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Know Your Role: Black College Students, Racial Identity, and Performance

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### **Abstract**

This article is a report of a critical constructivist study of racial identity and performance among 13 Black, traditional-age students enrolled at three different colleges, two historically Black and one predominantly White. The study's approach understood identity to be socially constructed and reliant upon community affirmation and validation. The findings highlight (1) the role of internal community pressure, (2) the ways in which racial performance dominated the students' discussions of their racial identities, and (3) the intersection of internalized racism and sexism. The overarching conclusion points to the need for promoting acceptance of racial heterogeneity within communities of Black young adults. Implications of these findings for research and practice recommend that college administrators and educators pay more attention to the influence of campus student communities on racial identity as byproducts of cultural production.

**Biographical Note**

Dafina Lazarus Stewart is an associate professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. Her research interests are in identity intersectionality, student services for marginalized groups, and the experiences and outcomes of marginalized groups in higher education. Constructivist and critical approaches inform her research.

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### Know Your Role: Black College Students, Racial Identity, and Performance

Racially minoritized students in the United States, who mostly attend predominantly White institutions, face the challenge of considering and resolving questions of identity in environments that are generally unprepared to support these students effectively (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990). Regarding Black students, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been found to provide more positive milieus for the engagement of identity, as well as improvements in academic achievement and degree completion outcomes (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Lang, 1994). Moreover, previous research has found that Black college students perceive the process of college matriculation as a formative one for racial identity awareness and development (Stewart, 2008). The purpose of this study was to develop a greater understanding of the meaning of Blackness, how Black racial identity was performed, and how this was negotiated within Black student communities at three different institutions.

Higher education scholars have studied college outcomes and concepts of student success largely from a culturally neutral perspective, although recognizing the social mobility enabled by college completion (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College outcomes, such as subject matter competence, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, writing and speaking clearly, and career preparation are only one set of goals for college education. Colleges and universities also affect various aspects of students' personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Considering intellectual as well as social and personal outcomes reflects a holistic picture of success in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

Previous research by Chickering and Reisser (1993) has established the influence of the college environment on identity development. Through institutional mission and goals, faculty and staff contact, and peer communities, students in college encounter a range of personal identity tasks including developing competence, mature relationships, purpose, and establishing identity. Chickering and Reisser's discussion of establishing identity includes developing a mature and sophisticated understanding of oneself as a person with a racial and ethnic identity and what that means for one's worldview and relationships with others.

Yet, this core literature in higher education fails to recognize the cultural nature of schooling. Germinal literature in cultural studies in education by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) has highlighted the "symbolic violence" that the structure and process of schooling inflicts on marginalized students. The term *minoritized* is used here, instead of *students of color* or *minority students*, following Benitez (2010), to refer to the "process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization" (p. 131). This also implies an understanding that becoming a "minority" is socially constructed in specific societal contexts and reflects the "nonelite" collective status (Levinson and Holland 1996) of Black, Hispanic and Latina/o, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Native American students in college. Luttrell (1996) also found that schools were not culturally neutral sites. As she stated, "schools are sites of cultural production, places where certain styles of selves and knowledge are authorized amidst race, class, and gender inequalities" (Luttrell, 1996, p. 4).

In light of the cultural production of self and identity that occurs through formal education, these processes of identity development and formation occur differently for Black and other racially minoritized students. Having made it to college, Black collegians may be considered "successful" by comparison to their peers who do not matriculate to college from

high school. However, this “success” means that Black collegians continue to endure the “symbolic violence” of educational processes that “attack the self” to borrow Levinson and Holland’s (1996) language. If educators and scholars are truly to transform education from kindergarten through higher education to be a liberating (hooks, 1994) and democratic (Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2009) experience that dismantles oppressive power structures, then attending to the ways that the collegiate experience interacts with students’ internal development of identity should not be overlooked.

Recent ideas about the nature of identity highlight the pivotal role that interpersonal relationships play in identity meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2009). Consistent with this literature, the current study investigated the ways in which racial identity and how one performed that identity were formed and normed among Black college students through a constructivist approach. Findings from interviews with 13 self-identified Black students at three different colleges about how they experienced and understood these issues provide the context of this study.

### **Literature Review**

The study of racial identity has been treated as both a necessary social construction (West, 1993) and as a problematic artifact of a modernist obsession with identity politics (Appiah, 1992). Regardless, the realist theoretical framework that situates this paper considers racial identity as both real and constructed and always as a relevant and significant aspect of how one knows the self and from which one regards the outside world (Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2009). As Omi and Winant (1994) observed, race continues to be “a fundamental axis of social organization” (p. 13). Moreover, development theorists have identified the college experience as

a prominent site for considerations of racial identity as part of the construction of self (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1991).

Racial identity has been considered primarily from a psychological perspective (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1991; St. Louis & Liem, 2005), considering the construction and development of identity as primarily a matter of the interplay of the ego and external expectations. Other studies of racial identity from this perspective have identified five key concepts that influence racial identity development: racial salience, racial centrality, racial regard or reference group orientation, and racial ideology (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Tatum (2004) explored the role of family and community contexts in the development of racial identity among Blacks in predominantly White communities, as well as applying Cross' racial identity development model to understanding the role of racism in college classrooms (Tatum, 1992). Together, these concepts account for the multiple ways in which individuals identify with a racial group and allot significance, value, and a certain worldview to their membership within that group and the central role of context and community in doing so.

