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Sistas in Sisterhood:
Black Cultural Clubs in All Girls Private High Schools

by
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Abstract

The main objective of the research project is to assess how Black cultural clubs in high schools influence the identity formation of the club members in terms of their conceptualization of race, analysis of race relations, and understanding for racialized experiences. This project specifically focuses on organizations such as the Black Ladies' Association that operates within a private all girls high school in the Washington, DC area. I interviewed past BLA members to collect their reflections on their experiences at their private predominately white high school. Their stories demonstrated how their club involvement enhanced their interactions with family, friends, and the larger community, and generally increased their awareness surrounding elements of identity. The past BLA members were asked to contemplate their experiences and share their opinions regarding the overall purpose, function, and impact of the club. In this manner, the project will elucidate the ways that BLA students navigated and processed these experiences after they graduated from high school, as well as, assessing how club involvement aided their personal development, racial identity formation, and ability to negotiate situations that had racial dynamics at play. Finally, by gathering past members' life-histories, I aim to uncover the influence of Black cultural clubs within a predominately white cultural context, and plausibly reveal ways in which these clubs can successfully operate within other high schools. For the purposes of this project, all the statements from past BLA members are direct quotes, but the names of the interview subject as well as the student organization have been changed to uphold the members' and the club's anonymity.

Introduction: the Significance of Historically Black Clubs or Organizations

There are endless signs of progress in this nation especially as race relations appear to be improving. While the United States has its first African American President, the amount of people who identify as biracial or multiracial is increasing, and the media is portraying more ethnic diversity, the construction of race and the effects of racism in this country are often overlooked or pushed aside for more pressing issues. After all, there are shows like *Grey's Anatomy* that intentionally hired an extremely diverse cast of actors, corporations across the country implementing diversity initiatives, and schools that have completely embraced the idea of inclusion and diversity considering they have been fully integrated for decades. Many would even argue that Dr. King's dream has finally been fulfilled and we are now living in a 'post racial society' since little Black boys and White boys play together at recess. With all of these improvements, many people find Black cultural clubs unnecessary or even exclusive- especially when they exist within schools. In fact, these clubs which are rooted in the Black identity, traditions, and culture are often viewed as being intolerant or another form of self-segregation. However, these signs of improvement exist only on the surface. Unfortunately, racial tensions run deep and inequalities still persist today. Racialized problems appear to be non-existent in society, because they now manifest differently and in a more covert manner than they have in the past (Bonilla-Silva). Consequently, Black cultural clubs like the Black Ladies Association in predominantly White schools remain relevant and vital to not only the students of color participating in the organization, but also to the larger academic community in which they exist.

While racism continues to plague society, it has become much harder to name and identify in the twenty first century. In fact, I would even argue that the problem of the Twenty first century is not the problem of the color line; instead, the problem of the twenty first century is the problem of racial silencing. This silencing or lack of acknowledgment occurs regularly in

situations with racial undertones particularly if racist ideologies or behaviors take a much more covert form (Bonilla-Silva; Omini and Winant).

This covert racism is commonly exemplified in high schools. The administration and student body alike participate in the silencing of racial discourse. When this is happening on a daily basis, it can be even more detrimental to high school students since they are mature enough to conceptualize higher forms of socialization. At this stage in their development, high school students can embrace the social constructs that they have unconsciously learned and begin to apply them to their everyday lives or impose them on others. When this happens, these social constructs that define the students' identities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class start to be reproduced in their social interactions and they can essentially begin to police and oppress each other without even knowing it. Furthermore, if students fail to recognize racism, racial constructs, or power dynamics of any form and lack exposure to validifying language names their racialized experiences, then they can potentially internalize their emotions and thoughts about the situation; this internalization can have a very negative impact on their personhood and understanding of their own racial identity (Fletcher).

Therefore, racial dynamics need to be identified in high school settings since it affects the students rationalization of race and their responses to the issue, regardless of how they racially identify. In fact, extra measure should taken to address racial stratifications, misunderstandings, or assumptions within a predominately white high school that has students coming from families with high socioeconomic status. Whether a White student uses language in a class discussion that reflects a racial prejudice and certain amount of power or privilege, a White teacher has a negative perception of a student of color, or even a Black student takes extra measures to avoid perpetuating Black stereotypes, race plays a major role in the personal and individual interactions

within a high school environment. Particular structures, policies, and procedures also reveal underlying racial dynamics on a larger institutional level as well. Both teachers and students need to bring racial tensions, biases, or inequalities to the forefront to truly inspire revolutionary change in both thought and action. When teachers and students can finally discuss these issues openly, racial disparities and oppressions can be properly addressed within private high schools. In order to do this, however, safe spaces for students of color must operate within a school community that is just as safe and encourages students to fully acknowledge how these disparities originated; once the root causes of these racial divisions are identified, then solutions can be designed to create a more racially tolerant and understanding school community.

Since the Brown versus Board of Education case in 1954, the politics within academia have continued carrying racial undertones. Despite this major landmark in American history and this momentous victory for the Civil Rights Movement, the dichotomy between the racially inferior and superior has remained present in the classroom even after the Supreme Court decision integrated schools. In fact, these racial undertones did not begin once individual schools were desegregated- they were evident in the very beginnings of the education system since they incorporated white culture in the fundamental principles of public education. Values like individualism and competition continue to be present at the very crux of these academic institutions and identifiably belong to white culture considering they are remnants of European colonialism. Somewhere in these academic institutions, however, there needs to be a place for Black culture to thrive mainly because Black culture has traditionally fostered a more collective approach while it developed throughout history. Therefore, a predominately white school should have a formalized safe space for students who share in the Black experience and culture so that they can collectively work through those experiences as a community and heal from them.

Unfortunately, the sad reality is that many schools fail to establish such places for students of color.

With this said, cultural organizations continue to be products of their social contexts. The current social conditions within the United States need to be considered in order to completely comprehend the need for Black cultural clubs within predominately White high schools. Historically, Black organizations whether they exist inside or outside of a high school have created supportive spaces for Black people (Tatum). Today, race and education are still intrinsically tied and have a unique relationship; for example, problems of racial discrimination and inequality in the US educational system are evident in not only standardized test scores, but also college retention rates (Kozol). Because of this, Black cultural clubs within predominately White high schools can assist students in both their personal and academic success, because they can function as a social community and educational space that raises awareness around similar issues that affect the Black student population. Based on my research, students who attend private high schools and participate in Black cultural clubs like the Black Ladies' Association have an in depth understanding of race, their personal identity, and how they individually navigate in the greater systems and are perceived by society. Therefore, instead of debating about whether or not Black organizations should exist, efforts and energies should be directed in exploring the reasons why Black organizations still exist, and need to be intentionally sustained and supported in predominately White high schools.

In order to assess how high school Black cultural clubs influence the identity formation of the club members in terms of their conceptualization of race, analysis of race relations, and understanding for racialized experiences, I look more closely at the multifaceted dimensions of the Black Ladies' Association, the privatized high school environment (which highlights how

race is influenced by gender and class), and the different histories of its members. To do this properly, I first examine the legacy behind historically Black organizations and today's social context, and then look at ways in which Black cultural clubs currently work within a student body that hegemonically fosters White culture.

