

Moving Beyond Black Education Spaces: The Five Dimensions of Affirmation in Black Trans Education Spaces in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted dimensions of Black Trans Education Spaces (BTES) within higher education, highlighting the unique experiences, challenges, and transformative potential of these spaces for Black transgender students. This article acknowledges that Black education spaces may perpetuate trans-antagonism due to a lack of awareness, understanding, or intentional inclusivity. Drawing from narratives of 20 Black transgender students both currently and formerly enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, this research investigates the existence of BTES both within and outside traditional educational structures. Findings indicate five dimensions of BTES: community determination, community actualization, community efficacy, community sustainability, and community reliance. These dimensions encompass the empowerment, identity affirmation, and collective support that Black transgender students derive from BTES. The narratives reveal the capacity of BTES in meeting the basic needs of Black transgender students, providing and sustaining spaces for retreat and empowerment, and nurturing communities of care. The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and honoring BTES, fostering greater solidarity, and addressing intersecting oppressions. While BTES play a crucial role in supporting these students, broader inclusivity and understanding are needed in all educational spaces to ensure that all Black transgender individuals can thrive within higher education.

Keywords: Black Trans Education Spaces, higher education, LGBTQ, transgender, campus climate

Warren and Coles (2020) proposed a conceptual framework known as Black Education Spaces (BES), which encompasses both physical locations within or adjacent to educational institutions and cultural elements aimed to foster a nurturing and humanizing environment for Black students, where their presence is acknowledged and celebrated (p. 2). BES is designed to uplift and support Black students and educators. BES function as fugitive spaces where Black individuals can see and embrace one another while offering a reprieve from the anti-Black world, serving as counterspaces (Warren & Coles, 2020). However, despite the overarching goal of promoting inclusivity and affirmation within Black education spaces, there are instances where these spaces can unintentionally perpetuate trans-antagonism. Trans-antagonism encompasses hostile, discriminatory, or exclusionary behaviors directed towards transgender individuals. For instance, research uncovered the role of respectability politics in the ongoing marginalization, isolation, and harassment experienced by Black LGBTQ students at often considered BES, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Njoku & Beatty, 2017; Patton, 2014; Patton & Simmons, 2008).

Respectability politics involves the expectation of projecting one's best Black self which enforces strict boundaries of acceptable gender presentations, sexual orientations, and conformity (Gray, 2016; Njoku & Beatty, 2017). For Black transgender students, this may entail adhering to cis-heteronormative or hegemonic relationship structures, gender expressions, and sexual practices. Such rigid boundaries create conflicts and dynamics within the broader Black community, further marginalizing those who do not conform to cisheteronormative respectable Blackness (Patton, 2014; Patton & Simmons, 2008). Upholding respectability politics can force Black transgender individuals to suppress their outward affirming gender presentation to appease the larger Black community on campus, thereby contributing to the trans-antagonistic nature of BES. This can result in a lack of recognition, validation, and support for Black transgender students and educators within these spaces.

While BES may play a pivotal role in supporting Black transgender students, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of BES and the challenges Black transgender students may face. For instance, the need for Black transgender students to strategically navigate or sometimes conceal their identities within non-Black transgender communities highlights the imperative for broader inclusivity and understanding across all educational spaces (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b; Squire & Mobley Jr., 2015). It is crucial to recognize, honor, and sustain Black Transgender Education Spaces (BTES), foster greater solidarity, and address the intersecting oppressions faced by Black transgender students. Therefore, this article is guided by the following questions:

- What are the key dynamics, characteristics, and effectiveness of Black transgender education spaces in higher education?
- How do Black transgender education spaces contribute to the well-being, academic success, sense of belonging, and community for Black transgender students?

Building upon the foundation of BES, this article examines pertinent literature on campus climate research, specifically focused on Black transgender students, and utilizes anti-Black transness framework to explore the need to recognize and celebrate BTES. The findings gleaned from the narratives collected by Black transgender students prove the existence of BTES and their dimensions in higher education. BTES are found to persist among Black transgender student communities both within and beyond the conventional structures of education, irrespective of formal educators, and even in the absence of physical locations. These spaces effectively contribute to addressing the basic needs of Black transgender students, preserving a shared sense of identity, providing refuges of empowerment, and cultivating communities of care.

