MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: EXPLORING A BLACK CULTURAL CENTER AS A COUNTERSPACE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Some African American college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) encounter marginalizing dynamics that place them at risk for unfavorable psychological and academic outcomes. Scholars maintain that members of this population mitigate this risk, in large part, through participation in counterspaces like Black cultural centers (BCC). Counterspaces are settings theorized to bolster the self-concepts of African American college, thus enabling them to ameliorate or circumvent the deleterious effects of racial denigration. Yet, the self-enhancing processes that occur within counterspaces have not been adequately investigated. The purpose of this study was to illuminate self-enhancing processes that occur within counterspaces through an ethnographic case study of a BCC. Over the course of nine months, a series of interviews and focus groups were conducted with a sample of 26 individuals comprised of BCC staff, students who frequented the center, and students who had little to no contact with the center. Additionally, systematic observations were made of the setting and an analysis of key center-related documents was conducted. The analytic approach that was employed combined traditional ethnographic assumptions and a modified grounded theory approach. Findings revealed that the BCC was experienced by many student participants as a “home away from home” that counteracted the isolation and non-belonging experienced by some African American college students. Additionally, the experience of home was supported by direct relational transactions (DRTs). Direct relational transactions are a self-enhancing process comprised of interchanges between individuals that provide social support and that transmits behavioral and cognitive strategies to respond to marginalization. The DRTs that occurred within the BCC helped students to: (a) navigate the vicissitudes of college life, (b) connect with resources critical to their academic progression, and (c) ameliorate the distress associated with their marginalization. Findings also indicated that an important part of what gave rise to DRTs within the BCC was the
distinct roles staff and students took related to each other and the caring relationships that were present between and within these groups. Ultimately, these findings point to the importance of the formation of a supportive “community of othered” as part of counterspace settings for African American college students. They also suggest that what BCCs and other ethnic student organizations provide to counter the experience of isolation and non-belonging is an opportunity to be a part of a supportive community and to engage in self-enhancing relational transactions.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Eighteen years of my life I have been living as a Black person. I come to campus and I need to live in a similar way to the way I’ve been living…and so I just had to reach out to build that community for myself, whether it’s with Black students or Black organizations, The Banks House, whatever. I needed to find that…just to maintain the identity that I’ve already had for the rest of my life. -Marco (study participant)

For some African American college students matriculating at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the collegiate experience can be a tumultuous one rife with unique race-related challenges that have adverse consequences for psychological wellbeing and academic persistence (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Wei, Ku & Liao, 2011). In addition to the demands of coursework and extracurricular activities encountered by all college students, African American college students must contend with a range of racially marginalizing experiences at PWIs, from openly hostile racist gestures (e.g., the use of racial epithets and slurs) to racial microaggressions, to deficit race-based stereotypes and assumptions (e.g. African Americans are intellectually inferior to other ethnic groups; Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cureton, 2003; Fisher & Hartmann, 1993; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Smedley et al., 1993; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). There is also the intangible sense that “I do not belong” that some African American students experience because of a perceived incongruity between the culture of the academic institution and the culture they are accustomed to within their families and communities (Tinto, 1993; Williams-Flourney & Anderson, 1996).

The cumulative effect of these marginalizing experiences can be debilitating for some African American college students. Studies have found that the subsequent stress and strain related to such experiences are associated with psychological and emotional sequelae such as depressive and anxious symptoms, demoralization, and lowered self-esteem and life satisfaction.
(Carter, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000; Mays et al., 2007; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012; Smedley et al., 1993; Utsey, Payne, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). Additionally, the marginalization of African American college students enrolled at PWIs has been theorized to be a significant contributor to why such a large portion of this population does not persist to graduation (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Grier-Reed, Buckley, & Schuh, 2008). Yet, as research has demonstrated, not all African American students who experience marginalization suffer adverse psychological effects or impeded educational progress (Allen, 1992; Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). This likely suggests that members of this population engage in processes that facilitate resilience in the face of marginalization (Brondolo et al., 2009; Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2003; Kim, Bean, & Harper, 2004; Mellor, 2004). This collection of processes has been referred to as adaptive responding (Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2005).

The recognition that African American college students engage in adaptive responding to marginalization has led to a fledging literature focused on explicating the relationship between adaptive responses and psychological and academic outcomes (Brondolo et al., 2009; Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed, Buckley, & Schuh, 2008; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). However, what we know from this literature about the adaptive responses of African American college students has been limited to responses at one level of analysis. Specifically, there appears to be two levels at which adaptive responding occurs for marginalized groups (Jones, 2005). The first level, the individual level, encompasses responses that are enacted and maintained primarily by intrapersonal factors. These responses include (a) avoiding certain places on campus, (b) confronting perpetrators of racism (c) minimizing the significance
of the event (d) racial ideologies, and (e) religious and spiritual beliefs (Brondolo et al., 2009; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Lewis & McKissic, 2009). Adaptive responding also occurs as individuals interact with settings. A setting, as defined by Sarason (1972), is a social context in which two or more people come together for a specific purpose over a period of time. Adaptive responses occurring at the setting level are instantiated through interpersonal factors such as social support and organizational participation. While adaptive responding has been theorized to occur at both individual and setting levels of analysis, the majority of past research has focused on individual-level responses (Brondolo et al., 2009; Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2003, 2005).

The lack of setting level examinations of the adaptive responding of African American college students is surprising given that African Americans have been known historically to rely on social networks and community organizations to resist marginalization (Boyd-Frankiln, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2008; Moore, 1991; Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). As illustrated by the opening quote, African American college students often seek or create spaces that affirm their racial/cultural identities and in which the racially oppressive dynamics that characterize the larger institution are not present (Greer, 2010; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000). Therefore, in order to fully understand how African American college students at PWIs respond adaptively to marginalization, it is necessary to now turn our theoretical and empirical gaze toward the ways this population’s participation in campus settings may promote psychological wellbeing and academic persistence (Guiffrida, 2003).