The Inherited Social Context of Black Adolescents

Every single day, Black students function and perform in schools that were never meant for them, originally designed for them, or initially used for their academic achievement. For numerous generations, Black students have had to navigate within academic institutions belonging to an unjust and unequal education system that mirrors other oppressive structures in the United States' society (Kozol). These flawed systems have historically institutionalized racism and carried a tradition of economic exploitation and abuse of power (Fletcher).

There are several methods Black high schoolers use to cope with their situations that are directly impacted by the organization of their school. In response to the predominately White environment and administration, they can actively participate in the silencing process and decide to ignore the role of race in their high school experience, or they can either consciously partake in activities and conversations that put race at the forefront. Many past BLA members mentioned the impact of silence on their community and suggested that "silence among the high achieving females at the school is an act of defiance, a refusal on the part of the high achieving females to consume the image of 'nothingness' so essential to the conception of African American women and their success in navigating systems and academia that were not set up for them (Fordham 10). One member of the said that many of her fellow club members simply were "not willing to address [racial] issues and were lazy about it" because it was easier to ignore it and helped them

survive the racial dynamics within the student body. For those who decide to ignore race, however, they ultimately slowed down or stunted their racial identity formation and prevented their racial identity from fully developing. By disregarding their racial histories and experiences, students basically prohibit a major aspect of their identity from completely unfolding. They also risk internalizing negative characteristics of their race since they decide not to engage in discussions that enhance their language and conceptualization for race.

According to Beverly Daniels Tatum who wrote Can We Talk about Race, she outlines the importance of addressing race for all students. She claims that it is equally as important to address race outside of cultural clubs, cliques, or groups since:

particularly for young White children, interaction with people of color is likely to be a virtual reality rather than an actual one, with media images (often negative ones) most clearly shaping their attitudes and perceived knowledge of communities of color. The progress that has been made in the reduction of racial prejudice that can be associated with shared school experiences is at risk of stalling (Tatum 14).

It is equally important for Black youth to have the language to own their experiences since they often avoid acknowledging their racial identity, racialized experiences, or the racial dynamics in which they find themselves, because it is so difficult to do so (especially in front of White peers).

The motivation behind their choice to ignore these things manifests as an act of resistance to racism. To them, racism is both "a conceptual force that circumscribes how they perceive reality and as a material force that constrains their conduct in the social and physical world" (Duncan 134). Essentially, racism is so pervasive and constricting that it motivates these students to censor their voices and alter their behavior. By not recognizing their experiences of racism or

how race impacts their lives, they are denying formative occurrences that helped shape their identities.

In Shame of the Nation, Jonathan Kozol quotes Richard Rothstein who said that "a black child does not need white classmates in order to learn" and educational policies now aim to raise scores in schools that Black children attend..that effort will be flawed even if it succeeds...[because] its not about raising scores but about giving black children access to majority culture so they could negotiate it more confidently...For African Americans to have equal opportunity, higher test scores will not suffice...[Black children need] to have the skills and confidence as adults to succeed in a White world where they have no experience (Kozol 229).

By going to a predominately White high school, Black students unknowingly or knowingly determine the best ways to function in a "White world" and develop their own survival mechanisms. Many resort to assimilating to white culture to avoid being the "rebellious exotic other" (Duncan 134).

Taking all of this into account, Black adolescents inherit a particular legacy at birth: one that has been shaped by a history of discrimination, racism, and inequality. Because of this legacy, Black cultural clubs serve to positively impact Black students' identities which are influenced by intersectional elements like gender and socioeconomic status. Race, gender, and class are instrumental components of an individual's identity and they do not function in a mutually exclusive manner. Because of this, all of these identifiers directly impact Black adolescents relationships to other people whether they share in the Black experience or not. Internalized racial inferiority often plagues Black youth while they may not even realize that it affects their psyche and behavior. As many of my interview subjects noted, this internalization of

racial inferiority and experience as the ‘other’ was the most divisive force in the Black community when it was left unaddressed by students. As a reaction to these common experiences and discord that is evident in the larger Black community as well, organizations for adults and youth alike were established specifically for those who identify with the Black experience and they continue to exist today.

The History, Tradition, and Influence of Black Cultural Clubs

Historically, many African American organizations have stood alone and independent from integrated institutions or structures (often because it is easier for their members to be honest about their experiences, express their feelings, and vocalize their racial consciousness while they are not in mixed company). However, clubs like the Black Ladies’ Association infuse traditions from historically Black organizations with a more integrationist pedagogy and nuanced communication style. Since the BLA functions within a predominately White private high school and the school climate is a reflection of many contemporary social contexts for students of color, this organization needs to be examined more intentionally for more people to truly grasp its significance and the different legacies that embodies.

Unfortunately, the discrete manner in which race influences educational settings today makes Black cultural clubs seem unnecessary and insignificant. Consequentially, the legitimacy of these identity clubs are now being questioned on a daily basis by high school parents, students, and administrators alike. These organizations face opposition since their messages, missions, and programs are either misunderstood or perceived to be controversial simply, because they are raising awareness about racialized issues that directly impact the Black

community and tend to be overlooked considering they are not as prevalent for the dominant culture.

This misunderstanding of Black culture or apathy toward issues plaguing the Black community can be perpetuated by many members of the White community. Even previous members of BLA noted that it was still a constant struggle with members of the school's administration to get approval for BLA programming. This struggle persisted and was attributed to the White faculty members' lack of understanding for the importance and value of the BLA sponsored events. In one interview, a former BLA member who graduated in 2011 said that "there was never a question that we [BLA club members] would not accomplish something as a group, because that was never an option for us." As I talked with this young Black woman, she conveyed parts of her background. She mentioned that race and Black culture were always talked about within her household growing up, and because of this, she was "astounded" that she could not only conduct similar conversations about race with her peers, but also engage in action surrounding racial issues or issues that were prevalent in the Black community. The passion and commitment that this BLA member conveyed, revealed to me that a strong sense of conviction and purpose was passed to the members of BLA. While she talked to me, she echoed sentiments of the Civil Rights Movement and her deterministic attitude resembled attitudes that allowed activists to endure and succeed during the Civil Rights Movement; in fact, I would even argue that she had a similar fervor and mentality that focused on resisting opposition to justice and equality not because it was detrimental to not only herself, but also other marginalized Black students.

This attitude towards opposition can be directly linked to the concept of creating social progress through collective action. For this reason, BLA did not host programming to merely

enhance their experiences or bond with each other. Instead, BLA programs were necessary since they were needed from students who were both inside and outside of the club. This struggle for programming, which will be extensively outlined later, were rooted in many misperceptions from the faculty and administration about the students of color at the high school; it appeared that these misperceptions stemmed from a lack of understanding that individual faculty members had.