Sociological perspectives, however, study identity as a social performance, emphasizing its socially constructed nature. People perform their identities for others to be seen as acceptable and to ensure social relationships are comfortable and positive (Goffman, 1959). With regards to racial identities, treating race as performance demonstrates a subversive power (Willie, 2003) exercised by minoritized subjects. This subversive power lies in the suggestion that "race is not solely phenotypic, but is a way of behaving, a place to be entered and exited, a garment to be put on and taken off, impermanent, calculated, and chosen" (Willie, 2003, p. 126). There is no standardized performance of identity facets (Phelan, 1993) and each performance is



unpredictable on the basis of external identities (Butler, 1991; Willie, 2003; Wittig, 1992).

Studying race as performance refutes biological deterministic attempts to define any behavior or set of behaviors as inherently characteristic of membership in a racial group. Such a perspective is also consistent with literature that has suggested that human behavior has been dictated by socially constructed roles rather than by biologically determined ones (Andersen, 1988; Butler, 1991; Connell, 1987; Harris & Khanna, 2010; Rich, 1980; Stoltenberg, 1989).

Willie (2003) explored concepts of Blackness through a similar lens used by Wittig (1992) who wrote about lesbian women as *not-woman*. In Willie's research, she classified as "not Black" (p. 127) those persons of African descent who did not conform to the social expectations for Black people, communicated and enforced both externally and internally to the community. In this way, Willie has explored thinking about how much "black and white (and red, yellow, and brown) are also *roles* in the personal and institutional dramas of race rather than simply markers of biological difference, signifiers of ethnic traditions, and expected behaviors" (Willie, 2003, p. 127, emphasis added). Willie's (2003) findings about Black college students at a predominantly White university and a predominantly Black university reflect the centrality of identity performance and external expectations to constructing a Black racial identity. However, internal pressures to conform to narrow definitions of perceived authentic Blackness also influence Black racial identity and performance (Harris & Khanna, 2010).

The role of others' expectations and racialized behavior is a key aspect in the formation of racial identity. Race is about "which differences match up with the behaviors that are expected from each racial group... regardless of how much our behavior may contradict racial stereotypes, we each still have to navigate the expectations of others" (Willie, 2003, p. 126). Racial socialization (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Taylor, 2004) then becomes a fundamental

component in the construction and development of racial identity through this continual negotiation of racial affirmation and confirmation. Socialization comprises the communication of the norms and tacit assumptions deemed to be most appropriate for members of a group (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994). Those socialized norms can include parameters for behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that are reinforced both within the community, as well as outside it through interactions with institutions, members of other communities, and popular culture media (Willie, 2003). The students in Willie's study were consciously aware that they were manipulating their audience with their racial performances, holding the performance of race outside themselves as object without affecting their ego-based racial identity. Identity is both part of the self and a function of community (Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2009). Psychological and sociological pictures of identity intersect when racial performance is examined as within and distinct from racial identity.

As noted previously, the college years are a significant period of identity development and developing mature relationships with others, particularly for traditional-age students. Identity performance, as noted by Butler (1991) and Willie (2003), is greatly influenced by others and is negotiated with peers in community. Yet, as discussed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Levinson and Holland (1996), and Luttrell (1996) in the context of primary and secondary education, the college years are not culturally neutral sites for this identity development. White racial dominance has positioned Whiteness as the norm in United States society and on college campuses, while at the same time affirming the individuality of its racial group members and positing an existence merely in response to the presence of the Other (Fine, 1997; Powell, 1997; Winant, 1997).

Consequently, the effects of Whiteness as cultural norm and cultural product resonate on predominantly White college campuses as well as on historically Black campuses, although the degree to which Whiteness resonates likely differs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Harper & Gasman, 2008). Once achieving college matriculation, Black collegians must navigate and negotiate an environment that is structured to attack the self, while attempting to successfully resolve identity development processes both internally and as a member of multiple campus communities (e.g., general student body in predominantly White institutions, Black student community, other social identity spaces which may be also salient).

As stated earlier, using Black students' college matriculation as a sole determinant of their successful adaptation to U.S. educational hierarchies is presumptive and reflects utilitarian assumptions about the purpose of higher education in particular. Such a perspective ignores the importance of holistic development, including intellectual and identity development, as well as community norming. How young adults are socialized within higher education institutions to both interpret and perform their identities as they live in community with others signifies what continues to be valued and expected in U.S. society of individuals as social actors contributing to that society's maintenance. Therefore, understanding how Black students negotiate racial identity through racial performances co-constructed within student communities is critical to enhancing educators' understanding of the cultural production role of *higher* education and its "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004). Student communities do not exist in a vacuum; rather they reflect the institutional environments which contain them (Strange & Banning, 2001). Different historical legacies and present-day missions exert different environmental presses (Griffin & Hurtado, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2001) reflecting different communal approaches to questions of knowledge, community, and the purpose and value of higher education. Therefore, studying

the experiences of Black students with racial identity and performance across a variety of student community contexts is essential to representing a more complete picture of the multiple ways that higher education produces and reproduces culture.

### **Methodology**

Thirteen Black college students from three institutions participated in a study investigating identity among Black college students in 2005. The study was qualitative in design, deliberately employing the underlying belief that identity is constructed over time through social relationships and reflection (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 1994), reflecting a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014) and a theoretical perspective described as constructivist developmentalism (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Consistent with this view, the primary focus of the data analysis was on how the participants made sense of issues of identity negotiation and meaning making. Both the students' interpretations of their experiences as well as my interpretations as the researcher came together in the data analysis. This approach was meant to shed light on a topic through in-depth inquiry to produce implications that may be transferable to the understanding of similar students in similar settings. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did these students make meaning of Blackness as their racial identity?
2. How did these students perform a Black racial identity?
3. How did these students negotiate the meaning and performance of Blackness within the Black student communities at these three institutions?