In the critical race studies literature, campus settings that promote psychological wellbeing and academic persistence have been referred to as “counterspaces” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). According to Solórzano and colleagues (2000),
counterspaces are “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p.70). Scholars have argued that these spaces are more than just “safe” settings for African Americans; they aid this population in adaptively responding to marginalization and thus promote psychological wellbeing and academic persistence (Greer, 2010; Guiffrida, 2003; Lewis & McKissic, 2009).

hooks (1990) reminds us that historically such settings have been sites in which:

Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world (p. 42).

This suggests that for some African American college students enrolled at PWIs, counterspaces are intimately tied to their psychological and academic wellbeing. A small but growing literature on ethnic student organizations confirms this; campus settings such as Black Greek societies, the Black Chorus, and Black cultural centers enhance the capacity of African American college students to thrive under racially hostile conditions by providing respite, support, and a site where culturally-meaningful and affirming behaviors can be enacted (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Grier-Reed, Buckley, & Schuh, 2008; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, 2011).

Of the aforementioned campus settings, perhaps none has had a more profound legacy than Black cultural centers (Hefner, 2002). Black cultural centers (BCCs) are institutionally-funded campus settings that are purposed to provide a venue in which African American college students can (a) explore and practice African American culture, and (b) find a level of psychological and social comfort not always accessible to them within the larger institutional context (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006). For this reason, BCCs could be considered a setting likely to facilitate adaptive responding among African American college students. While BCCs have
been characterized in terms of the benefits they confer on individuals (e.g., a sense of belonging and support; Grier-Reed, 2010; Harper & Quaye, 2007), they have not been systematically investigated in a way that clearly elucidates how they contribute to African American college students’ psychological wellbeing and academic persistence. Thus, this study investigated a BCC on a predominantly White university campus as a counterspace for African American college students. It detailed the ways in which the space is experienced, crafted, and contested by its African American college student membership. The ultimate goal of this inquiry was to contribute to our understanding of how African American college students adaptively respond to experiences of marginalization through participation in settings. This was accomplished through examining the processes that occur within this setting that may promote psychological wellbeing and academic persistence among African American college students.

This document is organized into the following sections. Chapter 2 summarizes the extant literature on the implications of marginalization for the psychological wellbeing and academic persistence of African American college students. It also reviews what is known about how African American college students respond adaptively to marginalization and what remains to be known about the role that campus settings, like Black cultural centers, play in this process. This is followed by a discussion of the Counterspaces framework and its potential for illuminating self-enhancing processes by which BCCs facilitate the adaptive responding of African American college students. Chapter 3 outlines the specific methodological approach that was taken for the study, highlighting the philosophy of science, design, methods, and analytic strategy that informed the inquiry. Chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis and chapter 5 discusses these results and their implications for the current literature on adaptive responding of African
American college students attending PWI and how settings like Black cultural centers play a role in this process.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Racism is a pervasive and enduring facet of American society (as well as other societies). It is based on the ideological premise that one group, identified by its phenotypic characteristics and assumed ancestry, is inherently and immutably superior (or inferior) to another (Bulhan, 1985; Clark et al., 1999; Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006; Harrell, 2000; Jones, 2003). For Black individuals this ideology presupposes a subordinate position relative to White individuals and when coupled with the imposition of power at multiple levels of society results in a complex set of social arrangements and structures that disadvantages this population in a number of critical life domains such as employment, housing, education, psychological and physical health (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Clark et al., 1999; Harrell, 2000; Massey, 2007). Thus, the marginalization experienced by African American college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can be understood to have its basis in the historical and contemporary social phenomenon known as racism.

Marginalization and its impact on African American College Students

This section reviews the literature on the relationship between marginalization and psychological wellbeing and academic persistence in African American college students. It begins by highlighting the aspects of the marginalization experience that are proximally related to unfavorable psychological and academic outcomes. This is followed by a review of factors, across several literatures, critical to an understanding of how marginalization results in impairments in psychological and academic domains of functioning.

Marginalization impacts African Americans through a number of mechanisms such as limited access to resources and dominant narratives that devalue the cultural expressions of this
population (Jones, 1997; Massey, 2007). However marginalization has its most discernible effects on wellbeing via discriminatory interpersonal experiences (Jones, 1997; Paradies, 2006; Sue et al., 2007). Scholars have noted that discriminatory and exclusionary interpersonal acts can be especially challenging to cope with because of their direct and intimate nature (Essed, 1991; Sue et al., 2007). Unfortunately, for African American college students who attend predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), these types of acts are commonplace (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Swim et al., 2003). Though blatant acts of discrimination such as the use of slurs and physical assaults are on the wane, more subtle manifestations of racism in the form of racial microaggressions persist (Sue et al., 2007). African American college students, for example, routinely encounter assumptions that their place at PWIs is unmerited (i.e., due to affirmative action), as well as interpersonal and institutional acts suggesting that they are not welcome or accepted (e.g., not being invited to join study/class groups, strong police presence at “Black” activities/parties; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Experiences like these can lead to African Americans not feeling incorporated into the university, having to endure racism-related stress, and having added challenges in negotiating the developmental period of emerging adulthood.