Black Transgender Student Experience in Higher Education

Black transgender students' experiences within higher education are characterized by a myriad of challenges they encounter while navigating campus climate. Research has emphasized the violent, exclusionary, and isolating nature of the campus climate for transgender students (Bilodeau, 2005; Blockett, 2017; Evans, 2000; Gomez, 1999; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Renn, 2010; Seelman, 2014). While extant literature provided insights into experiences transgender students' have encountered, studies often overlooked the intersectionality of race and transness in comprehending the unique challenges faced by Black transgender students.

Black transgender students have encountered specific adversities that arise from the confluence of their racial and gender identities, warranting a more nuanced examination (Garvey et al., 2019; Jones, 2020; Jourian, 2017; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Simms et al., 2023; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). For instance, visibility or outness, a measure of a community's awareness of a student's gender or sexual orientation, holds different implications for Black transgender students as compared to their White counterparts (Garvey et al., 2019). The intersectionality of racial and gender marginalization compelled Black transgender students to navigate a sense of *coming in*, adapting their identities in response to external influences to protect themselves (Garvey et al., 2019; Patton & Simmons, 2008). Consequently, visibility for Black transgender students exposed them to increased encounters with violence, harassment, and exclusion, hampering their access to campus resources and support communities (Nicolazzo, 2016b). These challenges were further compounded by the embedded structures of whiteness that grounded the policies and practices of higher education institutions, perpetuating the exclusion of Black transgender

students from fully belonging to the campus community (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

Whiteness further contributed to the perpetuation of transnormativity in higher education spaces, limiting Black transgender students' ability to engage authentically in campus community (Glover, 2016; Johnson, 2016). Transnormativity is characterized by the adherence to respectability politics, lifestyle standards deemed acceptable to heterosexual guidelines, whiteness, and class privilege (Glover, 2016). Transnormativity, a phenomenon favoring white transgender experiences, emerged as another critical element contributing to the marginalization of Black transgender students (Glover, 2016; Jackson, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2016b). Discourses perpetuated by transnormative ideologies situate White transgender people as the right kind of transgender person (Jackson, 2021) and make medical transitions the main component of transness (Johnson, 2016). The dominance of transnormative discourses within LGBTQ spaces in higher education resulted in the isolation of Black transgender students, constraining their access to crucial support services, resources, and community on campus (Nicolazzo, 2016b). To cope with isolation due to the perpetuation of transnormativity in LGBTQ spaces in higher education Black transgender students adopted disidentification as a survival strategy to navigate the anti-Black transgender higher education setting (Jones, 2020). Disidentification describes the process by which individuals position themselves in relation to, and often in opposition to, the prevailing narratives they are encouraged to align with (Muñoz, 1999). Students used disidentification to maneuver beyond the boundaries of the institution, albeit unnoticed and often unacknowledged, generating community connections and survival strategies to thrive in an environment fraught with exclusion and vulnerability.

Given the multifaceted challenges faced by Black transgender students and the limitations of existing research, it becomes crucial to frame Black transgender students' experiences in an understanding of pervasive anti-Black transness. To grasp the essence of anti-Black transness, it is imperative to acknowledge that anti-Blackness constitutes an inherent and structural element of both historical and contemporary global societies (Vargas, 2018). Anti-Blackness yields discrimination, violence, and premature social and physiological death while shaping the economic, educational, psychological, health, and judicial disparities for Black people (Sharpe, 2016). Within the overarching anti-Black climate, Black transgender individuals experience the complex interplay of gender, race, and sexuality in shaping economic, educational, psychological, health, and judicial disparities impacting their community. For example, Black transgender people reported living in extreme poverty with 40% of the respondents reporting an income of less than \$24,000 per year (Choi et al., 2021), this is about three times greater than the general Black population poverty rate of 17.4% (Statista Research Dept., 2022). In this same study, 49% of Black transgender respondents reported that they had been discriminated against in their