However, this misperceptions can exist within the larger academic community as well since the current discourse analyzes how race, gender, or socio-economic status simplistically intersect with educational institutions. There are still limitations on studies on race and even if the scholarly works do grapple with several aspects of identity and its complexity, the discourse is not often applied to high school girls who participated in a cultural organization while attending a private, primarily white high school. Each aspect of identity is equally important and ultimately "shaped by the social context in which we learn about ourselves over time. Group identities-gender, race, social class, to name a few- are part of that developmental process" of the individual person (Tatum 24). In recognizing the intersection between one or two elements of identity, the complexity of identify formation is ignored which is why the discourse needs to be widened in order to address the magnitude and weight that race, gender, and class have on each other (Collins).

Despite the increasingly large amount of misconceptions about race, how it influences private predominantly White high schools, and the resistance to establish or continue cultural organizations for students, there are prevailing student cultural clubs like the BLA that highlight the compounding influence of these factors on identity formation. Moreover, they have the potential to be vehicles that promote a high level of social and racial analysis amongst not only

its members, but also the larger community in which it functions. For this to happen, honest and extensive conversations need to be centered around these clubs and their origins first and foremost.

Throughout history, Black clubs have traditionally responded to the United State's social context in which they dwell in, and they serve individuals who are direct products of the social constructions embedded in American society. For this reason, it is exceptionally impressive and important that Black clubs and organizations initially emerged considering so much of Black culture is based on improvisation and hybridization since a majority of the African culture was depleted during slavery and European colonialism.

Slavery erased and rearranged African American lineage, family histories, and cultural traditions. According to Signithia,

to survive, enslaved Africans learned to live with' the lack of differentiation externally imposed upon them as slaves and, ironically, to make use of the lack of differentiation in ways that not only assured their survival (as individuals), but also promoted the growth and well-being of the entire group (Fordham 12).

Although, these clubs and organizations originally transpired to support the basic survival of Black Americans, they have evolved to encompass and support so much more and in actuality continue to promote collective growth.

To be fully aware of how the social conditions impact the individual's identities, one must look at the fundamental framework of Black organizations to learn about how these groups collectively respond to their members' social positions and how they allow these elements of identity to be demonstrated and deconstructed. According to Kevin Kumashiro, the founding director of the Center for Anti-Oppressive Education, it is necessary to have

“a space to learn different perspectives and interpret what was going on students lives. [We] must look at the history of education and academic institutions role in supporting assimilation or reinforcing differences and divisions in the community. Schools were always about separating students, we just do it in more invert ways. Therefore, it is a paradox to make schools into social justice institutions, because they were not born from that tradition. Teachers, role models, and students must dwell in the gray area outside of a classroom where they can absorb the information bestowed upon them with their own unique lenses that are influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Students need a space to work through that and not just come to terms with how their lens meets the information they have learned, but to grapple with themselves and how they relate to common knowledge. We must look at the environment and how we live in it and where we fit in different hierarchies.

This speaks to the tradition of many cultural organizations and how they view themselves and their constituents as parts of an entire American society.

Since the structures, institutions, and systems in American society were formative in the shaping of the Black identity, their influences can not be excluded in the very activities or discussions hosted by the Black cultural clubs. It is important to note that like school administrations, cultural club are microcosms of the society. Although state institutions or supported organizations function for political action and are ultimately steered by power, cultural clubs like the Black Ladies’ Association are reflections of civil society and are steered by community relations, dynamics in a similar manner. The BLA follows the same methodology in gaining membership and strong support.

In grasping this, we must look at the useful elements, styles, and principles that provided a strong foundation for Black cultural organizations that originally functioned outside of the integrated academy so that these helpful and essential components can be incorporated into the fabric of Black student organizations that wish to operate inside of a predominately White institution.

While attempting to address the many issues that the members of the Black Ladies' Association face, the group inherently nurtures several traditions or sentiments that provided a strong foundation for historically Black organizations. This foundation eventually become the key to their success and longevity as it enabled the organizations to flourish for numerous generations. The traditional principles used in historically Black organizations were not only embedded in the organizations' foundation, but also cultivated over time. The concepts that created the missions and frameworks of these organizations arose out of significant moments in the United States' history. After establishing the framework, these organizations became spaces for authentic action as well as notable social analysis. These formalized spaces helped foster the development of groundbreaking Black intellectuals, leaders, and professionals. Taking this into consideration, it is helpful to examine these intersecting social factors and dimensions of identity in relationship to community organizing in the Black community.

Essentially the problematic epidemic of discrimination and inequality, prompted people who identified with the Black experience to join together to create a supportive and united force against racism. By establishing a strong group of constituents and in developing a tight knit community, historically Black organizations became more formal in their practices and structures. This ultimately enabled Black people to mobilization as a collective force when opportunities for social change and transformative moments presented themselves.

Black organizations today like the Links, Incorporated, Jack and Jill, and the cohort of historically Black colleges (HBCUs) have been revolutionary spaces that have been instrumental in this country's social progress and are responsible for many small victories, reforms centered around justice, and the strengthening of Black political and economic power. These organizations have consistently exemplified the power of community organizing. They gather support and a strong base of constituents, spread awareness to members outside of the organization to increase visibility, gain an additional support group, and encourage accountability from everyone. Once this happens, their members take productive and just action.

In order to flourish and operate effectively, these organizations have worked as a collective agents and their success and sustainability has come from their understanding of the impact of economics, politics, and culture on the group as individuals and a collective.

According to Chris Rhomberg, social movements and organizations led by

subordinate groups may be internally stratified, fractured by structural contradictions, or divided by legacies of prior organization and political conflict. Public spheres are often fragmented or dominated by elite interests, while civil society itself harbors exclusionary and hierarchical relations of private power. The ambivalence of civil society underlines the importance of specialized social movement organizations as strategic agents, who intervene in civil society to make groups into collective actors.

This understanding of these outside influences as well as the demographic and cultural forces on marginalized groups is key for the very members who are fighting oppression together.

These organizations have unified members of the Black community during times of adversity and have helped empower its members by giving them a social, economic, and political network to work from. For Blacks in the United States, their social networks are substantially

less wealthy and advanced in comparison to predominantly white networks. Because of this, these created networks for Black individuals have helped create collective agency and develop future leaders within the Black community.

For example, The Links, Incorporated was established in 1946 as a non-profit organization for Black women interested in direct service to the community. Today, the organization praises itself as “one of the nation’s oldest and largest volunteer service organizations of extraordinary women who are committed to enriching, sustaining and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other persons of African ancestry.” Majority of the organization’s members are prominent leaders and scholastic individuals who aim to be change agents in their respective communities and fields of work (“The Links Incorporated: Linked in Friendship, Connected in Service”). Jack and Jill of America, Incorporated is another organization focused on empowerment and leadership building in the Black community. After being founded in 1938, this organization focused primarily on the strengthening the social, educational, and leadership skills of African American youth. Organizations like the Links Inc., Jack and Jill and historically Black sororities and fraternities, BLA acts as a collective agent consisting of members who participate voluntarily in order to actively work to counteract or prevent further discrimination and racism. This student club works towards maintaining its own structure and cultivating its own values and principles amongst members engaging within the larger educational environment. In fact, many of the interview subjects mentioned the how influential it was having to meet a certain set of expectations from both peers and supportive administrators.

