commune, as I myself engage in a plethora of clubs and community organizations on and off campus. It would be frankly a mistake to not make space to acknowledge the spaces that BSU members engage with outside of our own club. When asked where and with whom participants find community, the clubs that were mentioned are included in the appendix

how much they enjoy attending each others' showcases or participating in each other's dances as a show of love.

The conversation sometimes shifted to the conversations that BSU has about wellness. Kendall emphasized that cultures of community care and healing generally have to manifest naturally or they could appear disingenuous. She notes the BSU "tries" to incorporate dialogues of mental health and wellbeing into our events and structure, but it is difficult to do genuinely and effectively. As a community in which Black students gather, it serves as a fun relaxed space to exist together. She cited a few of her favorite events including the roller skating retreat, the Black Arts Explosion, and the MOSAIC Block party. To her, it is events like *this* that naturally foster joy and rest in the club more than a formal conversation. Although both are important, she mentioned feeling drawn to the moments that people who show up built together. It is less about the physical space but rather the actions that we take as a group.

Theme 2: Barriers to Being Well While Black at Clark[8]

Emotional labor - Fatigue & Outside Stressors

When talking about wellbeing, it is frankly impossible to not discuss what it means to be "unwell." As mentioned previously, BSU has had a complex history with balancing our desire to engage in Black joy as well as our need to prioritize our peace. Henry, Kempton, and Kendall all discussed at great length the burnout that has manifested during time at Clark as well as on BSU Eboard. Henry and Kempton in particular saw the BSU in its shift from "activism club" to

[8] Before I begin, I would like to reiterate my belief that in order to love something, you'd want to see it change and grow. Based on the interviews with BSU members, it is clear that we are still entangled in white centric and elitist mindsets as we continue to exist within the bubble of our PWI. I found myself struggling to write this section in particular because it felt as if I was "bashing" my community and invalidating the work and racial trauma Black students experience at our university. Revisiting the interview data and continuing to engage in these discussions with my Black peers has been vital in my ability to accept and interrogate the imperfections of Black space at Clark. Black culture and space *must* change in order to continue towards healing our Black community on campus.

“party-club” to the “lets just chill club. Henry reminisced on memories of witnessing and learning from mentors that introduced him to the Black Student Union, the stories they’d told about Black history at Clark, and the club’s future. However, Henry and Kempton emphasized and realized that we (members of the BSU, Black students, Black leaders) are simply tired, and it's not normal but it's okay.

If you are from New England you’ve heard the phrase “American Runs on Dunkin.” Well, Clark runs on students, for better or for worse. BSU participants spoke at great length about the reality that Clark students, *especially* BIPOC students are really fucking tired. The vast majority of events and initiatives on campus are run by Clark students. The labor expected of and enacted by Clark students has been discussed in great length over the past few months especially in the wake of the Clark Undergraduate Worker’s labor strike [9] and efforts to preserve the humanities/arts at our university. However, Henry notes a lack of dialogue surrounding *emotional* labor. Literature defines “Emotional Labor” as the emotional effort required to complete a task or role (Mohn, 2024). In the “events/party-era” (2022-2023) of the BSU especially, there was a large impending pressure to constantly perform and produce content and events for the University. “For the University” is used very intentionally because the participants found themselves asking “why” quite often; why are we doing this event, why is it important, and what impact did we hope to see? Kempton in particular, another long time member of the club, admitted that it felt as if we were sometimes throwing events to simply have them because that is what was expected of Black students at Clark.

[9] Clark University’s Undergraduate workers went on strike with support of the Teamsters Local 170 in an effort towards unionization. The strike began March 13 2025 initially as a 24/7 strike was projected to last only a few days. The University refused to recognize undergraduate workers as official workers and as a result had no valid right to unionize. The strike lasted 11 days. “Eli Gillen, a business agent for Local 170, said the Teamsters withdrew from the process after lawyers from Clark stated they didn't recognize students' efforts to organize and that the legal team suggested appealing a 2016 ruling by the National Labor Relations Board that granted students at Columbia University the right to unionize.” (Collings, 2025)