school or place of work due to their race and gender. Black transgender participants in the sample also reported that their overall health was fair or poor (Choi et al., 2021). It was reported that one in two Black transgender individuals have experienced incarceration, compared to one in six among transgender individuals at large, demonstrating the heightened vulnerability of Black transgender people to both legal and extra-legal forms of policing (Frazer et al., 2023). Black transgender women have also been found to be overrepresented in the mortality rates of LGBTQ populations in the United States (Frazer et al., 2023). Higher education research findings that Black transgender experienced isolation, exclusion, vulnerability, harassment, and identity negotiations also emphasized the unique anti-Black transness they encounter.

Understanding how Black transgender students experience this distinct form of anti-Blackness in higher education is essential. It is through this understanding that we can unveil the vital role of anti-Black transness plays in sustaining formidable barriers to the retention, success, and overall campus experience of Black transgender students (Garvey et al., 2019; Jones, 2020; Jourian, 2017; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Simms et al., 2023; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Reframing Black transgender students' experiences within an understanding of anti-Black transness moves beyond the repetitive discourse concerning the dissonance between the needs of Black transgender student communities and their actual experiences in schools (Grant et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2021).

Critical Narrative Inquiry

Critical narrative inquiry approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics and qualities of BTES within higher education institutions. This design enabled the collection and analysis of personal narratives and experiences, illuminating the lived realities of Black transgender students in higher education. Critical narrative inquiry, employing methods such as interviews (Clandinin et al., 2006; Saldaña, 2013), rigorously examines data to identify patterns and themes, exploring their connection to larger social structures and power dynamics (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). This methodology is particularly useful for exploring the experiences of marginalized communities such as Black transgender students in higher education, who may have limited opportunities to tell their stories and have their experiences externally validated.

Ethical approval from the institutional review board (IRB) was obtained before the collection and analysis of 20 narratives from Black transgender students' currently or formerly enrolled in a higher education institution in the United States. Narratives focused on Black transgender students' interactions with administrators, faculty, peers, the campus community, and the surrounding city. Self-identified Black transgender students formerly or currently enrolled in a 4-year college or university in the United States were eligible to participate in a 60-90 minute long Zoom interview (See Table 1 for participant demographics).

Before interviews were conducted, participants were provided pseudonyms to align with the IRB confidentiality policy. Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball (Bailey, 2007) and purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Three topical areas were covered in the interview protocol: 1) Black Trans Identity Construction and Exploration, 2) Experience with Peers and Institutional Actors (admin, staff, faculty), and 3) Campus and Community Engagement. Narrative coding methods were used to analyze the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). To analyze data, codes were defined from the interview protocol. These codes represented larger categories that were guaranteed to arise in the data. All codes were organized and descriptively defined in the codebook developed in Dedoose. Coding schemes were then applied to the narratives using the codebook as a reference. Relevant sections of text were marked with the appropriate code labels. After applying the initial codes from the interview protocol, codes were refined using the Black Education Spaces dimensions as a guide, and again applied the appropriate code labels to the text. This was an iterative process that resulted in 33 defined codes and 282 distinct excerpts from participant interviews. From the 282 distinct excerpts of participant interviews five dimensions of Black Transgender Educations Spaces were found: Community Determination, Community Actualization, Community Efficacy, Community Sustainability, Community Reliance.