Although any organization, including BLA ,is susceptible to inefficiency in programming, leadership, and organizing especially while working within a historically White

school that was formulated for students with racial and economic privileges. Because the school originated under these circumstances and continues to foster an environment of privilege, BLA tries to avoid fatalism, attempts to balance the larger system that they are working within by challenging the status quo which the school maintains, and aims to encourage a anti-assimilation racial ideologies or cultural pride to its members.

Following an anti-assimilation methodology, these organizations create informal and formal same-race peer networks to buffer experiences with racism and affirm their racial identity...[this reiterates] the importance of having safe spaces in predominately White learning environments for Black students to escape psychological, emotional, and physical stress stemming from experiences with racism (Carter).

This safe space allows Black students, students of color, or white student allies to be in community with one another. They can be in a place that empowers them as individuals to speak their truths, reveal their narratives, process their racial identities and develop their racial ideologies. This organization acts as an physical environment and emotional outlet that enables its members to identify with each other's experiences in a predominately White high school geared towards academic excellence. Usually, private college preparatory high schools concentrate so much on academics that the administration and student body fails to acknowledge the social dynamics at play within the institution. As a result, white privilege, class privilege, and heteronormative privileges can challenge students who do not identify with the prominent groups or norms.

Blackness and Class

This tendency makes the discussion of race and class very interesting in predominately White private high schools. Because of the racial history of the United States, Blacks in the US

have a very special relationship with class that has been crafted since slavery was implemented. African Americans have been essential in the economic development of the nation and have often been targets of exploitation in the housing, job, and financial markets for the sake of monetary profit. Since education significantly impacts the socio-economic status one achieves, the racial disparities within education can specifically be linked to the wealth gap between White and Black Americans. This achievement gap in education essentially reinforces and reflects the economic wealth gap between Blacks and Whites due to the perpetuated cycle of disproportioned poverty in the Black community which continues today. According to Gail Thompson, who also gathered collected stories from African American students about their encounters at school, "students who have been 'tracked' for college have in essence been selected to move in the direction of joining the middle or professional class. Those who have not are more likely to be relegated to lower paying jobs or unemployment" (Thompson 91). This unequal distribution of power and access to resources can also affect intra personal relationships within the Black community. The internal class divisions or dynamics can be equally detrimental to the Black community as well. The stratification that class induces can be seen within each sector of the Black community- even a small Black community within a high school.

With this said, class divisions definitely strain the relationship within the Black Ladies Association. These class divisions, however, correspond to the class stereotypes that have been imposed on the Black students by both faculty and other students. It was common for the interview subjects to include in their reflections how they were perceived by their teachers. Many said that they thought their teachers inaccurate perceptions of them based on the common assumption that most of the Black students were on a significant amount of financial aid.

Therefore, the class divisions within the BLA did not originate from the members' actual socioeconomic status, but instead from other people's assumptions of their class.

Despite these inflicted divisions, Patricia Hill Collins argues that middle class Black women "have had greater opportunities to achieve literacy" because they have been able to invest their finances into quality education. She also claims that they had

greater access to the resources to engage in Black feminist scholarship. Education need not mean alienation from this dialogical relationship. The actions of educated Black women within the Black women's club movement typify this special relationship between one segment of Black women intellectuals and the wider community of African American women... The work of these women is important because it illustrates a tradition of joining scholarship and activism (Collins 584).

This tradition that Patricia Hill Collins stems from the community organizing methodology that was integral in creating social progress, achieving civil rights, and advancing racial equality. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, the academy needs to incorporate spaces where intellectualism can help shape activism, and in turn, activism can give perspective on education (Collins 582-583).

The Intersection of Race and Gender

Before Black women can engage in activism together, they must cultivate conscious thought that supplements and enhances the work that they do, and the best way to do this is to be for them to be in community with one another. "Black women have found themselves the victims of Black men's powerlessness... Most Black feminists have wanted to promote the goals of racial equality, the care and nurturing of children, and the strengthening of the Black family system" despite the fact that white feminists have more social agency to be unconventional in their

parenting, families, and pursuit of higher education, Black women still aim to meet a high set of standards that are established from within the Black community (Boulin and Staples 35-36). A former BLA member emphasized her personal willingness to act and behave according to those standards because she knew it was in the best interest for her own academic success and social success of the BLA as a community.

More specifically, women in general are socialized to act as their male counterparts within the classroom and academic institution in order to be deemed successful. They must take on a 'tough exterior' and 'dominant' persona in order to disown and avoid being marginalized as a woman who is perceived to be weaker, less confrontational or threatening, and more passive when interacting with teachers or students (Fordham 3). When gender is coupled with race, students of color are faced with a unique situation because

the academy's penchant for universalizing and normalizing white middle-class women's lives compels black women and other women of color to seek to appropriate the image and attempt to consume the lives of the female 'Other'...African American females are doubly victimized by the existence of a two-tiered patriarchy (Fordham 5).

Student organizations like the BLA combat this victimization by empowering student leaders who are aware of their racial position and actively engage in the community while attempting to debunk their powerlessness.

Here, it is apparent that student run cultural organizations within all girls private schools can be as successful as the BLA if they were to incorporate traditional Black feminist theory.

Black feminist practice is powerful because:

on both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in

turn stimulate a changed consciousness. For U.S. Black women as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another...rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides, a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance (Collins 582-583).

For this consciousness to be truly transformative and to prompt passionate activism, Black women and girls need to stay deeply connected and grounded in their own personal experiences.

This methodology of activism fully reflects not only Black feminist thought, but also Black feminist action, because the it “encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment. It also includes more specialized knowledge that investigates the specific themes and challenges of any give period of time” (Collins 583). This particular knowledge set that Patricia Hill Collins mentions comes from individual women’s life encounters, but those experiences ultimately reflect various truths about society and the position of Black women. It is important for personal encounters to supplement formal education and this is actually the basis for many BLA general meeting discussions; however, learning rooted in the ‘I perspective’ can become problematic when it manifests in other arenas.

While this style of personalized learning has been adopted by many and embedded in the ground rules of various educational spaces, it may fail to push individual’s growing edge and challenge their ideologies on race. Especially during a time when diversity and cross cultural relations are championed throughout society, the misuse of these concepts becomes a significant

possibility since their intended outcomes and intentions may not actually emerge and become actualized by the academic institution (Cox 53). For example, diversity events or discussions within predominantly White high schools may aim at being inclusive or educational, but their impact may actually prompt a person of color to have a negative experience if they leave the conversation feeling tokenized, forced to be a spokesperson for all minorities, or as if their opinions were overlooked and minimized (Bonilla-Silva).