During this era of the BSU there was little-to-no connection between general members and Eboard members outside of these events; no quality time, no visibility, little joy. We were practically working part time jobs with no pay, and led to members needing to take a step back (or step down) from the club. Henry took a year off, Lily stepped down, and I admittedly was on the verge of doing the same. The lack of community and connection in combination with the amount of effort students put into the club, can and did lead to immense burnout. Kempton's response surfaces a tension between the cultures of individualism that is embedded in Clark clubs via expectations of production and the community that he thought he'd originally joined. He talks about having accepted the normality of stress as a Black student, indicating a subsequent normality of Black people needing to then work within the confines of a eurocentric expectations of production, perfectionism, etc. This normalizes race and racist expectations in our club structure.

Even today, the impending burnout of BIPOC students is still present in maybe a different capacity. Over the last 6 months, not only did Clark students go on strike, but the Office of Diversity and Inclusion was dissolved,[10] entire majors and departments[11] were disbanded, club/ activity funding has been slashed in half, and we are only in April 2025. Henry, Sammy, and Kendall all mention this notion of the "curse of consciousness" as we are all deeply aware of what's happening on our campus (critical reflection), yet don't have the energy to put out all the

[10] The Office of Diversity and Inclusion was a department that was fought for by Black Clark students and its written origin history has since been lost. However, on January 2nd 2025, the university released a memo announcing that Margot Foremen's position of Vice President and Chief Officer of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Clark University was being "eliminated" but not reflective of a lack of commitment to diversity at Clark. The roles and responsibilities of this office have been absorbed into Peyton Wu's role of Director in the office of Identity Student Engagement and Access (ISEA) as well as ODI staff being redirected to join HR (Lindstrom, 2025).

[11] As of December 6th 2025, Clark University has made moves towards the dissolvement or "restructuring" of the humanities and art departments/majors. According to the university, this is a result of significant financial decline and needing to "re envision" our departments and center "efficiency" as a result. The cuts have resulted in the dismissal of faculty and academic tracks being entirely disbanded. Examples of affected departments/areas of studies include: French, Combined Languages, Asian Studies, Comparative Literature, Ancient Civilization, Studio Art, Community Youth and Education Studies, Community Development and Planning, English, Communications,Theater, Music, and Philosophy (Porter & Espach, 2025)

fires. Henry highlights the reality that in times of action, the university instinctively turns to BIPOC students to lead the way. This puts BIPOC students, yet again, in a position of *having* to do the work, instead of *wanting* to do the work. Kendall brought up a similar sentiment, highlighting simply impossible it is to be everywhere at once. To her, one of the most prominent threats to our wellness as Black students is that we are also *students* on top of the stressors we face as Black leaders and people on campus. She put it plainly "we are doing the best we can." The pressure to reduce and respond in conjunction with the already existing stressors of being a student further exacerbate the distress that Black students experience of being black at a PWI.

The discussion labor also sparked a conversation of emotional vulnerability as Black women. The majority of participants in this project are female identifying or have explicitly stated being female aligned. The socialization as "Black women" for some has created a sense of dissonance as in some of their cultural contexts, participants are placed as the maternal/emotional holders in the Black community. Two participants recall having to actively learn through trial and error the importance of emotional boundaries with loved ones. One of the Caribbean identifying participants noted particular difficulty navigating these boundaries with family as, in their culture, it could be perceived as rude or selfish.

"All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk" - Homogeneity and Performance of Blackness in Black spaces

The term "performance" arose multiple times in my conversations with BSU participants. Performance was discussed in two main contexts: performance *of* Blackness versus performance *in* Black spaces. Sammy has been an active member for the last two years and recently joined the BSU's executive board. In our discussion, an age-old question among BSU members arose: "who is the BSU for?" While being a club that works to encompass and uplift the Black

diaspora, the BSU is run by predominantly Afro-Caribbean American students (myself included) yet there is a perception by Clark students that our events are meant to center African American culture[12]. However, Sammy mentions that her peers initially felt as if they cannot or should not attend BSU events out of concern that the space isn't meant for them. At times for general member meetings the BSU will have events such as "Black Trivia" or events of the sort. In activities that are more competitive and "facts based" in nature, the interviewed students noticed that often a majority of segments reference "Black American classics" that you might not understand if you aren't African American/Black American or raised in said social context.