The research design employed individual, in-person, semi-structured interviews. Following the recommendations for further study given by Stewart (2002), three institutions were selected to allow the opportunity for differences among student communities, as

represented by institutional environments, to emerge in the data analysis. The three institutions varied by source of primary funding (public or private), majority student demographic (predominantly White or predominantly Black), and sectarian influence (sectarian or non-sectarian). Each institution was geographically located in the Midwest and given the following pseudonyms: State University (public, predominantly White with 3% Black student enrollment, non-sectarian), Woodson University (public, historically and predominantly Black, non-sectarian), and Turner College (private, historically and predominantly Black, sectarian).

Black students who were enrolled full-time were recruited for participation in this study through student affairs administrators at each institution. The administrators were asked to be mindful to distribute information about the study as broadly as possible to better ensure a diverse participant group. Nominations were requested from three different administrators at State University, the largest of the three institutions, to ensure a greater diversity of nominations. Only one administrator at Turner College and Woodson University was solicited for nominations given the much smaller sizes of the student populations and the greater likelihood of duplicate nominations.

The nominations created a pool of over 40 potential respondents; including multiple duplicates and a student who did not self-identify as Black but was Puerto Rican and a member of a predominantly Black fraternity at State University. After deleting the duplicate nominations and the individual who did not identify as Black, I sent 25 recruitment letters by electronic mail to students at State, Woodson, and Turner. Recruitment letters explained the purpose of the study, that the requirements to participate in the study was identification as a Black or African American person since that was the study's intended focus. The recruitment letter also informed them that their participation would involve an interview that would be audio recorded, explained

how I would protect their confidentiality, and that they were free to discontinue their participation without penalty. Finally, I offered students a \$25 gift card in gratitude for their time to help encourage participation in the study.

As students responded with interest in the study, I paid attention to institutional representation and gender diversity, desiring to reflect maximum variation (Patton 2010) in the sample based on these two factors; no interested students had to be excluded from participation in this study. This method yielded thirteen students, identifying as either Black and/or African American, who agreed to participate in the study and who completed the interview. Both *Black* and *African American* were used as racial and ethnic descriptors by the students in this study and are both used here to reflect their self-designations. Of these students, eight identified as women, five as men, and there were no out transgender students among the participants. In addition, at the time of the interview, seven were in their junior year and six were graduating seniors. None of the students revealed a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation during the interviews; one came out to me as lesbian after the study was concluded. Three participants revealed a physical, medical, or learning disability during the interviews. Four participants were students at State; six were students at Woodson; and the remaining three were from Turner. Table 1 summarizes demographic information about each of the participants.

[Insert table 1 about here.]

I sent information regarding informed consent and procedures to maintain confidentiality prior to scheduling the interviews. Each participant selected a pseudonym that I then used to identify the student on all subsequent materials, including audio tapes, transcripts, files, analytic memos, and any reports of the findings. I kept signed consent form documents in a separate file.

I conducted one-time, face-to-face interviews with each respondent using a focused, semi-structured interview protocol. Time limitations for data collection and continued availability of the students beyond the academic year prevented the use of a staged interview protocol as was originally used in a previous study (Stewart, 2002). I streamlined the interview protocol used in this study to focus on the topic of immediate interest, the respondents' perceptions of the form and context of their identities. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed and typically lasted 75 minutes. The students discussed their racial identities in the course of responding to questions about how they understood their identities and the relationships among their multiple identity facets. The types of questions included in the interview guide asked the participants to share stories about their upbringing and experiences with primary and secondary education; how they articulated their identity and perspectives on race, gender, social class, religion and spirituality, and sexuality; and, how they perceived the campus climate, including whether and how they negotiated among the multiple facets of their identity. Other findings from this study discussed the perceptions of multiple identities among Black college students (Stewart, 2009).

### **Trustworthiness**

This naturalistic inquiry informed the development of the interview protocol and the conduct of the interviews themselves such that the interviewees and their responses continuously shaped the interviews. I kept the students' participation confidential from the administrators who nominated them and the researcher anticipated losing contact with these students after the school year (several students were graduating that spring). In light of this, I built into the interviews a way of sharing preliminary analytical hunches, collectively, about what other students had said up to that point and inviting the current interviewee's feedback. I did this consistently in each

interview and it occurred after the participants answered questions in the protocol so as not to influence those responses. Statements made by the students were summarized, paraphrased, and fed back for correction in the interview itself in order to ensure their accuracy when transcribed and later coded. Thus, I captured this negotiated meaning making between participant and researcher in the interview transcripts to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Immediately following each interview, I also carefully captured observational and perceptual information from the interview in a log. This log documented the initial analytic memos that later informed both coding and data interpretation.

### **Data Analysis**

As stated earlier, I assume that identity is defined and understood ongoing in the context of community. I conducted data analysis of interview transcripts by hand thematically. I coded the data in three stages: open coding to identify topical threads guided by my analytic memos, axial coding to group those threads into larger clusters of themes, and selective coding to pull out the central story in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I and a graduate assistant, who I trained to code transcripts for this study, coded each interview transcript twice. After separately coding each transcript, we reviewed our coding together and further refined the codes. This provided a level of analytic triangulation (Patton, 2002) that bolstered the validity of the findings. The *central story* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the data related to answering the research questions guiding this study was that these students perceived the need to alter and manipulate their identity performances to navigate and maintain peer relationships and that institutional setting mattered much less than internal Black community pressures which were consistent across the three institutions. This story is told through the data's three themes: Negotiating racial performances, embodying racial performances, and centering race.