**Lack of Incorporation.** Within the campus climate literature, it is well established that the extent to which individuals feel incorporated into a university is positively related to academic persistence and attainment (Flowers, 2004; Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling, 1996; Pascarella, 1985). This finding is noteworthy given that African American college students’ experiences of marginalization can lead to feelings of not belonging at the institution (Guiffrida, 2003; Solórzano et al., 2000). A small but growing body of research has begun to speak to the implications of a lack of institutional incorporation for African American college students.
Specifically, there is research to suggest that for this population, not being able to find supportive communities at PWIs leads to feelings of frustration and isolation that may lessen the likelihood of persistence to graduation (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998; Lang & Ford 1992; Littleton, 2002; Ponterotto, 1990;). Therefore, a lack of institutional incorporation can undermine the academic persistence of African American college students.

In addition to discriminatory experiences, an appraisal of incongruence between the cultural values and norms of African American culture and those that characterize the university can result in the experience of not belonging (Tinto, 1993; Williams-Flournoy & Anderson, 1996). Cultural differences in linguistic patterns, expression styles, worldviews and preferences can be barriers to African American college students feeling truly integrated into the institutional community (Armino et al., 2000). Scholars have argued that ultimately, discriminatory interpersonal experiences and cultural incongruence may convey “messages of unimportance, devaluation, and exclusion” (Museus, 2008, p. 569) that lead African American college students to feel that they do not belong at the institution and unwilling to remain there.

**Racism-related stress.** Findings from another body of research suggest that in addition to a lack of institutional incorporation, the experience of racism-related stress can impair psychological and academic functioning. Several models of racism-related/minority-status stress posit that experiences and perceptions of marginalization can be psychologically, physiologically and physically taxing (Clark et al., 1999; Harrell, 2000; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). These models suggest that the ensuing stress from being marginalized can result in both psychological symptoms (e.g., depressive and anxious symptoms) and academic impairment among African American college students (Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007; Banks, 2010; Fries-Britt & Griffin,
Emerging adulthood. Because of the experience of marginalization, African American college students may face unique difficulties negotiating the developmental period that overlaps with the college years. From a developmental point of view, the age span 18-25 is a monumental period with far-reaching implications (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period, known as emerging adulthood, is characterized by intense explorations of who one is as an individual and a member of a group (e.g., racial group), where one belongs, the roles one will take related to others, and how one will interface with society more generally (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2003). While these explorations are present for all emerging adults, for African Americans they occur within the context of marginalization. As such, the explorations of African American college students have an added racialized dimension that introduces additional challenges. As argued by Arnett and Brody (2008), the additional challenge African American emerging adults face is exploring who they wish to be while simultaneously combating the negative conceptions others hold about them and their racial group. In essence, African American college students must negotiate their roles, identity, and sense of belonging against the backdrop of a racialized social system in which they occupy a disadvantaged position.

Resilience/Adaptive Responding: What Remains to be Known

While marginalizing dynamics present at PWIs place some African American college students at risk for unfavorable psychological and academic outcomes, there is evidence that members of this population enact adaptive strategies by which they may experience resilience in the face of marginalization (Brondolo et al., 2009; Mellor, 2004). Resilience refers to a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar,
Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p., 543). Two assumptions undergird this concept: a) there is exposure to adverse conditions that would undermine an optimal state of being, and b) adaptation occurs despite these conditions (Luthar et al., 2000). African American college students’ positive psychological functioning and academic performance in the face of marginalization can be understood as resilience.

Historically, resilience has been considered an individual-level phenomenon, akin to a fixed “trait” that varies from individual to individual. Present day conceptions allow for a multilevel understanding of resilience that includes the influence of contextual factors (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Brodsky Welsh, Carrillo, Talwar, Scheibler, & Butler, 2011; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). Jones (2005) has proposed perhaps the only such model to date that explicitly posits that African Americans adaptive responses to marginalization includes processes that occur at a setting level (i.e, within an interpersonal context). According to Jones, African Americans are able to withstand racism and its psychological consequences through two mechanisms: self-protection and self-enhancement, the latter of which occurs within a “psychological community of others.” Drawing on the work of scholars such as bell hooks (1990) and Franz Fanon (1952, 1963), Case and Hunter (2012) argued that self-protection and self-enhancement are important because experiences of marginalization introduce “meta-communications of otherness” (p. 264). A metacommunication of otherness is the message conveyed to African Americans that they are qualitatively different from the dominant racial group (i.e., European Americans) and thus not deserving of the same level of respect, dignity, and regard accorded to members of this group. Research findings provide evidence that the experience of marginalization does adversely impact how African Americans see themselves, as evidenced in lowered self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989; Odom & Vernan-Feagans, 2010) and
that such changes have deleterious implications for various indices of wellbeing (Carter, 2007; Mays et al., 2007). Thus, the central purpose of adaptive responding is argued to be the preservation and promotion of the integrity of African Americans’ self-concepts in the face of denigration.

Self-protective mechanisms orient the individual toward anticipating and responding to racist incidents (Jones, 2003). Case & Hunter (2012) argued that coping strategies such as vigilance, avoidance, confrontation, minimization of the significance of the event, denial, etc., serve to provide an immediate response to experiences of marginalization. Self-enhancing mechanisms, on the other hand, are considered to be responses that promote or bolster the self-concept in response to or in anticipation of marginalizing experiences (Jones, 2003). Jones (2005) argued that self-enhancement often occurs within the context of others who, through a shared understanding, are able to enhance the person’s sense of self. Indeed, a small but growing body of research suggests that African American college students seek similar others in response to marginalization and that the support received from such networks is an effective coping strategy (Brondolo et al., 2009; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