This is interesting because this poses the implication that African American culture in particular and "Black culture" have become linked to some degree to the Black Student Union's framework and events. Sammy and Kendall both talk about how these games are incredibly engaging but coming into a "Black Trivia game" that focuses heavily on *a* facet of our diaspora often results in blank stares from our immigrants, our caribbeans, etc. This isn't necessarily a negative thing as the structure of these games *should* be true to how the people that planned the activity experiences Blackness. Expecting otherwise of event planners would perpetuate a cycle of being expected to *perform* Blackness. Kendall raised the concern that the lack of conversation and agreement surrounding who/what the Black diaspora is could potentially be dangerous for our Black spaces. African, African American, Afro - Caribbean culture *is* Black culture. The main issue that the participants are raising stems back to a lack of dialogue both within the BSU but also our larger Black community on campus. Kendall reiterates this reality that the focus of the BSU will always be informed by the people who show up and the people that organize. The demographics and experiences that make up the BSU has noticeably ebbed and flowed

[12] I initially suspected that it could be due to a lack of clarity regarding the definitions of Black and African American; particularly a lack of clarity regarding how the BSU defines Blackness.

throughout my time in the club; being predominantly African American my first year (2022) to leaning heavily Afro-Caribbean this academic year (2025). Typically BSU events and activities in particular represent the diverse range of Black experiences we hold in the club; engagement with a variety of Black arts and cultures ranging from "guess the song" to "finish the phrase." I personally believe it is important to celebrate both the specific identities the diaspora hold, but also Blackness as a collective experience. However, Sammy discusses how this pressure or *expectation* of what Blackness means in Black spaces can cultivate a culture of feeling a need to prove one's Blackness; proof that you belong in this space. There is power and healing in finding belonging, but Sammy also highlights that the lack of clarity on what defines Blackness could result in an initial sense of imposter syndrome for our Black students in our space.

In my conversation with Lily they talked at length about their experience shifting from an active executive board member to an "inactive" general member. Their decision to step down and step away from the club was two-fold: time and the people. The club at the time was recovering from being inactive due to the nation-wide COVID shut down and was working on rebuilding its structure. However, something that stuck out to me from this interview is the way they describe the strained dynamics within the club at the time. In our discussion, we discussed at length the phrase and its sentiment "all skinfolk ain't kinfolk" especially in relation to the club/Black spaces on campus. As children, we both heard this phrase used to warn children that people who look like you don't aren't always family; not all Black people have the interests and wellbeing of other Black people in mind. This phrase's origins loop back to author Zora Neale Hurston referring to the reality that racial solidarity doesn't *simply* appear out of shared racial identity (Rivera-Flores, 2024). Lily talks about how this was very much a reality in their time in

the BSU. Although most people in the BSU are Black, there is division in Black community particularly through colorism and classism.

> "I think another divide is ethnicity. So, like, there's a lot of tension between, especially, even the clubs Casa and BSU, and there's a lot of tension between, like, black Americans and African Africans and international students. I remember my one African mutual not gonna call him a friend. He was like, Yeah, I used to like, shit on black Americans because I thought y'all were lazy… [inaudible]... he admitted that to me, and he's like, No, but I realized that, like, you guys are doing what you can with what you're given. And like, even if I don't understand it, or, like, would do that, it's not the fact that it's like a bad thing. "

Their time in the BSU also consisted of constant reminders that not all students in the club interrogate or engage with Blackness in the same way. They talked about the fact that some of the club members they clashed with were either wealthy, from predominantly white areas, elitist, or simply center whiteness in their lives. Lily all but explicitly names the role that interest convergence plays in how the BSU functioned at this time. They named how Black students they'd engaged with understood their Blackness *through* white eurocentric lenses. This resulted in Lily making a choice to protect themself and their peace, resulting in distance from the club and those in it at the time.