Direct quotations from the students' interview transcripts, three to four exemplars for each sub-theme as recommended by Creswell (2008), are used to support the analytic interpretations that are presented below. As with any group of interview participants, the quality and clarity of respondents' engagement with these topics were uneven with some students being far more sophisticated in their articulations of their ideas than others were. Therefore, the data exemplars are representative of the dominant perceptions across the students. I have selected quotes that most clearly illustrate the sub-theme being reported. I have also presented disconfirming data, when relevant, and juxtaposed these data with the prevailing sentiments expressed. Direct quotations from 10 of the 13 students appear in the presentation of findings below, but the analysis and interpretation of the themes reflect the thoughts and ideas of all 13 participants.

### **Findings**

The constructivist data analysis I employed revealed three themes related to the research questions explored in this paper about the cultural production of identity articulation in higher education institutional environments. These themes were a) negotiating racial performances, b) embodying racial performances, and c) centering race. The theme, negotiating racial performances, reflects the participants' considerations of how their behaviors, habits, and preferences would be interpreted by others. Secondly, embodying racial performances portrayed the ways that gender intersected with expectations for racial performance, especially concerning Black women's physical appearances. The final theme, centering race, differs from the first two themes by shifting the action from the participants to the role of the college environments which they inhabited. This theme revealed the ways that the predominantly White environment of State

influenced those students' occupation with race as a central facet of their identities. This differed markedly from the students at Woodson and Turner.

### **Negotiating Racial Performances**

The students at State, Turner, and Woodson described multiple instances of needing to negotiate and navigate the perceptions of their racially-inscribed behaviors, habits, and preferences. These negotiations happened for the benefit of others and were disconnected from their identity meaning-making. Both internal (other Black students) and external (predominantly White society) audiences were implicated in this negotiation.

**Internal audiences.** Anticipating and responding to the reactions of other Black students dominated this theme. Paul from State wryly remarked, "People on the Black people's side make fun of my attachment to hanging out with so many White people. But, you know, I don't care. I don't care about much for a long period of time." These comments were so frequent that Paul had become nearly immune to the criticism he received from his Black peers about his comfort with interacting with White students.

Black students at State who freely associated with both White and Black peers were routinely criticized. Marie described her experiences in this way:

I can talk to anybody and then, well they [Black peers] might see that as, "Well, you're White. You're acting White now." And then when I'm around some hood friends, "Oh well, you're trying to be like us, but you're not because you know you're from the suburbs, you're not city."

Marie described how her mannerisms, vocal inflections, and word choices changed according to what set of peers she was around. Black students, who she called her "hood friends," who witnessed her interactions with predominantly White peers noticed these adjustments and

presumed that Marie code-switched as a way to either hide or accentuate her Black racial identity depending on her audience. Her “Black” performance was judged to be inauthentic because she was raised in a predominantly White suburban community. Her peers’ concepts of authentic Blackness were shaped by their experiences growing up in the inner city.

Pressures to exhibit racial performances consistent with expected norms for Blacks were also felt by the students at the HBCUs in the study. For instance, David, a senior at Woodson, shared with me a conflict he was experiencing with the woman he was dating at the time.

She is, I guess in my own words, she is that stereotype that says, “Black is this and this is defined as this. I listen to R&B [rhythm and blues] music and I listen to rap and that’s it.” There’s a whole other world out there. You go out in my car and you listen to my radio, there’s four different stations [preset]. Two of them are White stations and two of them are Black stations. I flip between all four of them....Well, when [we] ride in my car, I got to change my stations to adapt to her.

David also shared that he felt pressured to conform to her musical preferences in order to maintain a good reputation in her eyes and with other people. Yet, he acknowledged that his submission to her was “denying who [he] is.” Later, David added that he was somewhat ostracized on campus because his openly conservative politics conflicted with the perceived norm for Blacks at his institution. In this way, political ideology functioned as a part of the expected racial performance of Black students at Woodson.

For Bob, also a student at Woodson, this idea was shared through his acknowledgment of the ostracism that politically conservative students at Woodson faced. In fact, after the interview was officially ended but captured in my research log, Bob referenced David as a student whose racial identity was questioned by others on campus.

**External audiences.** The following comments from two students, Paul and Christion, illustrate the students' collective awareness of how societal audiences may perceive their behaviors as either positively or negatively reflecting on their racial group and themselves as individuals. At another point in our interview, Paul shared the following concerning how he carefully monitored his behaviors and his speech mannerisms:

Yea, whenever I became aware of the implications or ramifications of these different aspects [of his identity] is when they became big pieces. Like, oh, so, I'm a Black man. Anything I do is going to reflect every other Black man this person meets, so let me adjust accordingly. Adjust the awareness.

Greater awareness of the societal expectations for Paul's racial identity prompted him to more consciously consider how his behavior would be presumed to be reflective of the intersection of his racial and gender identities as a Black man. To avoid negative racial stereotyping, Paul used a different performance of his identity when he interacted with Whites.

Carol and Jasmine, both students at Woodson, shared a similar awareness of White cultural norms and values, but were determined to not allow others' expectations or perceptions of their race to dictate how they performed in front of others. This was despite their awareness that their racial performances might be deemed as inconsistent with White expectations for Black behavior.