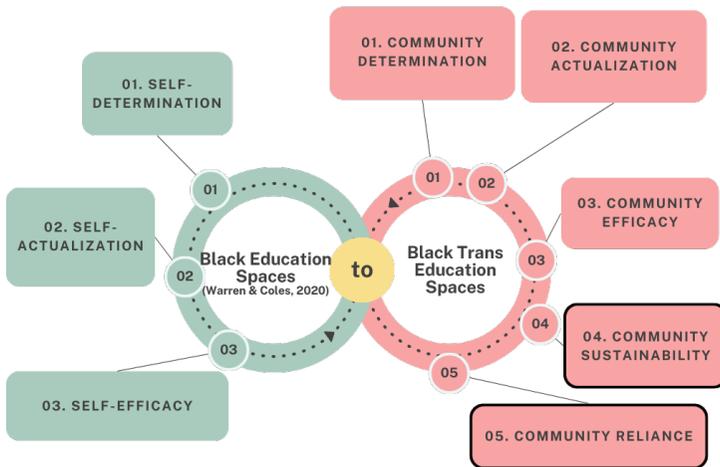
Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | Pronouns | Gender | Enrollment Status |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Dream | They/them | Trans Masculine | Enrolled |
| Magik | He/they | Nonbinary | Graduated |
| Radiance | He/they/she | Two Spirit | Enrolled |
| Matisse | They/them | Gender Diverse | Enrolled |
| Tatum | He/they | Trans Masculine | Enrolled |
| Vision | They/them | Gender Fluid | Enrolled |
| Saint | She/they | Trans Woman | Enrolled |
| Wonder | He/him | Trans Man | Enrolled |
| Riri | They/them | Nonbinary | Enrolled |
| Lavender | They/them | Nonbinary | Graduated |
| Brixton | They/them | Nonbinary | Enrolled |
| Bentley | They/them | Nonbinary | Enrolled |
| Tayo | They/them | Nonbinary | Graduated |
| Monique | She/her/hers | Trans Woman | Enrolled |
| Rome | He/him/his | Trans Man | Graduated |
| Jelani | They/he | Nonbinary | Graduated |
| Bliss | Ze/zir/zirs | Transgender | Graduated |
| Kai | E/em/eir | Genderqueer | Graduated |
| Remi | He/him/his | Trans Man | Graduated |
| Lex | She/they | Nonbinary | Enrolled |

Black Transgender Education Spaces: Centralizing Community in Discussion of Self

Warren and Coles (2020) discuss the importance of creating educational spaces that empower youth and promote their agency centralizing the need for Black youth to have full control and autonomy over their educational pursuits. The dimensions of Black Education Spaces focus on the self-determination, self-actualization, and self-efficacy of Black youth. However, according to the narratives, Black transgender students prioritize their community in their advocacy, discussions of identity, space, placemaking, and their resilience in higher education. To remain true to these findings, the discussion will shift from the focus of “self” to “community” in the discussion of BTES (See Figure 1 for visual of BTS vs. BTES). This shift highlights the central role “community” plays in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of Black transgender students and emphasizes the need for inclusive and supportive educational environments that acknowledge and celebrate their unique perspectives in higher education. This shift, underscoring the significance of community and identity among Black transgender students, sets the stage for the subsequent discussion, where the findings are structured into five dimensions of Black Transgender Education Spaces: Community Determination, Community Actualization, Community Efficacy, Community Sustainability, Community Reliance.

Figure 1. Black Education Spaces vs. Black Trans Education Spaces



Community Determination

Community determination can be defined as the collective power, agency, and decision-making capacity that the Black transgender community

possesses to shape and influence their own educational experiences, curriculum, policies, and support systems. It reflects the ability of Black transgender students, as a group, to assert their needs, goals, and values within educational environments, thereby playing an active role in crafting inclusive and supportive spaces that cater to their unique perspectives and aspirations. Community determination involves Black transgender students' desire for collaboration, advocacy, and shared responsibility amongst themselves, educators, and accomplices to ensure that educational spaces are responsive to their specific needs and promote their overall well-being and resilience. When describing zirs experience in student housing, Bliss (ze/zir/zirs) indicated being aware of being the only Black transgender student in student housing. This awareness shifted the ways Bliss viewed the institution and encouraged Bliss to "make something out of nothing" serving as a catalyst for zirs advocacy efforts:

I was the only black trans person. There were other black people but they were all cis and so I think in the sense of how I view the institution...I think it was like, "I know that I don't have anything but like, how can I make something out of nothing?"