Theme 3: What Heals Us - Black Spaces and Action

Storytelling, love and celebration ; the Power of oral History and Constructing Cultures of Care

The BSU's written history has honestly been hard to find. Henry, holding the longest membership of the current Eboard, grappled with our lost/fading history while he reminisced on *why* he joined the BSU. He talked about being a mentee in the ACE pre orientation program (a program designed to support and uplift incoming BIPOC/first generation first years) and hearing the stories of Black advocacy on our campus. For Henry, the stories he'd heard are integral to how and why he chooses to continue to show up in the BSU. Hearing the stories of those before

him made it feel possible to make change at Clark. He specifically references the BSU's annual alumni panel in which he learned that the late Office of Diversity and Inclusion had only been established within the last decade as a direct result of the work done by BSU members. That story isn't currently written anywhere! Despite his disbelief of how short lived this resource was, to him it was validating in the reality that we've been here before and we've moved forward. The lack of written history was cause for concern to him. He reflects on the reality that he actively had people telling these stories because action like the George Floyd Vigil took place so recently to his arrival to Clark as freshman; the people who were there aren't at Clark to keep telling those stories. Henry emphasized that it is now the responsibility of current BSU members to keep our history alive. We need to continue stories of Black excellence on campus, we need to ensure that future and current members know the ways in which Black students have changed Clark, we need to keep the BSU *alive*. Memory is essential to the lifespan and sustainability of change. The notion of storytelling and counter story telling is truly at the core of Henry's ties to Black spaces on campus. His grounding in *continuing* to be a counterstory teller in the BSU is supported by a culture of hope and change that he's seen in his mentors and hope to pass along to future Black students.

Kempton also discussed hope as healing tools/vehicles. Kempton in particular discussed hope as an essential characteristic of healing as it is something to work towards. He does so through envisioning his future with loved ones, manifestation, and making active efforts towards the future he hopes to see for himself. Kempton shares briefly the economic and social barriers that he has faced in life, and emphasized his desire to take control of his future. For him, hope is empowering as it feels as if were a *vehicle* towards something that matters to him; to heal. Radical hope is a grounding pillar in PRH as a framework. In this case, Kempton and other

participants are exhibiting engagement in hope informed by a relationship with the ways in which they wrestle with oppressive systems, as well as a vision for a collective future.

Kendall and Saoirse echo a similar sentiment, but take the idea a step further as their healing and hope are rooted in Black joy. For these two participants, the act of making an effort to be joyous and do things for the sake of happiness is radical and healing. Saoirse refers to joy as moments in which she can dance, cook, and laugh with friends. She *loves* to love and mentions her family, friends, and BSU being integral to her wellbeing. Active expressions of love are reminders of humanity in her communities; we still show up, we still laugh, and we still love. When talking about the things that brought her joy, Kendall referenced a tiktok trend called "Black Boy Joy." In this trend, Black men were encouraged to engage in activities that healed their inner child, made them smile, or something they'd never done before! Kendall discussed how this simple trend encouraged her to reevaluate how often she'd missed opportunities of joy. This led to her stance that "Black people really just need to frolick." To her, there is an expectation that Black students and Black people out in the world need to always do the "serious work." Kendall explicitly draws a parallel to both a value of self-authenticity but also a belief in joy as a counternarrative. In this conversation she talked so enthusiastically about the dinners she makes with friends, and the sunny day walks that she takes just because. *This* is radical healing, *these* are the moments that are central to the wellbeing of being well and Black at Clark.

What Now? (Conclusions, Implications, Limitation, and Beyond)

Where Are We Now and What Does it Mean for the BSU?

Since the beginning of this project, I've found myself noticing the ways in which people are talking about "wellness" in all spaces; are we well as mentors, family, students, managers,

etc? For many of the participants, the world and our campus feel as if they are in constant chaos, making it difficult to be well. In the wake of the 2024 presidential election, BIPOC/immigrants/disabled communities/LGBTQ+ people have seen their safety, education, and civil rights be thrown into uncertain futures. Perhaps not despite but rather in addition to it all, participants in this study generally felt that they had the emotional and community support to continue on. Black space and community are a testament to the necessity of these spaces as they are methods of care and healing for Black students at Clark University. Our social groups will not change whether or not we have the right to continue tomorrow, but BSU members point to these chosen families as necessary stabilizing forces while we navigate what's next.