The contention that adaptive responding is multilevel is consistent with a growing consensus within the field around the nature of resilience; however, the vast majority of theory and research on African American college students’ adaptive responding has favored an individual-level understanding (Jones, 2003, 2005). Consequently, much remains unknown about how adaptive responding is instantiated as individuals participate in settings. More specifically, how self-enhancement occurs within settings has been under-theorized and understudied (Case & Hunter, 2012; Guiffrida, 2003; Jones, 2003, 2005).
Counterspaces

Within the critical race theory literature in education, it has been argued that “counterspaces” facilitate adaptive responses among ethnic minority college students (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). A counterspace can be defined as a setting in which societal meta-communications of otherness directed toward marginalized individuals are challenged and where a positive racial climate exists (Carter, 2007; Case & Hunter, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). These settings are theorized to enhance or bolster the self-concept of African Americans in anticipation or in the aftermath of metacommunications of otherness (Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2005). For African American college students attending PWIs, counterspaces can take on a number of forms. Solórzano and colleagues (2000), for example, in their study of African American college students at a PWI, found evidence of counterspaces in the form of Black fraternities and sororities, academic halls, friend networks, and Black student unions. Grier-Reed (2010), in her study, observed a counterspace in the form of a network between African American college students and faculty. Of all the campus settings that can potentially serve as a counterspace for African American college students, Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) are perhaps the most recognizable and widely used by this population.

Black Cultural Centers as Counterspaces

Black cultural centers have an extensive history of being sites of refuge and respite from racially hostile climates at PWIs (Stovall, 2005). These settings began to be created on college and university campuses during the racially tumultuous 1960s. During that time African American college students demanded a greater presence of African American culture on PWIs, and in addition to the establishment of ethnic studies, the funding of BCCs represented a response by university/college administrators to this demand.
Currently, there is much debate concerning the continued need for BCCs, especially in the context of budgetary constraints (Bankole, 2005; Hefner, 2002; Malveaux, 2005). One argument maintains that in this “post-racial” era, where there is diminished threat of racial bias, such settings no longer serve a functional purpose and should be discontinued (Hefner, 2002). A second line of argument contends that BCCs should be transformed into multicultural centers that would serve the needs of multiple minority student groups (Patton, 2006). Last, it has been argued that these settings, in their current form, are still an integral part of the collegiate experiences of African Americans, providing vital connections to culture, a sense of place, and refuge from racism on college campuses (Hefner, 2002; Princes, 2002).

Against the backdrop of this unfolding discourse, there has been a lack of empirical research demonstrating how BCCs contribute to psychological wellbeing and academic persistence among African American college students. However, given the legacy of BCCs as places of refuge, it stands to reason that this type of setting could be conceptualized as a counterspace for African American college students. That is, BCCs may exist as settings that 1) challenge metacommunications of otherness, and 2) provide a community of support that ultimately promotes psychological wellbeing and academic persistence among those at risk for experiencing the debilitating effects of an adverse institutional climate. The framing of BCCs as counterspaces is useful as it helps us identify specific processes within these settings that may contribute to enhanced wellbeing and academic attainment. Assuming that BCCs exist as counterspaces, it should facilitate self-enhancing processes. Case and Hunter (2012) asserted three self-enhancing processes may occur in BCCs: narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions (Table 1).
Narrative identity work. “Identity work,” a term coined by Snow and Anderson (1987) refers to a range of strategies employed by individuals to construct their identities. Owed to the burgeoning research on narratives and their preeminent role in identity construction, some scholars have focused specifically on “narrative identity work,” or the processes by which individuals create and transform their identity through narratives (Case & Hunter, 2012; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). According to the counterspaces framework, narrative identity work, in addition to being an individual process can be a setting-level one. That is, narrative identity work is also in the service of the collective construction and maintenance of shared, self-enhancing group narratives.

It has been maintained that narrative identity work results in three types of narratives: oppression, resistance, and re-imagined personal narratives. An oppression narrative is a shared belief that articulates the nature of African Americans’ struggles with racism, effectively creating a shared reality and meaning system around experiences of discrimination, isolation, and exclusion. Oppression narratives are self-enhancing because they affirm and privilege the lived realities of this group. This is particularly important because outside counterspaces African Americans routinely encounter ideologies and social dynamics that question the veracity of their claims to truth related to experiences of racial oppression. In other words, African American college students’ subjectivities are often negated or nullified in the larger society (hooks, 1990; Sue et al., 2007), and BCCs become sites where individuals can create a shared reality and meaning system around their experiences of discrimination, isolation, and exclusion. There is reason to believe that identity work related to this type of narrative occurs within BCCs. Guiffrida (2003), in his study, for example, found that members of African American student organizations often discussed “their experiences and frustrations of being a minority” (p. 319).
with each other, and this resulted in a validation of their experiences that they were unable to get from their White peers. Grier-Reed (2010) found a similar process unfolding among an African American networking group comprised of Black faculty and graduate and undergraduate students. She noted that the sharing of race-related experiences allowed for a collective meaning-making processes and validation of students’ experiential realities.

A resistance narrative refers to a shared belief that counterspace members have (a) inalienable rights to dignity, respect, due consideration, and a place in the world, and (b) the ability to resist and overcome racism. This type of narrative is self-enhancing, first, because it exists as a counternarrative to meta-communications of otherness that maintain that African Americans are unworthy of respect, dignity, and social inclusion. Second, this narrative readies the individual to confront racism by asserting that she is capable of successfully doing so. Resistance narratives reject meta-communications of otherness and minimize the possibility that individuals will internalize racism and subsequently develop deficit views of themselves. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argued that resistance narratives enable an individual to foster a “hidden space of consciousness” from which she can identify and resist racism.