Christion, a student at Turner, shared Paul's concerns and extended their implications to his choice of a romantic partner.

Because I want to go into politics, I'll say, I can't really date a young lady who has locks, so that's really what the American image wants to have and I say I have to go by what the American people want, you know, and that's where my life is headed.

Christion, like David at Woodson, identified politically as a Republican at his predominantly Black college. His rationale for this decision included Christion's perceptions of the greater status of the Republican Party network leading to improved success in his future career. He also desired to avoid fulfilling expectations that he would affiliate with the Democratic Party since he was Black.

Illustrated by the remarks from these four students, affirmed by the other nine students in the study, it was evident that their behaviors did not merely reflect personality quirks and interests. Perhaps even to the point of overshadowing their personalities, their behaviors, particularly during interactions with White associates (also seen in Tatum, 2004), were often presumed by other Black students to be revelations of the depth or authenticity of their racial identities. Even when there was no specific audience, some of these students, like David and Christion, anticipated that their personal behaviors would be assessed to determine their racial identifications. Authentic blackness was identified with urbanicity, hip-hop, R&B music, and Democratic political leanings, which alludes to work by Alim (2003) on the ways in which language and racial discourses have evolved among youth cultures and reflected in hip-hop music. In response, these students scripted their performances. These performances were intended to avoid undue negative stereotyping of other Blacks or to attract positive regard from Whites, on whom they presumed they would need to rely to achieve their aspirations. The unexpected significant role of internal pressures from the Black student communities at these institutions reflects the conclusions made by Harris and Khanna (2010) that rigid definitions of authenticity inhibit the performance of Black heterogeneity. Greater awareness of the social significance of racial identity in social contexts prompted scripted racial performances.

### **Embodying Racial Performances**

For some students, navigating and negotiating their own and others' expectations for their racial performances, meant that their bodies and physical appearances became sites for authentic racial display, like an actor's costume, signaling and reflecting the character being performed. Regina's comments highlighted the significance placed on perceptions of racial authenticity at State. However, her particular experience brings out the ways in which race and gender intersected.

I know that I have a sense of self, meaning that I know what I stand for. I know who I am. It's very difficult sometimes to express that. Let me just use my hair. When I got here, I had braids all through my sophomore year and I took them out...when I took my braids out and I had my hair, the first thing I did was relax it...I'm not going to say that I regret it, but I think that at this point, I want to do something, I want to be different so badly that it's like, it's almost like a complex because in my mind I'm saying, [what if] I'm not going to be able to get a job. Am I going to be able to do this or who's going to accept me? [Are] my peers going to accept me? Are African Americans going to accept me?

Regina's anxiety over "going natural," the process of cutting or growing out hair that has been chemically straightened, has its foundations in the Black pride movement of the sixties and seventies, captured in the emersion-immersion stage of Cross' (1971) initial model of Black racial identity development. One of the manifestations of a Black person going through emersion-immersion could be an adoption of Black pride and the rejection of European standards of beauty that celebrated straight hair that could blow in the wind and degraded the thicker, tightly coiled locks that are more commonly "natural" for many Black women. Black women who did not wear their hair naturally were presumed to be White-identified and lacking in

cultural consciousness. Regina clearly expressed that she knew who she was and in other comments celebrated her heritage as a Black woman, but the source of her anxiety rested in how others might view her and how those perceptions might impact her career opportunities and social relationships.

The perception of a cultural press that validated and legitimized a narrow expression of Blackness created internal conflict for Tiffany, who felt that her racial performance was incongruent with presumed cultural group norms.

I want to be just so Afrocentric and then sometimes I'm so conservative at the same time and you know, some people, they either changed their name to an African name and went natural, and then, so here I am, you know, trying to speak the same dialogue as them, but I have a perm [chemically straightened hair]. ... Some African Americans shut you out, you know, just because I have a perm and I wear Tiffany's bracelets and a Coach purse I'll be materialistic, or I'm not into my culture, who I am, and that's not true. And sometimes it's hard to express that to people, you know? That I don't have to wear – dreadlocks don't make you deep. Dreadlocks don't make you a proud African American, you know.

For Tiffany, the struggle was resolving her perception that Afrocentrism could only be expressed by having natural hair. In her comments, she seemed to question the validity of her claim to an Afrocentric worldview if she did not wear the appropriate costume, which was centered around the style in which she wore her hair and her jewelry. Each of the eight women in the study (see Table 1) spoke in some way about hair and decisions about hair, either for themselves or others they observed. A small subset of these women, including Mignon and Carol, rejected the correlation of racial pride with one's choices about having chemically processed hair. Each of

these women who challenged hairstyling and treatment as an embodiment of racial performance also wore their hair straightened, either chemically processed or by the use of a flat iron.

Christion's comments, quoted earlier, also reflected the gendered nature of these racial performances. As he said concerning his aspirations for a political career, "I'll say I can't really date a young lady who has locks...I have to go by what the American people want, you know." Christion altered his racial performances to reflect the racial character expected by his audience, but did not include his hairstyle as an aspect of the racial costume he would need to don for his audience. However, he immediately pointed out what hairstyle his female romantic partner would need to wear in order to have an appropriate costume for the scripted racial performance they would perform together as a couple before the audience of the American public.