Predominately white institutions such as our own are structurally built with systemic values of whiteness in mind, thus leaving Black and Brown students to navigate higher education without culturally relevant support and assistance. As a result, Black students on campus have and continue to pave avenues for support interpersonally via organized community (BSU, CASA, ADDA,etc)[13], friend groups, and affinity spaces. Participants in this study unanimously agreed that the efforts made by student-run spaces (multicultural clubs, FIRM, CHOICEs, etc), BIPOC faculty, and the ISEA office, are virtually the only genuine efforts happening on our campus working towards true equity and inclusion on our campus. “We do the work. Clark will just post about ‘Black Excellence’ and our events during Black History Month just to say we have it.” Black students are aware of the power we hold at Clark University and have chosen to use it to support and uplift each other as “if we don’t do it, no one else will.”

This study will likely be a catalyst for a turning point for Black space in and outside of the BSU. Within the club I’ve seen an increase in conversations reevaluating what joy, action, and care look like in the BSU. Although it is much more effective to love, heal, and care

[13] All acronyms and Clubs mentioned are defined in the appendix.

organically, I do think the BSU and Black space at Clark have shifted towards intentionally doing so. Participants noted hoping to grapple with indicators of wellness and healing beyond the study and implementing them into the structure of the club. Active members especially found "wellness" and "community care" as foundational in sustainably balancing being both Black students and leaders at Clark. Tangible actions mentioned included the implementation of a formal care-focused role on the executive board, restructuring event planning processes, hosting more health centric dialogues, etc.

Limitations and Final reflections

Honestly, this study has changed roughly 4 times over the course of the last two semesters. I initially had hoped to invite the BSU to be co-researchers in my praxis project (youth participatory action research). However, I struggled to situate and frame the project in a way that would also benefit members of the BSU without the project becoming "another task." I was already grappling with my position as president and it felt that asking my eboard members to become co-researchers would be extractive and an abuse of my position.

I also found myself trying to incorporate *too many* theories in this piece and it quickly grew convoluted and manic.Wellness and social identity are so deeply intertwined that this praxis project could continue another 5 years and I still wouldn't feel satisfied in my analysis. As suggested by mentors and advisors of mine, I've had to come to accept that this work is never *truly* finished. As a result, this paper is a reflection of where the 6 Black participants and myself are currently in our healing of racial trauma on campus. This project's impact and reach may simply exist as a catalyst for conversations of health or a push for Black students to

recognize/find empowerment in community care. Regardless, I'm working to accept the work in its current state and look forward to its future interactions.

A personal challenge within this research was its setting in the confines of academia. I often found myself feeling rightfully protective of the stories that were shared with me throughout this year. I had a hard time finding the words to connect or even attempt to make this work fit into what I initially understood to be "academic writing." Frankly, I don't think I wanted to make it work. Academia itself is rooted in classism, elitism, and racism. Trying to make these stories fit into this structure felt like a betrayal to my participants. However, my research into PRH and CRT in particular are proof that academia *can* be empowering. The process of this praxis has encouraged me to interrogate what it means to work within the system to make change from the inside out or when to break from format.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to reflect on the spaces I share with people that I would call friends, mentees, and peers. My time as the BSU president is coming to an end but my work with the BSU is far from over. Since these interviews, I've personally grown more intentional in the ways in which I care for my team, and I have begrudgingly learned to be more conscious of how I care for myself. These participants have taught me the complexities of the journey we are on in working towards solidarity among Black students, while also fighting for genuine equity and diversity at Clark. We don't expect change overnight or even during our time at Clark, but it warms my heart to know that Black students on our campus have always and will continue to change Clark with love, hope, and community.