Since this risk exists, diversity programs held at predominately White private high schools can potentially further a student of color's discomfort and offend that student. As a result, precautionary measures need to be taken in order to ensure the appropriate facilitation of these conversations and their effectiveness in promoting cultural understanding. With this said, these conversations should model the approach that many historically Black organizations take. The Black Ladies' Association is a supportive entity that offers methods to address, cope, and advance students' way of analyzing and responding to racial politics both inside and outside of their high schools. because the particular elements that create a framework for the supportive student network BLA provides is rooted in a consciousness raising tradition and the affirmation of the black identity or experience (Patricia Hill Collins 579). The conversation's participants need to recognize the power and privilege dynamics at play. For this personal accountability to exist amongst members of a consciousness raising group like BLA, the traditions of deeply seeded community needs to continued and made present within Black cultural clubs and the outside community as well.

This cultivation of community can be a daunting task and is one that takes time. A standard of mutual respect needs to be established amongst members of the community and everyone participating in the collective organization needs to recognize that mutual learning is

imperative for individual and group growth. In a single sexed environment, the sense of community can often derive from the commonalities rooted in sharing the same gender. This gender sharing provides a strong basis for other elements of identity to be shared.

Once a basis of community is created the group can also begin to acknowledge other cultural, social, and economic identifiers. When components of the members' identities are shared trusting relationships between the members begin to form. As a result, more honest and open conversation can occur between the female members of the organization, while an emotional connection creates relationships that nurture affirmation. Beverly Daniels Tatum states the importance of Black students having one another because their friendships reinforce one another's experiences, sentiments, and hardships within the school. She describes this network and the conversations that students of color have as "affirming identity is about asking who they are, and where they want to go, and conveying a fundamental belief that they can get there—through the development of their intellect and their critical capacity to think" (Tatum 32). This determination and strive for academic and personal success can also be coupled with the pursuit of personal growth.

For this to be truly successful, however, this can not simply happen on an individual basis between students. The Black students' "self-actualization is thus fully realized only in so far as the individual becomes validated through other people" which prompts organizations to find and assert value to each of their members and highlights a need for the greater community in which they function to actually acknowledge and support their growth as individuals (Fordham 12). It is important to note that

counter-spaces [like BLA and other Black cultural organizations] can be formal or informal, academic or social...the space, outside of the confines of a strutted classroom

environment, allows Black students to express concerns and frustrations with one another about their experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination in the school.... [and] allows bonding between Black students who share similar cultural backgrounds and/or experiences....they allow Black students to specifically affirm the racial and/or ethnic aspect of their identity

especially when the classroom arena often fails to depict Blackness positively (Carter 543).

Black students at predominately White private schools that aim for high levels of academic achievement need an institutional commitment from administrators and faculty to prove that their success and well being is actually desired and institutionalized.

The significance of developing culturally aware, sensitive, and tolerant is often pushed aside when the main focus is on academic achievement and success. However, having an extensive cultural understanding for race, privilege, and power is crucial in the making of a student who is ready for the college/university atmosphere. Therefore, an entity should exist within predominantly White private high schools with a specific purpose: to recognize the value of Black culture, empower Black students, and help the academic community actualize America's democratic principles by gathering a socially well-informed and cultured student body that advocates civic equality within the school and beyond (James Banks). In doing this, cultural organizations now have to function within high schools as examples of student run and generated intellectual community aimed at furthering members' identity development, and a collective group resolved to promoting racial awareness throughout the school.

The Black Ladies' Association:

As seen in the Black Ladies' Association, a cultural club can be outlined as a network of support for students who identify with the Black experience, and this organization can have a large impact on the club members' racial identity formation, understanding of race, and their

ability to navigate different cultural encounters. By gathering information about a Black cultural club from students who attended an all girls private high school, the research will reflect the intersectional elements that contribute to the girls' personal growth and identity development. After examining the aspects of the club and the school culture, the Black Ladies Association fosters a community that reflects and perpetuates the traditional values of Black intellectualism and activism, relatively new perspective on Afrocentrism, sentimental approach to social movements, and nuanced view of assimilation.

BLA's History

As outlined earlier, Black organizations have a special relationship with social movements and activism. Robert Putman, a political scientist, portrays the United States as a nation that is void of social capital, and as a result organizations like BLA help the Black community regain social capital and rebuild essential "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" and fully engage in the democratic process (qtd in Rhomberg). This coupled with an afrocentric emphasis, the Black Ladies Association cultivates student leaders and engages students in discussions that focus on prevalent issues in the Black community. Although these discussions are centered around the Black community, they are still open to everyone. With this said, the club encourages a culture of inclusivity inside and outside of the organization.

The club operates with this paradigm in order to recognize all members who either identify or simply want to learn more about the African American or Black culture in some way. By practicing afrocentrism, the Black Ladies Association "sees all people of African descent as having a common history, experience, and culture... [and assumes that the] culture group never

completely loses its cultural heritage; it simply evolves into another form" depending on the context that influences it emerges from (Boulin and Staples 33). Therefore, BLA emphasizes both the history of Black people and an analysis on the various influences and movements that shapes the Black experience and identity in the present.

The club tries to address several needs and sentiments that are apparent in the school community. As a result, it aims to do the following: 1) provide a space to study African American history and recognize the role African Americans had and continue to have in the development of this nation 2) offer a place where students can acknowledge Black people, the Black experience, and the ways in which the Black community has contributed to society even though that should happen in every domain of the academic institution and 3) offer a community that analyzes the conditions which impact the Black community today. Specifically, the organization develops an "understanding [for] the family traditions that remained intact or were modified in the [African] diaspora, the political and economic forces that the Black American family encountered" and helped create its characterization in the American context, and the need for improvement (Boulin and Staples 34).

For this to happen, BLA works off the concept of "neoassimilationism" meaning it "does not assume a monolithic American culture, which is middle class, individualistic, and upwardly mobile. Nor does it assume that 'American culture and identity are of higher social status than the immigrants' culture'" and it operates under the pretenses that Black students from immigrant families may not necessarily speak English at home even though they have "a broad range of skills, and face more options for assimilation and identification." In doing this, the organization recognizes the diversity within the Black community and addresses the stereotype of the Black immigrant as the 'exotic' other who may be treated differently than other African American

students. Moreover, this model assumes that within the club there are different experiences with racism. This is reflective of the Black community as a whole considering different amounts of privilege can be given to Black people in the United States depending on their perceived skin tone, language skill set, class and nationality. Despite these differences, the organization (like many historically Black organizations) presumes that even these differing degrees of “racial privilege and cultural domination [socially or emotionally] bind individuals of African descent together” to a certain extent and allow them to share in a common Black experience (Boulin and Staples 39). Because the organization works under these pretenses, it enables the club members to address various issues connected to the Black experience that range from colorism, black male privilege, economic status, Black on Black crime, and so many others.