The comments by Regina, Tiffany, Christion presented here, together with the less expressive comments of the other Black women in the study, reveal the intersection of race and gender, adding another complication to racial performances of authentic blackness for Black women. Their bodies, and most notably their hairstyles, became sites for authentic racial display. Costumes, including how a woman adorned her body, not only mannerisms and vocal inflections as seen in the first theme, were critical elements of the racial performances these students portrayed and expected others to portray. Even women who did not accept the use of their hair in this manner recognized that it was used this way on campus by others, both men and women, both within and beyond the Black community. In this way, both racism and sexism, internalized within these Black student communities, manifested interlocking systems of oppression as discussed by bell hooks (1990) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000).

### **Centering Race**



Comments that emphasized the racial and cultural aspects of identity were more pervasive among the students at State University than among those at Woodson University and Turner College. Every student at State commented on this issue, while only a couple of the students at Woodson and Turner did so, including Bob. For students at State, race was readily identified as an important facet of identity because of the ways that this particular identity affected their social interactions on campus. These sentiments were sometimes expressed in terms of the significance race held for them if that aspect of their identity were to change. Duane made the following comment:

Even though we're the most hated race on the face of this planet, there's still a pride that we're taught in being Black. If I woke up tomorrow morning, and I was not Black, of course that would be a yes [it would make a difference]. ... There's a lot of insecurities that I would no longer have or a lot of things I wouldn't have to watch anymore because I wasn't Black anymore, but I feel that I would change, just the way I looked at the world would change a lot. Like, it would have to.

Marie made the point very succinctly and directly: "Um, actually, I never had a race issue until I came down to [State]." Paul described his experiences with race in terms of the effect it had on his peer group relationships.

I found myself only hanging with Black people and dealing with theater people on a purely have to deal with basis. ... But my second and third year, and fourth year, I hung out mainly with the White people at the theater. They tend to be really cool, liberal, "everything's okay" type people. So, but as far as it creating a conflict, man, like sometimes, there's this going on [with the theater department] and then the AKAs [a Black sorority] might be having something, so I gotta choose which I'm going to, which

one I'm going to support, who I'm going to hang out with, um, because, I've tried to bring those two together, whew – it just doesn't work.

As a group, students at State readily discussed issues of race as significant factors of their educational environment and experiences. For them, issues of race and authenticity framed every interaction they had on campus. After speaking with these students, I inferred that beginning and maintaining relationships was not simply a matter of forming relationships and friendships, but also left one's racial identity open for interpretation and critique consistent with conclusions drawn by Willie (2003) and Tatum (2004).

In contrast, the students at Turner and Woodson, the HBCUs, were more likely to discuss race as framing the context in which their identity operated, not as a salient element of their identity. As Angela, a student at Turner commented, "Race, I'm not so sure. It's not really an issue being at an HBCU. ... Not how I see myself, per se, just how I function in life and my goals, they [race and gender] don't affect that. I love being a Black woman. It's never been a problem for me." The majority-Black student populations at Turner and Woodson presented an environment where race was not a distraction or occupied their energies.

The students at Turner and Woodson were able to reflect on other experiences and approached the idea of race and racism in different ways than exhibited in the interviews with the students at State. As Mignon at Woodson commented, "With me growing up in different places, it [race] doesn't really play a part. ... I can adapt to anything. It wouldn't play a big part, but it plays a little part because you notice it." She went on to express that her involvement in a Black Greek sorority did not cause her to put more emphasis on her gender either, "I'm still me basically," she said. Porkchop, also a Woodson student, spoke of "the race thing" in this manner, "Are you going to allow that to tear you down or are you going to allow that to be

another stepping stone to get you where you're going? So that's how I use it." Race was perceived as a social construction that could open or close opportunities based on how the individual responded to it.

### **Summary**

Consistent with findings from Willie (2003) and Tatum (2004), race and appropriate racial performances significantly shaped these students' experiences in college. They reported repeated encounters that challenged their internal definitions of what it meant to be Black and which they used to shape their future aspirations and expectations. None of the students reported that these experiences hindered their development or contributed to an overall negative appraisal of their college experiences or identity. Yet, several clearly conveyed their frustrations with having to defend their identity performances as appropriate, relevant, and authentically Black, particularly with having to do so within their Black student communities. The role of this kind of internal pressure on racial identity negotiation was also discussed by Harris and Khanna (2010) and reflects the racial socialization processes discussed by Taylor (2004). Moreover, the particular challenges faced by the Black women in this study, reflect the need for an intersectional approach to how identity is socialized within Black youth communities (hooks, 1990; Collins, 2000). Black racial performances and expectations for those performances were visible elements of these colleges' cultural production as experienced by these Black students.

### **Discussion**

This study adds further support to Willie's (2003) findings regarding Blackness and identity performance for Black students at Northwestern and Howard universities. For the students at State, Turner, and Woodson, racial identity was enacted through behaviors, mannerisms, and vocal inflections similar to Willie's students. The racial performances of the

students in this study were not fixed but situational, nor were they unconsciously adopted but rather deliberately chosen. This supports the literature regarding identity and performance across both race and gender studies (Butler, 1991; Harris & Khanna, 2010; Phelan, 1993; Tatum, 2004).

These performances were delivered for the benefit of multiple audiences: Black peers on campus and White society, although the internal audience was more directly felt and engaged. The effect of audience on identity performance has not been significantly explored in the literature in this way, other than work by Harris and Khanna (2010) which also found that internal community pressures to conform to an authentic Blackness were keenly felt by biracial individuals and middle-class Blacks. Fine (1997) discussed the need for majority group members to repeat racialized performances to confirm their social group membership. Other writers (Rich, 1980; Wittig, 1993) have focused on how performances by minoritized group members are judged by dominant groups.