Appendix

Spaces mentioned

General Clubs:

- Arts (Theatre, Photo Society, etc)
- Study/Academic Based (Ascend in STEM*, C4, Pre-Health, Mock Trial)

Identity Centric Clubs/spaces

- CASA (Caribbean American Student Association)
- BSU (Black Student Union)
- ADDA (African Diaspora Dance Association)
- LASO (Latin American Student Org)
- Affinity House (Housing reserved for BIPOC identifying undergraduate students)
- ASCEND IN STEM*
- ACE/Connections (Pre Orientation programs for BIPOC & First gen students)
- FIRM Pantry

Friend Groups

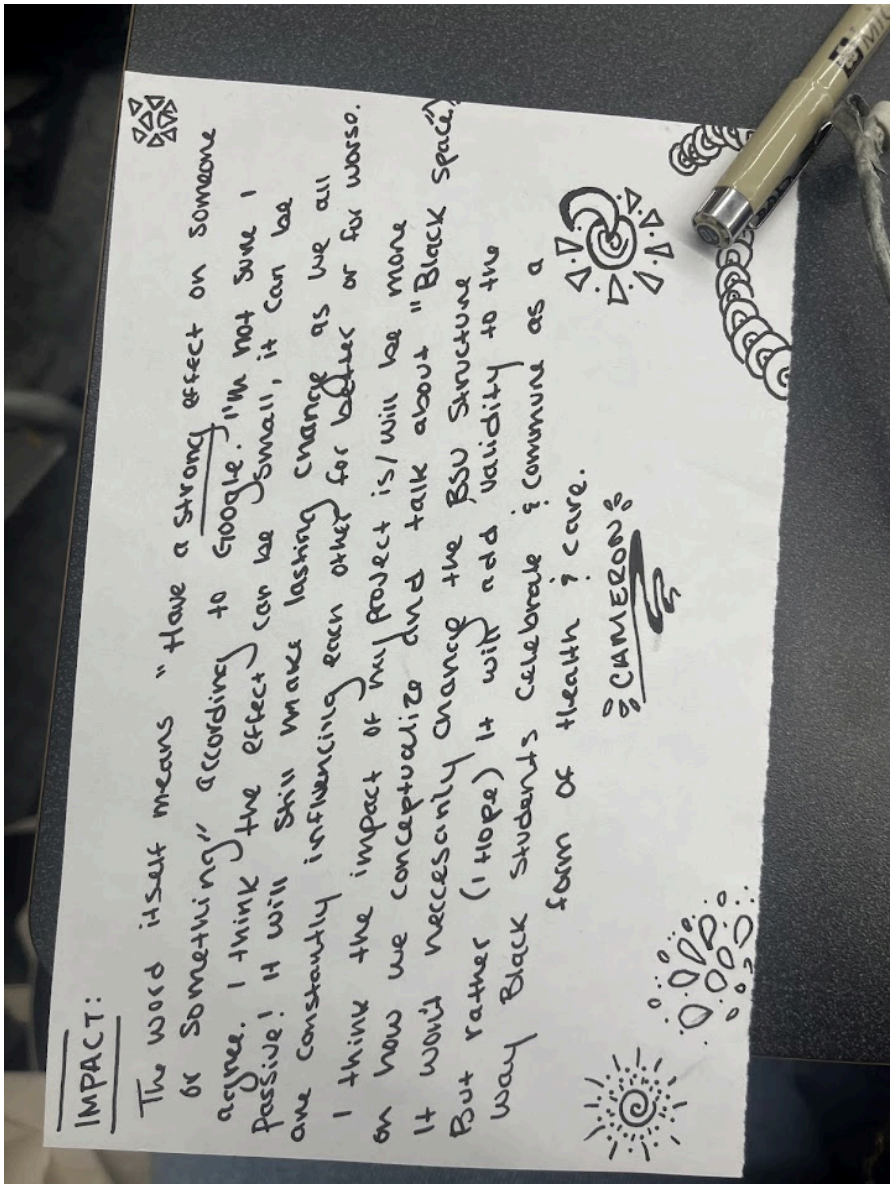
- Both on and off campus

Offices:

- ISEA (Identity Student Engagement and Access)
- ODI (Office of Diversity and Inclusion)

Physical Spaces

- The Village (Afro-centric Healing Center, Worcester non-profit org)



Interview Questions*:

- What is your Name, pronouns, and how do you racially identify?
- How old are you?
- In your own words, how would you define:
    - Wellness
    - Community care
    - Belonging