Bliss's determination to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black transgender students campuswide led Bliss to adopt a philosophy of looking out for others, driven by the aspiration to prevent fellow Black transgender students from enduring the same challenges ze had faced:

I took on the philosophy of I don't want anyone else to experience what I've experienced here, and so for me, I realize that there's a lot of emotional labor that I did, and like a lot of harm that I had experienced. But I put that into my activism.

As a result of zirs unwavering commitment to the cause, Bliss emerged as a prominent student leader on campus. Bliss' peers and community members sought zirs guidance and support in navigating the institution, highlighting the significant impact of Bliss's self-determination on the broader Black transgender student community. Bliss's journey exemplifies how self-determination within Black transgender education spaces can be a powerful force for change, as individuals like Bliss take it upon zirselves to create more inclusive and affirming educational environments for the Black transgender community.

This aligns with and expands the self-determination dimension of Black Education Spaces (Warren & Coles, 2020) which centers on the desire to defer authority of spaces to Black youth and emphasizes the importance of their imagination and agency. Bliss' story differs from Warren & Coles's (2020) self-determination, for example, a cisgender Black boy's self-determination journey may predominantly involve addressing racial disparities and navigating the educational system's challenges without the added layers of gender identity-related discrimination and violence. This difference highlights the critical role of expanding self-determination to community determination, where Bliss' experience provides understanding of how Black transgender students have

capacity to centralize their community in their advocacy, identity discussions, and resilience-building. Previous research in higher education shows that Black transgender students experience greater levels of isolation and reduction of agency and authority in spaces in higher education due to the intersection of their racial and gender identities (Garvey et al., 2019; Jones, 2020; Jourian, 2017; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Simms et al., 2023; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018), which always forces them to rely on their self and community-determination. Contrast to the Black cisgender youth considered in the conceptualization of Black Education Spaces, Black transgender students draw strength from collective efforts and community support in their pursuit of self-determination within educational spaces.

Community Actualization

Community actualization involves the commitment to creating spaces where Black transgender students fully express their unique identities and perspectives; where their diverse experiences and bold expressions of oneself are celebrated. Previous research in higher education shows that Black transgender students have already created spaces of their own where they centralize individuality and bold expression of themselves, where there remains room for unapologetically Black and transgender life, expression, and culture (Nicolazzo, 2016b; Simms et al., 2023). When discussing how they survived the COVID-19 pandemic, Matisse (they/them) gave credit to their Black transgender peers who formed a networking group that was committed to protecting and sustaining one another through quarantine. Matisse acknowledged that they felt held and supported by their Black transgender community where they were holistically taken care of and able to express their full humanity:

My really good friends, who are all Black, queer and trans or not cisgender, and just being able to go over and kick it with them in their apartment...Just to be in a place where it's like you don't have to have all of this figured out and just being so unapologetically ourselves and blasting like Black music being loud and smoking on the porch. It's very important when I feel safe in all aspects of my identity and ...I can talk about gay shit. I can talk about gender shit. Like anything kind of goes and I know that I'm not going to be judged or chat challenged in a way that makes me feel rejected.

Matisse's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a powerful illustration of community actualization within the context of BTES. Community actualization is manifested through Matisse's ability to fully express their authentic self and find a supportive and affirming community among their Black transgender peers. Within this peer group, Matisse felt a sense of belonging and safety, where they could be unapologetically themselves. They were able to discuss various aspects of their identity, including their gender, sexuality, and

culture, without fear of judgment or rejection. This environment allowed Matisse to express their full humanity and find affirmation in their identity.

For Warren and Coles (2020) the dimension of self-actualization is considered aspirational when they write, “Participants in BES ought to protect the capacity of every other participant’s earnest desire to realize the possibilities of what they can accomplish, or who they can become” (p. 9). For Black Education spaces, it is probable that participants will, “inspire individuality and bold, unique personal expression” (Warren & Coles, 2020, p.9). This is not good enough for Black transgender students who are seeking affirmative and holistically inclusive spaces in higher education. Matisse’s narrative challenges the notion that community actualization within BTES is merely aspirational, as suggested by Warren and Coles (2020). Instead, it demonstrates that Black transgender students are capable of creating spaces where they centralize individuality and bold self-expression, mirroring the ideal of inspiring unique personal expression described in the definition. These peer-created spaces have capacity to provide affirmation and inclusivity, allowing Black transgender students to thrive without compromising their identities.