However, for the students in this study, the relationship between identity performance and audience seemed more complex and more intimate. As found by Harris and Khanna (2010) and Willie (2003), the influence and regulation of identity performances by other minoritized peers seemed a more significant hurdle to negotiate than the presumed judgment of dominant group observers. Even for those students who also scripted their racial performances to appease the presumed preferences of a dominant White society, it was the pressure exerted by their Black peers that elicited greater conflict and frustration. Explanations for this intra-group regulation and pressure that denied the authenticity of others' racial identity based on judgments of their racial performance were not frequently discussed in the literature reviewed for this study. Defining the nature of social groups in oppressive societies can help with understanding

repression exacted by members of a group upon other members of that same group (Goodman, 2001).

Young (1990) defined social groups as collections of people “fundamentally intertwined with the identities of the people described as belonging to them” (p. 25). Young called social groups a “specific kind of collectivity with specific consequences for how people understand themselves and each other” (p. 25). Members of a social group share a sense of identity based on shared social status, a common history based on that shared status, and self-identify as members of the group. Social groups, according to Young, are “forms of social relations,” constituting an individual’s sense of historical place, as well as even that person’s “mode of reasoning, evaluation, and expressing feeling” (p. 26). This does not mean that individuals do not express ideas and behaviors that differ from other members within the social group. Young, drawing upon Habermas, asserted that individual identity is a product of socialization, not the origin of it. Identity is defined by others in terms of social groups that are already associated with “specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms” (Young, 1990, p. 27).

This understanding of social groups explains how the Black students in this study recognized their racial performances as non-normative for the social group, setting them apart from other Black students. Yet, why their Black peers would not accept this heterogeneity as authentic and legitimate remains unresolved, although closer investigation of the role and effect of hip-hop youth cultural identities (Alim, 2003, 2009) may shed some light. Alim’s scholarship has focused on local urban street culture, but these findings may reflect the matriculation of those street cultures and attendant hip-hop racial discourses to the college campus.

I believe that deeper understanding of this phenomenon requires a theory of internalized oppression. Goodman (2001) defined internalized oppression as “the belief in [one’s] own

inferiority [which] undermines [one's] self-esteem, sense of empowerment, and intragroup solidarity" (p. 15). Internalized oppression functions as a key tool of hegemony and privilege by enforcing dominant cultural norms and muffling resistance among oppressed social groups without the need to engage in tyrannical power exercises. Therefore, internalized oppression is a byproduct of an institution's cultural production and reproduction of hierarchies of privilege and marginalization as discussed by Levinson and Holland (1996) and Luttrell (1996).

Intragroup solidarity is inherently unstable, according to Young (1990), because social groups also reflect the heterogeneity that exists in the general society. Therefore, there is no monolithic expression across members of social groups, yet the social group membership partly shapes individual identity. Non-conforming racial performances are seen as mimicry of dominant cultural norms (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Willie, 2003) because such performances are perceived as rejecting identification with the social group in a particular context. The college and university settings at State, Turner, and Woodson re/produced Black social groups whose identities were partly characterized by the unexamined adoption of behavioral stereotypes reflecting inferiority and internalized oppression. For example, demarcating "the 'hood" as Black and the suburbs as non-Black reflects internalized oppression that regards poverty as an essential aspect of Black cultural expression (possibly reflecting Alim, 2003 and 2009 as well). Consequently, Black students who defied stereotypical expressions of Blackness were deemed "non-Black" (Willie, 2003) and subject to critique and ostracism (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Tatum, 2004) in response to their perceived anti-group rebellion.

These findings change the way racial identity has been viewed theoretically in the higher education and student development literature. Previously, identity has been understood primarily through a psychological lens that portrays it foremost as an internal construct. Although

responsive to external factors, growth and development is reflected by eventually articulating a meaningful identity for oneself free of external expectations (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Sellers et al., 1998). Instead, as depicted in Figure 1, racial identity among Black college students is a socialization process constricted by internalized racism to produce multiple performances of a scripted racial identity that are both object and subject to the individual's core identity definitions. This is the view of racial identity advanced through sociological understandings of identity (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Taylor, 2004; Willie, 2003). These students did not wholly adopt a rejection of White identity and presumed whiteness while uncritically adopting an afrocentric Black cultural display as characterized in the emersion-immersion stage in Cross and Fhagen-Smith's model (2001). The multidimensional model of racial identity (Sellers et al., 1998) is subsumed in the face of powerful racial socialization. Certain mannerisms, musical preferences, ways of speaking and enunciating words, and forms of dress and hairstyles were considered to be either Black or non-Black, but not necessarily therefore White, because each performance was judged to emerge out of their core identity. For the students, their own performances, although judged to be more or less authentic by others, were not perceived in this way as they made meaning of their identities. For instance, David was not being *inauthentic* when he listened only to the R&B stations when his girlfriend was in the car, neither was he being *more* authentic when he allowed himself to listen to country music while in the car alone. Both performances were authentic reflections of his core spiritual identities as discussed in earlier findings (Stewart, 2009); they were at all times portraying some genuine aspect of their racial identities. The use of multiple racial performances allowed them to maintain valued relationships with Black peers, while protecting other aspects of self from unwarranted criticism. These multiple racial performances also represented a form of resistance

to the cultural re/production of privilege and internalized oppression within the context of their institutionally-specific student communities. This may be reflective of perhaps a different type of code-switching than commonly seen in the literature related to Black people, which demonstrates the ways that Blacks systematically and consciously adapt their speech and mannerisms to be palatable to middle-class, White norms (DeBose, 2010).