    - How do these terms arise in the context of being Black on campus (ex: cooking with peers, spirituality, etc)
- How would you describe your experience as a Black student at Clark University?
    - Where are some spaces you feel the most community/belonging
    - What are some things you do to take care of yourself? Who do you tend to lean on for support?
    - What is something that feels essential to your wellness as a Black student on this campus?
    - What were your initial expectations of what it'd be like to be Black at a PWI? Did you feel prepared?
        - Did you know of any options for support and community?
    - Has being at a PWI impacted the way you understand yourself and the identities you hold?
- Would you consider yourself an active or non-active member of the BSU (Black student union)?
    - *Active Member questions*
        - How would you describe your involvement with the BSU?
            - In your own words, what is the primary focus/goal of the BSU?
        - Do you feel as though the BSU engages in community care and wellness? Why or why not?
        - What drew you to the BSU? Why did you join?
        - What is the purpose/value of having identity centric spaces on campus?
            - What role do these spaces play in the larger Clark community?
        - In terms of fostering community and wellness, what do you wish the BSU would do/do differently?
        - If you could give yourself advice on your first day at clark, how would you advise yourself to engage in Black wellness/joy/care
    - *Non-active member questions*
        - In what capacity do you find yourself involved with the BSU?
            - Is there any particular reason for this level of engagement (ie: time, connection, etc)

        - (ask if relevant: is there something you wish the BSU would do/do differently?)
    - Where are some other places you find community on campus?
        - What makes this space special to you? Why'd you join
        - How do people care for each other (if at all) in this space?
    - Do you see yourself in the BSU/feel like you belong? Why or why not?
    - If you could give yourself advice on your first day at clark, how would you advise yourself to engage in Black wellness/joy/care

Events Held This Academic Year:

- Recurring:
    - Biweekly Eboard Meetings
        - Planning events and general club organization
    - Biweekly Gen Interest Meetings
        - Black Mental Health Dialogue
        - Open Mic
        - Karaoke
        - Squid Games
        - Board games
        - Black jeopardy
        - "Pink Court"
        - Easter Egg hunt/bingo
- Halloween Party
- Drumming workshop
- Kwanzaa
- Roller Skating Retreat
- Black Alumni Panel
- Black Arts Explosion
- African American Museum
- BIPOC Talent Show

- Multicultural Block Party
- Multicultural Formal (w/ LASO)

Code Book -summarized

homeless	Social performance/performing /performative spaces	immigrant	Born here	mexican
ADDA (african diaspora dance association)	CASA (caribbean african student association)	Ivy league	college	african
LASO (Latin American Student org.)	Black Culture	Academic pressure/performance	“Left the hood”	Poverty
Grow up Middle class	“isn’t based off what you can do”	“African american focused”	“Black culture”	New York
George Floyd	activism	Story telling	generations	city
dance	theatre	Church	“Days off”	intention
Create space	ODI	ISEA	clubs	Midnight madness
Space/space making	harm	Multicultural	fun	celebration
diversity/diverse	critical	Blackness	Self taught	resources
PWI	scholarship	academics	internship	Middle class
Lived experience	archives/history lost	Culturally black	affinity	Self care
Support each other	Cooking together	together	Dialogue	Alone time

Labor/emotional labor	Left the BSU	Cultural Exchange	Love	Intention
Black joy	Time barriers	Cook together	“Being together”	Separation between work and fun
Community care	“Who does the work?”	Black love	“Trying out best”	Poetry
Roller Skating	intention	political	Burnt out	Black women
maternal	interracial	Translating cultures	Code switch	High school
non-profit	Women supporting women	Black women	Acts of service	“Rah rah”
Protecting big emotions	Isolation (intentional)	Black Men	“Stop normalizing trauma-bonding”	indigenous
guilt	fatigue	loyal	pressure	Called upon
Single mom	construction	Only child	family	uncle
journaling	overwhelming	manifestation	secondary	aunt
meditation	dance	Non member	Connection with other schools (BSU)	FIRM
outlets	dysregulated	When needed	I like to wake up	Just me and my mom
Black joy is just joy	White schools	Playing instruments	Reading	“Excited to graduate”
Tangible skills	girlfriend	friends	mentors	Pulled- in
CASA	Multicultural Formal	Computer Science	Racist Professors	Internship opportunity
Gatekeeping opportunities	Travel the world	fun	celebration	arts
				Support my friends

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