Community Efficacy

To expand the dimension of self-efficacy in BES, Community efficacy is defined as the collective recognition, affirmation, and support that Black transgender students offer to each other, ultimately fostering a sense of empowerment and belonging within their community. Self-Efficacy within Black Education Spaces is the fostering of confidence and the belief that an individual can overcome challenges to achieve their desired outcomes (Warren & Coles, 2020). Whereas Community efficacy is where Black transgender have capacity to collectively believe in their abilities to effect change amongst themselves but also within their broader communities. In the context of BTES, community efficacy recognizes that Black transgender students draw strength not only from their own self-belief but also from their supportive and affirming communities. This collective sense of efficacy extends beyond academic success and includes advocacy, activism, and community-building efforts.

Before coming out to herself and to others, Monique (she/her/hers) talked about her experience attending a freshman preview event where her now Drag mother, recognized her transness before she recognized it in herself. This recognition made Monique want to explore more of her gender identity. After building a large community of Black transgender people, Monique began to perform in Drag:

I performed in drag like 2 years later. It was a drag show and one of the local Drag queens from my hometown, a beautiful Black trans woman, my drag mother, performing. She saw me and had connections like “oh somebody else Black”. And then we talk a bit after the show and she did the thing that trans women love to do to each other which was

[ask], "So when you getting your stuff together? What's your timeline?" And she's like, "Okay, you just let me know. I'll keep up with you. We'll see where you are... You hang around these kids a little bit longer. We'll see. We'll see what's going on."... and then realized, "oh, I see what she meant. Okay, here we go." There was a destiny that she can see for me that just again took some time for me to have my own experiences and then see what she meant.

This recognition played a pivotal role in Monique's journey of self-discovery and eventual involvement in Drag performances. This narrative reflects how Black transgender individuals within the community can inspire and guide each other, contributing to a shared sense of empowerment and identity affirmation.

Similarly, Lex's (She/they) encounter with a Black transgender person at their college's LGBTQ resource center highlights the community's ability to spot and acknowledge each other's transgender identities:

Once I got to college...it was great cause there's always like a fall welcome for undergraduates and I remember going to the LGBTQ resource center and they had like a fall welcome barbecue and [redacted] was there at the same time as me, a big trans activist now, and she was like the first Black trans person I met in person and saw and she also like pointed me out of the crowd which was kind of nice and I think she could tell almost before I was like open about my queerness or genderness.

This recognition occurred even before Lex openly embraced their own queerness and gender identity. It underscores how the BTES community actively supports and uplifts its members, contributing to their self-actualization and empowerment. Radiance's (He/they/she) experience at a fellowship dinner further exemplifies community efficacy. When Radiance chose to embrace their true self and wear an outfit that felt authentic, other Black transgender individuals at the event immediately recognized and celebrated Radiance's expression. This instant affirmation and support from Radiance's peers within the community demonstrate how the collective recognition of shared experiences fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among Black transgender students:

I got a fellowship to go here, so I was invited to a dinner. It's a very fancy dinner and the entire time I was like, "Oh, my gosh! I feel so uncomfortable. I don't know what I'm gonna do". And I remember going to the store and looking like this is the perfect outfit of how people want me to look. But this is not who I am at all. This doesn't feel comfortable, so I went back home. and I'm like, "Well, I'm just going to wear exactly what I want and I'm not gonna care what people think." So I dress in a way that would be more traditionally feminine with my long hair and my heels, and even like a skirt. And I felt extremely uncomfortable walking out the door going to the event but when I got to the event, I didn't realize there were majority Black people there. So it was a diversity

scholarship dinner which I didn't know about and there were other trans people there and so the second I walked in before I turned the corner to the event there were like 6 like Black trans people that were hollering. They're like, "Oh, my God! You're wearing those heels. You look so good in this outfit".