In addition to being a part of a setting’s belief structure, resistance narratives can also emerge as a function of roles and opportunities that setting members do not normally have access to and that affirm members. These include leadership opportunities and engaging in meaningful work (e.g., community service, activism) that enhances the way members view themselves. Lewis and McKissic (2009) found that African American college students’ involvement in the Black campus community informed identity work. For example, for one of their participants, organizing and leading a silent protest led the individual to feel empowered to resist and “defy
those individuals and social structures that seek to undermine their humanity and limit their possibilities” (p. 277).

Last, re-imagined personal narratives are those narratives individuals hold about themselves. While this is an individual-level narrative, setting narratives influence the creation and maintenance of these narratives. These narratives arise because deficit-oriented and limiting dominant narratives concerning African Americans have the potential to entrench the identities of these individuals. This often necessitates the re-crafting of personal narratives that are affirming. For example, some female African American college students may feel “unpretty” because their physical characteristics do not qualify them to be attractive according to the standards of their White peers. In order for these women to feel good about themselves, a re-working of their personal narratives is often required. For women who are a part of a counterspace (e.g., family or friends) that challenges that dominant narrative that African American women are unattractive, a resistance narrative of “Black is beautiful” might become a personal narrative that is subsequently self-enhancing. Like resistance narratives, re-imagined personal narratives can also emerge as a function of unique roles and opportunities individuals have access to as a result of their involvement with the setting (Case & Hunter, in press).

**Acts of resistance.** The second challenging process that occurs within counterspaces is called acts of resistance. Acts of resistance refer to behaviors enacted by members of a counterspace that are meant to either affirm the cultural identities of the actors or to protest the oppressive conditions under which they endure. In the former instance, these behaviors are cultural practices that would be denigrated or regarded with little esteem if enacted outside the BCC. They may include distinct linguistic patterns (e.g., slang, talking loudly and expressively), relational gestures (e.g., dap), and styles of clothing. These behaviors represent expressions of
authentic cultural selves, and provide connections to ideas, values, and beliefs that are familiar and personally meaningful. Evidence of culturally-affirming acts of resistance among African American college students participating in campus settings can be found in a few studies. Guiffrida (2003) found that members of African American student organizations talked slang and engaged in coarse joking only in the presence of each other, because they believed that these cultural expressions, at best, would be misunderstood by their White peers and, at worst, would be viewed as “ignorant”. Acts of resistance can also be enacted as social critique. The wearing of clothing with provocative messages, the refusal to patronize certain businesses on campus, and the use of spoken word/poetry to communicate political messages are ways in which African American college students might protest. Lewis and McKissic’s (2009) portrayal of the student engaging in a silent protest is an example of this type of resistance act, which, at its core, represents an “acting out” of resistance and personal reimagined narratives that subsequently affirm the actors emerging self-concept.

**Direct relational transactions.** More commonly referred to as social support, direct relational transactions refer to those direct and routine interactions between counterspace members that promote the individual’s sense of self. These interactions can function in one of two ways. First, such may serve to ameliorate the distress caused by marginalizing experiences. Research has demonstrated that having someone to talk to about stressful experiences and who has had similar experiences can reduce current feelings of psychological distress (Brondolo et al., 2009). Social support also contributes to a sense of community and belonging and reduces feelings of isolation. One consistent finding in the literature on campus settings for African American college students is that these spaces provide members with support that they are not
able to access in the larger institutional community (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Guiffrida, 2003; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

Second, for African American college students, these interactions can bestow knowledge or model strategies related to navigating oppressive contexts. For example, a member of a BCC might suggest to another not to take a particular instructor’s class or to stay away from certain areas of campus or town. Or, one member might urge another to focus on their goals and rely on God as ways to deal with racial stressors. As one participant in Lewis and Mckissic’s (2009) study stated:

[The Black community] kept me sane. Like, coming in and having a bunch of experiences where I didn’t have my parents to talk to or someone to fall back on. Like, I could go into the [Black cultural center] and talk to friends or in my room or down the hall and talk with somebody about the issues I was dealing with and the questions I had. And to have them understand was key because I think if I had come to a point in my first year where I was like, no one understands, that would have been terrible. And to feel as if there were people who did understand, who could sympathize with what you were going through, who were willing to support you and what you did, was priceless. (p. 276)

Settings as a Level of Analysis

**Setting features.** While the above self-enhancing setting processes by no means represent an exhaustive list of all possible self-enhancing process within counterspaces, they do provide a starting point for identifying and understanding setting processes that occur in various counterspaces and that facilitate adaptive responding. That said, in order to investigate these processes within a given counterspace, a settings level of analysis that goes beyond the traditional personological/individual-level approach is required.

As previously defined, a setting refers to two or more people coming together for a purpose over time (Sarason, 1972). A review of the settings literature in community psychology reveals that setting processes are supported by certain features or mechanisms. These
mechanisms include a setting’s belief systems and the roles, resources and relationships individuals have access to as a result of their participation in a setting (Maton & Salem, 1995; Maton, 2008; Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Arguably, these setting mechanisms may give rise to self-enhancing processes within counterspaces.