[Insert figure 1 about here.]

As seen in the figure, the non-unitary spiritual core (Stewart, 2009), is located within a process of racial socialization that ascribes blackness to the performance of particular mannerisms, forms of speech, and cultural displays perceived both within and outside the Black social group to be appropriate and expected for Black people (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Tatum, 2004; Young, 1990). Emerging from either side of this racial socialization are racial scripts suitable for performance in front of the community circle of a Black peer group audience on campus (to the left) or before the White peer group and larger White society (to the right). For students at State, a larger community circle of White peers surrounds the Black peer group community; this does not exist for the students at Turner and Woodson. The findings of this study situate racial socialization and racial performances as the context in which identity development and meaning making occur.

Interestingly, other racially minoritized students did not figure in these students' discussions of race and racial performances. At Turner and Woodson, this is likely due to the very small population of non-Black students that were enrolled at either institution. At State, this may reflect their occupation with being Black in a specifically predominantly White context, without acknowledging any solidarity with other racially minoritized students on campus.

### **Recommendations**



These findings suggest several implications for research and practice. Researchers studying identity development and college contexts should continue to study how individuals perform certain aspects of their identity and how social groups operate within and across different settings. Relatedly, study of the influence of environment on identity is also necessary given these data that show identity and identity performances are shaped and constrained by peer relationships as discussed also by Renn (2004). Additionally, this study lends further support to the different ways that predominantly White and historically Black colleges may differentially shape Black students' experiences in college as first articulated by Fleming (1984).

Another avenue of future research involves the role of generational influences in shaping the lives and self-images of young adults in college, and Black youth in particular. Samy Alim (2009) has written cogently about the development of Hip-Hop Nation Language (HHNL) and its communication of a "street-conscious identity" (Alim, 2003) meant to celebrate and uplift urbanicity as a positive trait of the Black community. The extent to which HHNL informs Black youth discourses in colleges located in rural areas and how it communicates ideas about identity and authenticity through the use of critical discourse analysis would be of great interest in future research. Moreover, research on code-switching as a tool of racial performance *within* Black communities, as well as in front of White audiences, would expand understanding of the ways in which identity is malleable and dynamic and through which individuals exercise social agency.

This study also yields important implications for college and university staff. To help students recognize and combat internalized oppression, student affairs professionals should engage students individually and in groups in discussions about identity performance and social oppression. Such dialogue can reveal internally oppressive tacit assumptions making it possible for students to challenge those assumptions and redefine individual and communal identities in

ways that honor racial heterogeneity rather than seek to suppress it. Secondly, the findings for these students also revealed the participants' perceptions of how they should behave in their campus environments wrought by racial pressure internal to the Black communities on those campuses. Higher education administrators can more effectively address these issues by directly assessing campus racial climates through the framework proposed by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1998) and updated by Chang, Milem, and Antonio (2011), which includes studying relationships *within* racial groups, not just between racial groups. Educational programs that include multiple voices of racially minoritized students may also serve to challenge the internalized oppression that leads to critical judgments of one's own and other students' identity performances.

### **Limitations**

Thirteen students participated in this study, which may be seen as a limitation inhibiting transferability of these findings. Data saturation is the primary criterion for determining when an adequate number of participants have been recruited into a qualitative study (Patton 2002). Using Patton's (2002) interpretation of data saturation, I determined that I had achieved a reasonable level of data saturation after reviewing transcripts and noting the repetition of similar ideas and themes across the participants. The data across participants were overlapping and disconfirming data were minimal. Although data saturation was achieved in this study, a larger study sample with more participants from each institution would have allowed for deeper analysis of how pervasive and prevalent these students' insights and interpretations about their experiences were across more of the total Black student population on each campus. Future research into the influence of campus environments and peer relationships may benefit from such analysis.

### **Conclusion**

This study used a critical constructivist paradigm to explore the ways in which Black student communities co-constructed Black racial identity and socialized community members regarding racial identity performance norms and expectations. These findings demonstrated that certain beliefs, behaviors, and mannerisms reflected racial performances subject to evaluations and critiques informed by internalized oppression. These critiques also prompted some anxieties revealed by some of the women in the study, illustrating the intersection of race and gender in the embodiment of racial performances. Finally, the predominantly White campus environment at State precipitated an occupation with race that was not articulated by the students at the HBCUs. Race preoccupied the attention of the students at State, while those at Turner and Woodson were able to articulate greater agency in the face of an acknowledged racist social hierarchy. These findings confirm the use of a multifaceted, sociological approach to racial identity, inclusive of racial performance. They also support and extend scholarship on racial identity and the role of student communities as sites of cultural production and identity socialization in the production and negotiation of race and identity in the lives of college students.

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Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Duane	State University	Junior	Man
Marie	State University	Junior	Woman
Paul	State University	Senior	Man
Regina	State University	Junior	Woman
Angela	Turner College	Junior	Woman
Christion	Turner College	Junior	Man
Tiffany	Turner College	Junior	Woman
Bob	Woodson University	Junior	Man
Carol	Woodson University	Senior	Woman
David	Woodson University	Senior	Man
Jasmine	Woodson University	Senior	Woman
Mignon	Woodson University	Senior	Woman
Porkchop	Woodson University	Senior	Woman

**List of Figures**

Figure 1. *Model of Interaction of Socialization and Performance in Black Racial Identity*