Black transgender students like Monique, Lex, and Radiance, within BTES are not only confident in their abilities but also in their community's ability to create positive change and challenge systemic inequalities and social norms. The community efficacy dimension within BTES emphasizes the interdependence of individual and community empowerment, where the collective strength and belief in their ability to effect change become a driving force for personal and communal growth, resilience, and liberation. This dimension underscores the role of BTES in cultivating a shared sense of efficacy that goes beyond self-actualization and contributes to broader community well-being and empowerment.

Community Sustainability

Community sustainability, in the context of BTES, involves the ability of Black transgender students to create and maintain spaces and support networks that not only meet their immediate needs but also ensure the continuation and thriving of these spaces for future generations of Black transgender learners. When reflecting on their experiences while in college, Riri (they/them), recognized how much of an impact that Black transgender communities have had on them and made sure they were able to move through tough times such as the election of 45. Within their Black transgender community while in college, Riri discusses how they learn coping strategies through their peer group which enabled them to survive the institution:

Cooking really damn good food, feeding each other, and finding a way to make the university pay for it. Even all of our coping strategies...are a skill set in a way of like, "how do we just get ourselves through day to day? What do we need to do to feel okay?" ...I think we had a real kind of attunement to one another's needs and emotional experiences and being able to kinda like see each other and be there for each other in these ways. Just like having the kinds of conversations that I would never even have with my therapist.

Riri's account highlights how coping strategies and mutual support within the Black transgender community are not only practical tools for surviving tough times but also a form of communal knowledge and care. The skills and strategies developed within the community serve as a collective resource that contributes to the well-being and resilience of its members. This shared knowledge and sense of mutual care demonstrate how Black transgender students actively work together to sustain their community and empower each other.

Riri continued in their efforts of giving credit to the Black transgender community that sustained them throughout their academic journey:

I'm unendingly grateful for having those spaces, particularly BlackOUT. And that being a weekly space. That was also an everyday space cause we were normally just hanging out. But then, there was also this structure to being there together on Tuesdays and having a ritual of that together, where we would check in and talk about what was going on in our lives and a lot of things that kind of bubble up that we didn't necessarily talk about outside of that [space].

The reference to BlackOUT, a student organization that supports Black LGBTQ students, exemplifies community sustainability within BTES. BlackOUT serves as a reliable and accessible space for Black transgender students, providing not only emotional support but also addressing their basic needs, such as privacy and a sense of belonging. This organization's existence and its impact on students like Riri underscore the importance of creating and maintaining spaces within higher education that cater to the unique experiences and identities of Black transgender students.

Tayo's (they/them) emphasis on the long-term viability and impact of the organization further reinforces the concept of community sustainability. They stress the importance of providing ongoing support, especially during critical times like holidays when students may need a safe and affirming space. The commitment to nurturing and expanding such organizations ensures that future generations of Black transgender students will have access to these essential resources:

We were a small but mighty group, and I think it was a necessary space to have on campus because there were a lot of issues. I felt within [redacted] where our presence was neglected and so we had to do a lot of advocating, for black, queer, especially, black trans experiences and voices paved the way... I will say, that having [the organization] there, above all else, was important because it brought community. It brought folks who were like me, who didn't know what to do, or how to navigate...once they went back home right. They don't know how to navigate, gender and sexuality with parents who might not be as accepting. And so we knew that when they would come back here this was their home, this is a place where they can be. And I wanted to kind of reflect that every single time we had a meeting and that was always my motivation when I transitioned from being a member to the director of the org for 3 years. And now it's just taken off so much so I see a lot of longevity because there's so much care. And a mutual understanding that there are no other safe spaces on that campus for Black queer and trans folks.