A belief system refers to the ideology shared among setting members and that comes to characterize the setting (Maton, 2008). It is comprised of the views members hold of themselves and others. Roles are mediating social structures that enable setting members to engage in meaningful activities within the setting. It may confer on the individual a unique social standing, responsibilities, and opportunities relative to others (members and nonmembers; Maton, 2008). Resources are the forms of capital (human, physical, economic) that counterspace members are able to access as a result of their membership and roles within the setting (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Last, relationships refer to the distinct patterns or tenor of relational transactions that occur between setting members (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

**Investigating settings.** Settings can be investigated in a number of ways depending on the ontological assumptions made about settings and the purpose of specific inquiries (Linney, 2000). In this study, settings are viewed from a transactional perspective, meaning that individuals are continuously involved in transactions with settings; they are impacted by settings but also create and shape the settings in which they are embedded (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). This understanding of settings appears to lend itself to inquiries that have three features. First, such studies need to account for the temporality of setting processes (Case, Todd, & Kral, in press). In other words, the ways processes emerge and unfold across time needs to be attended to. Second, given that settings impact people and people shape settings (i.e., reciprocal influence), it is necessary to understand the meaning-making of setting members (Rappaport,
That is, how people experience settings and why they interact with settings in the ways that they do must be considered to better understand the processes that unfold within settings. Last, because settings are shaped by the individuals within them, they are in some senses unique (Linney, 2000). Depending on the particular questions being asked of settings, studies may need an in-depth understanding of a particular setting to answer specific questions.

Several community psychologists have argued for the suitability of ethnography for understanding settings from a transactional perspective (Case et al., in press; Linney, 2000). Ethnography allows for prolonged engagement with a setting which then allows for an in-depth observation of setting processes as they unfold over time. Also, as a “relational method” (Kral, 2014), ethnography facilitates the emergence of the meanings people ascribe to their experiences and actions. Last, ethnography holds promise for contextualizing the unique dynamics that occur within a given setting. Thus, ethnography is especially poised to illuminate the self-enhancing processes that occur within a Black cultural center.

**A note on person-environment fit.** It is important to acknowledge at this point that there are often differences in the experience and perceptions of settings (Linney, 2000). While some may experience a setting one way, others may experience that same setting another way. For this reason, the idea of person-environment fit—the congruence between a person’s characteristics and the features of settings—is an important one (Kelly, 1966; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rappaport, 1977). The implication of person-environment for this study is that there may be differing degrees to which persons experience a BCC as a counterspace. While for some African American college students, involvement with a given BCC may be part of their adaptive responses to marginalization, this may not be true of all African American college students. As McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue, “People are attracted to others whose skills or
competence can benefit them in some way. People seem to gravitate toward people and groups that offer the most rewards.” Consequently, the results of this study will speak to how BCCs facilitate self-enhancement among a subset of African American college students—those for whom the BCC is a part of their adaptive response to marginalization.

**Purpose of Present Inquiry and Research Questions**

The overarching purpose of this research is to advance scholarship on the processes and mechanisms that promote self-enhancement in counterspace settings, specifically within a Black cultural center. This research is positioned to add to the knowledge base a clearer understanding of the role settings play in the adaptive responding of African American college students. This study is informed by the Counterspace framework, which posits a number of self-enhancing processes (i.e., narrative identity work, acts of resistance, direct relational transactions) that may occur within a BCC. This study is also informed by an understanding of setting mechanisms (i.e., belief system, resources, roles, relationships), which may explain how self-enhancing processes emerge and are supported within counterspaces. However, with these frameworks being non-exhaustive and this study being primarily exploratory, this inquiry is meant to uncover whatever processes and mechanisms are present within the setting that are useful to African American college students in the face of marginalization. That said, the specific research questions to be addressed by this inquiry are:

1) What precisely does the BCC counter? In other words, what is the nature of the institutional dynamics that necessitate BCC involvement for those African American college students who frequent the center?

2) How is the BCC experienced and what are the needs that it meets for its student membership (e.g., inclusion, amelioration of distress, developmental navigation)
3) How does self-enhancement occur within the BCC?

   a. What are the self-enhancing processes present within the setting (e.g.,
      narrative identity work, acts of resistance, direct relational transactions)?

   b. How are these processes supported within the setting (e.g., through belief
      systems, relationships, roles, resources)?
CHAPTER 3

CONTEXT OF AND APPROACH TO INQUIRY

This section describes the context of the study and the approach that was taken to the inquiry. Included in the context is information about the Black cultural center (BCC) that is the subject of the inquiry, as well as its host institution. The approach to inquiry details the study in terms of its design and methods, data analytic plan, criteria for findings credibility and inference quality, and the philosophical orientation that undergirded this approach.

Context of the Inquiry

The focus of this study was the BCC at a large university in the Midwest that is characterized by Carnegie Mellon Foundation as very high research activity. This university is recognized as the flagship university for the state in which it is located. In fall 2013 this institution had an undergraduate enrollment of over 30,000, of which African Americans made up 5% (Division of Management Information, 2014). Given that African Americans make up 14.5% of the population in this state, they are statistically underrepresented at this institution.

The Black cultural center which is the topic of this inquiry is referred to in this document by the pseudonym, “The Banks House” (TBH). The Banks House was created in the late sixties with the expressed purpose of “providing a safe and welcoming environment for African American students” as well as being a resource to the larger university community around the contributions of and issues concerning African Americans (Author 1, 2007; Author 1 & Author 2, 2007). Currently, the center either administers or supports a number of programs and initiatives geared toward cultural awareness, the arts, academic achievement and retention,

1“Author 1” and “Author 2” denote the name of anonymized staff of the Black Cultural Center who wrote the cited reports. In the reference section key names and locations are redacted to further protect the identity of the authors, the center, and the institution.
leadership, community building, and civic engagement and intellectual enrichment. Additionally, several predominantly African American student organizations hold their meetings at the center and/or are advised by center staff.