Mission

In creating a framework that fosters conversations that recognize the diversity within the Black community, the Black Ladies Association has a very specific mission that focuses on promoting racial education and awareness to its constituents and the larger school community. The club also takes responsibility for representing Black students if any bias, racist, or discriminatory incidents arise in the academic year. Even though this organization takes on additional responsibilities, its official mission states that the Black Ladies Association was formed in the Spring of 1983 to support and promote African-American culture among the [school] community. Over the years, BLA has grown into a large service-oriented club which not only promotes cultural awareness, but also fosters leadership. BLA is a charitable organization of hard working young women who raise funds to benefit the BLA Scholarship Fund (which is awarded to one African-American incoming freshmen).

Once again, the club's mission reflects cultural awareness, service, and overall uplift, and draws on the many traditions that so many other historically Black organizations have fostered over the years.

The Black Ladies Association provides a formalized space for group formation, a structured atmosphere led by students, and a collective cultural perspective that drives the club to execute various initiatives throughout the academic year. One interviewee acknowledged that there was some difficulty conveying this inclusive attitude to her White peers, because she felt that the club had to function "out of isolation, [because] once the term "Black" is used within the name of an organization, that automatically instills a sense of unwelcomeness to the majority population of the school." However, according to the school's website that lists the diversity group descriptions, BLA "Membership is open to all members of the [school] community, as the group welcomes student, faculty, and parent support." Furthermore, even though the interview subjects never quoted this mission nor ignored how much of a positive and transformative entity it was for them personally, they shared a commitment to the student body as a whole. One former BLA member said that "we tried to get people to grow as individuals and develop their perspectives on life and race, ethnicity, the Black experience in society, and more specifically the Black experience in the school" and this sentiment was echoed in many interviews. The club members may have been motivated by the learning component of the organization, the sense of community, or the legacy of activism, but it was very clear that each of the members willingly took on a responsibility to educate others, because they wanted to utilize the club as a space to make social change; this is what they expected from each other and what was expected of them from the legacy they inherited.

Institutional Setting

The amount of social change that the students could make was often limited by their academic environment. Because the Black student population is so small at this particular private high school, it is vital that those students of color do not feel isolated when interacting with other students. This proves to be more difficult as the school administrators condone and support the BLA initiatives totally in theory, but not fully in practice. For example a former BLA executive board member said that

you would not know they [the administrators] were on your side if you were apart [of a marginalized group like BLA] that had to go up against the administration...its sad, that we had to fight so much just because race was involved... In the end it was ok because it made me stronger. In those situations, you have to achieve. You have to be successful. You don't have another choice, because if you don't step up and challenge the administration or your opposition and advocate then it [the meaning and impact of the club] would slip away.

With this said, BLA cannot be completely successful, flourish, and reach its greatest potential if it does not have the full fledged financial and civic support from school administrators.

It proved to be very telling when I asked the BLA club moderator what the diversity make up of the school was. She said the number of students who identified as a student of color was roughly 22 percent of the student body; however, she could not tell me how many Black students the school had nor was the racial diversity listed on the school's website. In addition to this, the school's website has an entire page titled "Diversity and Inclusion" dedicated to portray the school's commitment to diversity initiatives. Yet, the club moderator for BLA is also listed as the contact person for all the other diversity clubs. For example, there is a newly established

Asian/Pacific Islander Cultural Club that has an extremely small following as well as the eleven year old diversity club called Kaleidoscope, but once again, they are supported by the same administrator who oversees BLA. It appears that she is the only person on the administration who is really acting on her verbal commitment to supporting students' diversity on a day to day basis.

Additionally, the school's website claims that a major part of their vision is to "seek and support students from racially, culturally, and socio-economically diverse backgrounds...[where there is a] safe, supportive environment where young women may ask the difficult, often uncomfortable questions and learn to value and respect an individual's differences." Although this is a great model to follow within a community, that should not be the primary goal of an academic institution. Students have to be taught something substantial before they form their own opinions. Because any racial experiences are so new to them as they emerge into adulthood, they need a basis for their intellectual analysis. These students are in dire need of having an education that enhances, clarifies, and identifies aspects of their racialized encounters. Even in the 21st Century, there is a grave need for schools to start "creating inclusive learning environments-environments that acknowledge the continuing significance of race and racial identity in ways that can empower and motivate students to transcend the legacy of racism in our society even when the composition of their classrooms continues to reflect it" because inevitably within the academic arena covert racism will occur between students or even with faculty, and this racism can even be institutionalized through policy or simply an accepted part of the school culture (Tatum 21).

Even though the club does receive support from one or two extremely involved and active administrators, who act more like mentors to the members of the organization, that simply

is not enough. There needs to be more of an institutional push and investment into the organization and into diversity training for the faculty. Genuinely institutionalized cultural clubs operate as

formal identity-affirming counter-spaces [that] are defined as networks co-constructed by school adults and Black students. These counter-spaces represent institutionalized mechanisms that serve as protective forces for these students and allow them to maintain a strong racial sense of self, while maintaining school success in a racially hostile environment. The presence of these spaces also offsets the challenges involved in effectively navigating classrooms, social, and extracurricular domains in the school context in culturally accommodating but not assimilative ways (Carter 543).

Considering the club grew out of parents and students who desired and needed an affinity group, the club was established because of the assistance it received from the headmistress at the time. Essentially, the organization was supported from the top down as well as the bottom up and the club flourished under this structure.

One member explained that even though there still is some administrative support and the BLA members presented themselves as a “valid collection of women, it was way too easy to become forgotten” in the larger school community. The BLA members lived a tough reality everyday at school as they constantly experienced having their racial identity overlooked, their racial experiences minimized by both White students and faculty, and their passion for diversity and culture were always made out to be irrelevant. As a former BLA member, this interviewee felt like this was the unsaid message that was passed along to the students: since diversity and race were not formally taught in the classroom and they “did not come in the text book then they aren't worth knowing.” To the club members, the impact of these experiences and sentiments

were hurtful- not because their peers and faculty were dismissing their passion for diversity and culture, but because it felt like they were dismissing and invalidating aspects of their personal identities.

Coretta, another former BLA member, said that while she enjoyed school and all it had to offer her,

there were quite a few things that I disliked about it. One thing that I really disliked was the social structure of the school, which often seemed to be based of socioeconomic status. In addition, the student body as a whole was very homogenous with everyone wearing Uggs and The North Face fleeces in the winter and always carrying a cup of Starbucks. Besides the uniform, everyone looked very similar, not just racially, but often in values or beliefs. There was definitely a sense of privilege amongst many students as well. There was also a lot of ignorance such as during the 2008 election, I remember one of my classmates telling me that she was really afraid of what would happen if Barack Obama became president, as if the United States would become some Islamic state and the country would no longer be safe. In addition, there were many students that believed that because you attended Visitation and were Black, you received financial aid. This was not the case for me and some of my friends, who were Black.

This lack of cultural understanding was not only evident in BLA members interactions with students.

Faculty also made cultural assumptions and racial stereotypes which contributed to BLA members' frustration and reinforced their position as the 'other' in the school. One student said that her only negative experience with a faculty member happened during her senior year, and it left a lasting impression on her. During one of her college counseling sessions, she said that "my

college counselor told me that I most likely would not get into my schools and they were all reaches for me; she suggested I add HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) to my college list.” This encounter indicates the college counselor had lower expectations and standards for this Black student and active leader of BLA. Despite the advice she received, she ended up applying to mostly predominately White colleges anyway and got into most of them- including a very competitive state school in the area.