Education Spaces for Black transgender students go beyond the three dimensions introduced by Warren and Coles (2020) to include community

sustainability. Community sustainability within BTES refers to the ongoing commitment and practices amongst Black transgender communities in higher education that create and maintain social and educational environments that not only address the current needs and aspirations of Black transgender students but also ensure that these spaces remain affirming, inclusive, supportive for future generations of Black transgender learners. The emphasis of community sustainability remains on cultivating a sense of continuity, resilience, and empowerment within the BTES community, all while safeguarding the capacity of future Black transgender students and their accomplices to access the resources and affirming spaces they require to thrive. Community sustainability in BTES thus seeks to balance the present well-being and self-actualization of Black transgender students with the imperative of preserving and enhancing these vital educational spaces for generations to come.

Community Reliance

Community sustainability brings me to the fifth dimension of BTES, community reliance. Community reliance within BTES is the mutual interdependence and trust among Black transgender students and their broader community, both within and outside educational institutions. This dimension of BTES encompasses the understanding that individuals within the BTES can rely on each other for various forms of support, including emotional, academic, spiritual, and social support, as well as advocacy and empowerment. Previous research in higher education shows that Black transgender students build support networks also known as kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2016b; Pierre, 2022). Community reliance is the practices and functionality of/within kinship networks that sustain Black transgender students and underscores the value of the contributions of each member within the community and acknowledges the reliance on one another that becomes the source of their resilience.

Dream (they/them) described their participation in a Black Trans Torah study group composed of Black transgender Jewish individuals from their community outside of their educational institution:

I go to a Black Trans Torah study. So all black people, all trans people and we're all Jewish. And so there's a way that we have built this really interesting community. Some of us have converted. Some of us were born Jewish. We're all trans. And so this is a really lovely way that those experiences we get to engage with the text in a particular way. And I remember going to something....There was a Jewish History museum in town and I remember going to an event and meeting some people who were younger, more lefty in their understandings of Judaism and politics and anti-Zionism practices, and whatnot beliefs, I should say, and I was like cool you're gonna be my people and then over the last 4 years we've just gradually built like a space where we regularly have Shabbat dinners together.

Dream's Torah group represents a community of care where Black transgender community can explore and embrace their spiritual and gender identities in a supportive and inclusive way. By coming together, sharing experiences, and engaging with religious texts, they have created a space where their unique intersectional identities are not only acknowledged but celebrated. This community reliance enables members to find understanding and support that may be lacking in other spaces.

Similarly, Bentley's (they/them) desire to share their home space with other Black transgender people and engage in everyday activities like drinking water and hanging out reflects the concept of community reliance:

If on a day I can drink water and hang out with my people, It's a good day. And I think that says a lot about how little that is. I think that says a lot about how massively neglected we are as a people.

Bentley's reflection underscores the need for spaces within and outside of education where Black transgender people can simply be themselves, engage in mundane activities, and find solace and support in the presence of like-minded peers. This kind of community reliance highlights the importance of creating informal, non-institutional spaces where individuals can connect, find comfort, and build relationships based on shared experiences.

Implications and Conclusion

The article offers compelling evidence of the existence of BTES within higher education spaces, centralizing the importance of community in conversations surrounding the retention, well-being, and identity development of Black transgender student communities. Each dimension of BTES carries a specific implication for research, policy, society/culture, and practice within higher education. First, the article raises important questions for future research, specifically in terms of in-depth examinations of each dimension—such as community efficacy, community sustainability, and community reliance—as its own framework for exploration, to uncover their unique contributions to BTES. Second, the evidence presented underscores the need for policy adjustments, particularly surrounding the treatment of Black transgender students in the outreach, retention, and institutional resources provided to the community. Third, the cultural ramifications of the findings cannot be overstated, pointing towards a need for societal and institutional shift in how we view the importance of community for Black transgender students. Lastly, the study not only contributes to our theoretical understanding of BTES but also has direct implications for student affairs, including identity specific programming, budget allocations, and community outreach. The dimensions of BTES, when prioritized by higher education institutions and their stakeholders, can lead to more welcoming, supportive, and diverse educational environments that benefit the entire campus community. By presenting compelling evidence of Black transgender students actively participating in the five dimensions within their educational

environments, dismantles the notion that holistically inclusive and supportive educational spaces are merely aspirational ideals.

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