Historically, the university has been plagued with racial climate issues. The first African American to enroll in the university did so in 1887 and it was not until 1894 that the university would see its second African American enroll (Author 1 & Author 2, 2007). Enrollment among African Americans would increase in the early to mid-1900s but would not increase beyond one percent. The emergence of the center was the result of a group of African American students demanding an end to institutional racism that stymied the growth of the African American student population. Part of that demand would be the establishment of a BCC to serve the needs of the African American student population (Author 1, 2007). Currently, the annual enrollment of African Americans at the university hovers around 5% and some institutionally-sponsored studies suggest that some students of color continue to experience the institution as hostile toward them.

The extent of African American college students’ involvement with the center varies from individual to individual. It is estimated by the current director that involvement can range from 1-20 hours per week. For some students, their only contact with the center is through a one-hour weekly “Lunch and Learn” event where a speaker presents on a pertinent topic and engages the audience in a discussion. Estimates suggest that the center attracts a total of 1000 -1300 attendees (of differing racial backgrounds) per semester through this event. For other students, there is more sustained contact through their volunteering time to help with clerical duties or the center’s programming.
Individuals who most frequently interact with the setting are involved with “Student Strong”. Student Strong is an initiative geared toward the retention of African Americans at the university (Author 1, 2007). It aims to provide African American freshmen with academic, social, and cultural enrichment that will enhance their experience at the university and increase their likelihood of remaining at the institution beyond their first year. This is accomplished through a combination of events, workshops, and activities meant to connect these students to campus resources, leadership opportunities and peer networks. The organizing of the initiative is aided by a group of 8-10 students who serve as either interns or members of the executive board (E-board), with the latter occupying various chairs (e.g., programming, recruitment, publicity).

The Researcher

“Owning one’s perspective” in terms of personal connections and frames to a given study is considered one of the hallmarks of effectively communicating qualitative research (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005; Ponterotto & Greiger, 2007). This section delineates the personal grounding of the inquiry. I (the researcher) am a Black male who at the time of this inquiry was an advanced graduate student in clinical/community psychology. Prior to this inquiry, I conducted several studies on the racism-related experiences of Black Caribbean immigrants and African Americans. I was born in the United States but was reared in the Caribbean by Caribbean parents. I identify as both African American and Black Caribbean. The choice of this dual identity is partly the result of my recognizing that even though my familial heritage and cultural socialization is Caribbean, the racialized U.S. social system does not allow for ethnic differentiation between persons of African descent. In other words, I am keenly aware that I am viewed simply as “African American” in the U.S. While there is indeed a societal imposition of

\footnote{Given the visibility of this program, the pseudonym “Student Strong” is used.}
the African American identity, I also personally identify as African American because of the cultural similarities between African Americans and Black Caribbean immigrants and because of the common experience of racial marginalization that typifies the experiences of these populations.

My unique identity as described above informs the research in the following ways. First, as an African American, I approached this study assuming that many African American college students feel racially marginalized on a PWI. I also assumed that because of my identity (and phenotypic characteristics), participants would be willing to disclose their racism-related experiences to me. Second, from a critical perspective (see below), I assume that my identity as a Black male helps inform how I understand and represent the realities and experiences of African American college students. This is important, as consistent with a critical perspective this study privileges the lived experiences and subjectivities of African American college students as a subjugated group.

**Philosophical Orientation**

Science is said to be guided by distinct philosophical assertions that are assumed to be true (Ponterotto, 2005). Over the past 70 years, science has seen various philosophical turns and most recently there has been a proliferation of philosophical stances, some of which stand in direct contrast with each other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For this reason, being explicit about the philosophical assumptions that guide one’s research has been viewed as critical in the age of philosophical pluralism. This practice provides a position or platform from which others can evaluate the merit of the approach and the claims to truth that are made (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). This section discusses the researcher’s philosophical orientation to the study
and how this informed his choices concerning the research design and methods that were employed.

In terms of how I view reality, I assume there to be various types of ontological objects, and this necessitates the use of a variety of methodological approaches to explore various facets of the social world (Shweder, 1999). For the purposes of this study, I was interested in what has been referred to as “qualia” or those ontological objects which have their basis in individuals’ subjectivities (Shweder, 1999). These coalescing subjectivities, considered from a critical-constructionist lens, are self- and socially-constructed “truths” that are mediated by factors such as one’s social location to power/powerlessness and privilege/disadvantage (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Patton, 2002).

Methodologically, these truths are brought to the “surface” through dialectic processes engaged in by the knowers (i.e., the researched) and the would-be knowers (i.e., the researchers) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Interviewing is one such process that enables the researcher to “develop insights on how subjects interpret...the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 94). Methodological considerations are also informed by a transactional understanding of settings, which assumes that individual, contextual and temporal factors are inseparable and mutually defining (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). In essence, it is the interactions between individual and contextual factors that give rise to psychological phenomena, and thus our understanding of these phenomena should be informed by the interplay between individuals and context. (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Case & Hunter, 2012; Linney, 2000). “Setting” was chosen as the unit of analysis to capture this interplay (Linney, 2000), and observations and document analysis were chosen as additional procedures to more fully explore the interplay between converging factors.
Last, the specific lens that was brought to this inquiry is one rooted in a critical standpoint. In other words, my analytic gaze was especially attuned to issues of oppression, resistance and empowerment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

**Research Design and Methods**

The research design employed by this study is best described as an ethnographic case study. The “case” was The Banks House (TBH) as a setting and more specifically a counterspace. In terms of this setting, the focus was on exploring self-enhancing processes as a function of the relationships between members of the space, and between members and resources, activities, roles, and opportunities with which they interact.