Lindsay, a biracial member of BLA, felt like she had a unique perspective on the racial issues that came up amongst her peers. When talking with her, she described herself as an outsider or bystander to the situations regarding race, because she was able to see the Black perspective and White perspective while she witnessed “everything happen from a removed standpoint.” With this point of view, she explained that she saw several instances involving teachers and their unchallenged racial biases. She went on to say that “most faculty members assumed that because a student was of color that they were poor, needed extra help or came from a broken family. That would annoy me, because they would give preference to students of color and try to fix their situation.” These “annoying interactions” were common to the students of color at that school and it became very clear that administrators often saw members of the BLA as charity cases and even tried to establish very paternalistic relationships with them. These interactions made the girls’ academic pursuits difficult when they were dealing with so much social turmoil and emotional stress that was brought on by race. Because of this, the mentorship from a school administrator was extremely helpful to the BLA members since they were able to receive guidance while navigating the social and racial dynamics of their high school. For an administrator to provide appropriate mentorship that is not patronizing, he or she needs to avoid creating a power dynamic while giving advice and educating members of the club.

Supportive Mentorship

Mrs. Jackson completely avoided this power dynamic, and as a result, she became more than the official moderator for the Black Ladies Association. She is a mother figure, a role model, a confidant, and an administrator who genuinely cares about her students. Through her personal passion for diversity, she constantly seeks to be better, to do better, and to understand culture, race, and society better. This passion shines through to her students so much that it has made a lasting impact on the BLA members. By exemplifying care, concern, and compassion, Mrs. Jackson has taught the members of BLA to constantly embark on a quest for personal truth and greater understanding.

By being extremely frank about her racial ideologies and personal experiences as a Black mother, wife, and educator, she has always encouraged club members to speak their truths by sharing their personal experiences during club meetings. At the same time, she never fails to impart her perspective on the girls' situations, encounters, and stories. As a result, the girls constantly learn from her honest feedback and general wisdom, because she acknowledges that she is in this struggle with them. In doing this, she left the impression that they were all trying to work through their different, yet similar positionally within the predominately White school and society. Mrs. Jackson's mentorship embodies and exemplifies the perfect pedagogy for learning: to always be a student of life by being both a teacher and student in any situation (Paulo Freire).

Mrs. Jackson constantly extends herself to the club members and makes herself always available to talk- even if it is just about life. Beverly Daniels Tatum describes this kind of impact that teachers and mentors can have on their students. She says advocates that

as educators we must acknowledge the impact of the many hours spent in school and the influence even one teacher can have on the story a student tells him or herself-also for better or worse. We cannot control the stories others are telling-we must take responsibility for the identity stories we tell. (Tatum 32)

By taking this responsibility, educators must do their best to guide their students through their personal narratives and give as much insight as possible-even if it is just to validate their students' experiences and to give credence to their personal journeys.

With this sentiment, Mr. Jackson is extremely intentional about the messages she gives the BLA members. While she understands that her words hold a significant amount of weight on her students as individual people who are trying to find their own way in a predominately White community that is also extremely vigorous academically, Mrs. Jackson understands that she is an instrument that helps mold the next generation of Black leaders. This understanding emanates from the idea that "individual experiences of Black women help shape a collective ideology based on shared or similar experiences" (Collins 579). This understanding also prompts Mrs. Jackson to be extremely vocal and honest in almost every situation. In doing this, she facilitates the club members participation in dialogues so that they can express and explore various ideas based on their personal experiences rather than discussing racial theory and topics.

For example, Mrs. Jackson chaperoned a BLA trip to another local high school where other Black student groups gathered to partake in a forum. At one point, the forum had each club make a presentation to "defend their school" against their perceived stereotypes in front of other students who did not attend the same school. This was a pivotal moment in the forum, because a major disconnect arose between the cultural groups. The exercise was clearly intended to highlight school stereotypes with the hopes of debunking them. However, the manner in which

the exercise was presented to students sparked defensiveness from each cultural club and ultimately created an ‘us versus them’ attitude amongst the BLA club members. As the club members were strategizing how to attack the stereotypes that other schools had given them, Mrs. Jackson waited for club members to voice several concerns and suggestions, and then she offered her advice and guidance. Once again, she exposed to the girls that this was yet another teaching moment and opportunity to enlighten others. She was essentially advocating the same approach found at the core of the BLA’s mission: to educate others while simultaneously learning from them whenever possible. Even when the Black Ladies Association was gathered in a different context, Mrs. Jackson guided the club and challenged them to uncover the constructs that had created their perceived stereotype as well as their true reality, identity, and unique experiences as Black students going to a predominately White private high school.

Sistas in Sisterhood: BLA Members in Community

In sharing similar experiences in both the classroom and in larger communities, the BLA club members establish a strong and meaningful bond unlike many others. They cultivate a sense of sisterhood that is not only reinforced by the all girl academic environment, but is also derived from their deeply personal, emotional, and insightful dialogues about race, ethnicity, and inequality. These dialogues essentially deepen an extremely "genuine friendship [that] generates enough trust to allow for honest exchange between oneself and the other about matters large and small and permits the sharing of one's true thoughts and feelings, even when those thoughts and feelings are troubling to the receiver” and is described as authentic and reciprocal “which is life giving and soul satisfying" (Tatum 84). These kinds of friendships which occur between BLA members are mutually beneficial, because they strengthen individual members’ identities and

experiences while promoting personal growth and a stronger sense of self. As Pat Gurin explains, these friendships allow conversations pertaining to complex issues about race and identity to flourish and “disrupt an insidious cycle of lifetime segregation that threatens the fabric of our pluralistic democracy” (qtd. in Tatum 11). These are the kinds of conversations that are truly transformative for young, Black adolescents because they end up making an impact beyond those involved in the friendship.

These sentiments were reflected in the interviews I conducted with former BLA members. One member who had graduated in 2000 recalled that they “were so diverse internally – from a wide range of schools and neighborhoods in the DC Metro area - and I liked that we, as a group, were not homogenous. I was more comfortable at times with my fellow club members from BLA because I just got to know them a lot better since we worked so close together planning programs at school.” Another student named Melissa is now a freshman in college; she commented that the diversity within the Black Ladies Association was intellectually stimulating and helped her recognize that there was a spectrum of experiences and perspectives within the Black community, and she was able to learn from this. Melissa’s classmate mentioned that despite this diversity amongst the Black girls and members of the club, “it was a chance to be a part of the community and feel the Black solidarity that the BLA tried to foster.”

My interview with Melissa was incredibly touching because her words were really able to relay the impact BLA left on her life. She said that “the main point that I took away was the idea that you can have solidarity with any group you are a part of, and you can keep that group in solidarity with other people in the school. It wasn’t like we were exclusive, but we sought to work within the school as a segment of the community who had conviction and strong opinions” about society. BLA gave these girl a formal place to “share in that together. She went on to

describe how beautiful and liberating it was to not feel “like you were in competition with other girls.” This sense of solidarity and care that the girls nurtured amongst each other was a direct result of Mrs. Jackson’s mentorship, because she helped perpetuate accountability amongst the girls. Melissa went on to say that if you were in the club “overtime you developed a sense of duty and obligation- not because we technically belonged to an affinity club, but because when you were in the club you wanted to carry on a certain mission” and present yourself properly to other people.

When the members first started high school, many girls desired a Black community simply to seek "out that oneness that is felt in being apart of the group, that sense of belonging," but by the end of the four years the club became and represented more than that. The girls were working together for something that was bigger than themselves. They were working to make social progress, and put forth efforts to raise their own racial consciousness while spreading awareness to others. In doing this, they were continuing the collective struggle that modeled after the Civil Rights Movement and they were holding true to the legacy within the Black community-the legacy of resilience and perseverance despite adversity. This resilience and perseverance is a reflective testament of strength that can be found in the Black community, strength that can be found in Black youth specifically, and strength that can be found in the highly educated future leaders of the United States. According to Gail Thompson who wrote the article titled “African American Teens Discuss Their Schooling Experiences,” she describes that many African American students are resilient enough to become stronger, instead of weaker, as a result of problems. Nevertheless, there is clearly a need for educators to become aware and more sensitive to some of the unique needs" of Black students that stem farther than merely the

students family background and is actually rooted in the history of Blackness in the United States (Thompson 93).

Despite the deeply rooted and valued bond the club members shared, they still had difficulty relating to each other at times. These difficulties that the Black Ladies Association faced still transcended the power of having a physical space that links the Black students together, because the community is still fractured due to the divisions. These divisions are usually not strictly caused by the class of two girls ego's, instead these conflicts often have undertones of internalized oppression. Basically, the girls disputes are heavily influenced by their responses to their own position within the predominately White student body, to white privilege and being in such a "sheltered" environment. Sadly, even though unity and solidarity exists amongst members of the Black Ladies Association, remnants of internalized racism like colorism and assimilation to stereotypes still periodically caused fractions in the group.

This made programming and activities essential to the organization. Throughout the school year, the Black Ladies Association hosted a variety of programs for their members and the larger student body. "Girls Night Out" is an annual event that takes places before midterms where girls can gather together and enjoy each other while they participate in relaxing activities. The BLA members provide manicures, drinks, refreshments, Christmas music, and much more for the student body; once again, this event helps the students cultivate strong relationships while it supports the BLA's fundraising efforts. All the proceeds of the event go into the annual scholarship fund which is always given to an incoming Black freshman.

While the programming and activities have a purpose aimed at building community and prompting internal healing between the BLA members, further analysis and understanding needs to be given to the group for the girls to truly become empowered in the school community. If

they add more training, mentorship, and overall support that gives them the language to name and dissect the influence of racial inferiority and internalization on their relationships then they would be able to pursue more effective activism as a collective entity in the school atmosphere.

Melissa went on to say how powerful their collective action was, despite its limitations. She said that “at the end of the year something was completed, and it was meaningful, and it mirrored the efforts the club members put out and the care they had for other students.” She went on to note that what made the club unique was that it was

not a group that comes together to talk about issues and proclaims that they are Black women. The work we did was something beneficial for us and for the school as well as with other clubs from other schools. We had purpose and mission and it happened every year without fail and thankfully we have that [legacy] embedded and ingrained in us every year.

This sense of purpose deeply united the Black Ladies Association members. I was incredibly touched by one of the BLA members from the class of 2006 who explained to me that the “special bond [was originally] based on our race, but it definitely went deeper than just the color of our skin....We developed into young women together, its a bond that has not been matched, and it is a bond that is unheard of in most of the social circles I have encountered over the years.”

Black Identity clubs in High schools across the country will only be able to truly flourish in this same manner if race consciousness is promoted amongst students who identify as white as well. There needs to be particular recognition of racial privileges that play into students lives and white teachers must also acknowledge their history, power, and privilege in a positive manner. Beverly explains that everyone should "be able to embrace all of who we are, and to recognize that in a society where race of dominator, or "oppressor," and to become genuinely antiracist in

one's White identity, and to activate work against systems of injustice and unearned privilege" (Tatum 37). With this said, high school teachers need to be given teaching tools, antiracist training, and personal development programs that are centered around unpacking their own racial identity and the racial identity of their students. This is important because students look to their teachers as models who set the standard for classroom discussions.

One of the past club members who graduated in May of 2011 suggested that the BLA executive board members needed more educational instruction and training before they led the club. The BLA alum said that the training was needed because during her "Junior year, BLA gradually veered from its purposeful goal....[it] became more social and didn't really get serious until our [Black History Month] assembly in February...Our executive board needed to be educated about how to present these issues and combat them." The truth of the matter is that this student organization is fluid just like many clubs and organizations. Students come and go and the dynamics between members are constantly changing so even if the mission of the club remains relevant over time, the plans on how to uphold and carry out that mission should be continuously altered depending on the membership base and executive board members. Despite the various strengths of BLA and the positive impact it has on its members, there is still room for improvement and society has a long way to go before we can say that we have fulfilled the dreams of Dr. King.

As a result, it is important to continue to examine how to strengthen the diversity initiatives and cultural programs in high schools across the nation, because the debate surrounding multiculturalism within academic institutions is so much more than a debate about curriculum. It is about how cultural tensions play out in society today and

it is to question what cultural representations will shape the ideals and values as well as the categories of analysis and understanding that will guide the next generation of American leaders. Thus, the question of multiculturalism in higher education-more specifically, of whether and how to include the issues of race in the curriculum [and amongst the student body]- is of great importance (Yamane 6).

In essence, the exclusion of black leaders and texts as well as the issue of race within a classroom or course curriculum, is not merely an injustice to the students, but it is also a reflection of society and the position of Black people in the United States.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to ensure that a complete silencing of the Black voice or perspective does not occur. To avoid this, outlets like Black identity clubs need to prosper, they need to be protected, and completely supported by the academy. In closing, the power behind an organization like the Black Ladies' Association lies in that it challenges its members and the greater community in the same way Audre Lourde believed we all need to be personally challenged. She once said that

each of us is called upon to take a stand. So in these days ahead, as we examine ourselves and each other, our works, our fears, our differences, our sisterhood and survivals, I urge you to take what is most difficult for us all, self-scrutiny of our complacencies, the idea that since each of us believes she is on the side of right, she needs to examine her position (qtd. in Collins 26).

Ultimately, the Black Ladies' Association dares to take on this challenge to self examine as a collective community and sisterhood filled with authentic relationships. This sisterhood supports students while it feeds off the energy and willingness of its members so that each sister leans into

their growing edge, advances their intellectual understanding of race, becomes funneled into a pipeline of activism, and ultimately deepens their sense of their own humanity.

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