This case study took the form of an ethnography in which I was engaged within the setting as a participant observer over the course of nine months. I combined data from interviews, focus groups, systematic observations, and a document analysis, to gain an in-depth understanding of the setting and more specifically the self-enhancing processes that occurred within them (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

**Setting entrée and involvement.** In January 2012 I formerly received permission from the director of TBH to proceed with this study in the ways proposed in this document. As part of my agreement with the director and in the service of reciprocity, I agreed to present portions of my findings to members of the TBH.

I began attending activities at TBH during the summer of 2012. During this time I began forging relationships with the members of the setting. I also used the opportunity to make observations that guided the development and refinement of an interview protocol.
The study. The data collection period began in December 2012 after Institutional Review Board approval was received. At that point, I formally announced to setting members my interest in conducting a study that would involve them.

Participants. The study consisted of two separate purposive samples that differed by the extent of their involvement with TBH. The first sample consisted of individuals who had frequent interactions with the setting (high-involvement sample). It was comprised of 11 students and two staff. The vast majority of students were involved with Student Strong. Members of this sample were interviewed individually and several students were part of a “member check” focus group that occurred after the interviews were completed and the analysis had begun. The student portion of this sample consisted of four (4) males and seven (7) females who identified as “Black” or “African American” and who had an average age of 20.63 years. Of this group, three (3) were seniors, two (2) were juniors, three (3) were sophomores, and three (3) were freshmen. The staff portion of this sample consisted of one male and one female who identified as “Black” or “African American” and who had an average age of 30 years.

Because of the frequency of their contact with the setting these individuals were considered to be well-positioned to speak to the self-enhancing processes that occur within the setting. The member check focus group consisted of individuals from this sample as well as other individuals who had frequent contact with the setting as paid or volunteer student assistants. The purpose of this focus group was to solicit feedback from participants concerning themes that had emerged in the analysis. Additional details concerning the participants in this sample can be found in Table 2 (Appendix B).

The second purposive sample consisted of students who had little to no contact with TBH. Unlike, the members of the first sample who were recruited directly into the study, these
participants were recruited through predominantly African American student organizations.

After responding to a recruitment email, they were screened based on their self-report concerning their involvement with TBH. Specifically, participants were asked:

How much involvement have you had (over the past 12 months) with TBH? This includes as a volunteer or participant in any of the programs associated with or housed with the center including Student Strong?

A) none  
B) very little  
C) moderate  
D) a lot

Participants who answered “none” or “very little” were recruited for a focus group. Three focus groups were conducted with four, three, and two participants respectively. The addition of low-involvement participants was necessary to determine whether differences in perceptions and experiences of TBH exist as a function of the extent of one’s involvement in the setting. Additionally, it is possible that individuals with no or little contact with the setting may hold preconceived notions/beliefs about the setting that differ from the beliefs of high-involvement participants. Therefore, by having these focus groups, there could be a range of experiences and perceptions of TBH represented. The low-involvement sample consisted of nine participants, three (3) males and six (6) females who identified as “Black” or “African American” and who had an average age of 20 years. Of this group, three (3) were seniors, two (2) were juniors, one (1) was a sophomore, and three (3) were freshmen. Additional details concerning the participants in this sample can be found in Table 2 (Appendix B).

Consent process. Students who indicated an interest in participating in the project were given two consent forms. I went over the consent form, highlighting the different components of the project in which students could participate (i.e., interview, observation, focus group) or opt out of participation. I also informed students of their rights including their right to withdraw their
participation. Students were also informed that they would receive $10 for each interview or focus group in which they participated. Students who were interested in participating in the study signed both consent forms, keeping one for their records and returning the other to me.

**Interviews.** I began interviewing students and staff in fall 2012 and continued into mid-spring 2013. Interviews were conducted at various venues including a private office at TBH and one in the psychology building. Participants chose pseudonyms for themselves prior to the start of the interview. The interviews lasted anywhere from 50 minutes to 75 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol that allowed for emergent questions to arise during the course of the interview. This interview protocol (Appendix C) included a demographic section and was developed to gain insight concerning (a) what it is like to be a student on campus, (b) challenges/opportunities on campus, (c) perceptions of and experiences with TBH, d) race-based experiences on campus and perceptions of the racial climate of the institution, e) how students understand the benefits they derive from their involvement with the setting, and f) the nature of their relationships with other students in the setting and with staff. For the staff interview protocol (Appendix C), questions were developed to gain insights concerning staff’s understanding of (a) the program in terms of its philosophy and model, (b) their role in the program and relationship with other staff and students, and (c) the benefits they believe (and have observed) students derive from their involvement with the setting. Interviews were conducted to the point of theoretical saturation where there was a repetition of themes (Adler & Adler, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In other words, interviews were carried out until newer themes (in more recent interviews) began to mirror previously identified ones (in older interviews).
**Focus Groups.** I conducted 4 focus groups in spring 2013 in a conference room in the psychology building. Participants chose pseudonyms for themselves prior to the start of the focus groups. The duration of focus groups ranged from 40-60 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. The protocol for the low-involvement focus group (Appendix C) was developed to assess the following: (a) what it is like to be a student on campus, (b) challenges/opportunities on campus, (c) race-based experiences on campus and perceptions of the racial climate of the institution, (d) perceptions of and experiences with TBH, and (e) benefits and detriments of involvement with TBH. The protocol for the high-involvement (member-check) followed the above format, but also allowed the facilitator to present themes that had begun to emerge from the interviews and that were related to the above foci of the protocol. A copy of this protocol can be found in Appendix C.

**Observations.** Preceding and concurrent with the interviews, I conducted systematic observations within the setting. These observations were broad at first, but narrowed in focus as the study proceeded to include only “key social groups and processes” relevant to the inquiry (Adler & Adler, 1994; Berg, 2004). Specifically, observations began with various meetings and events (e.g., Food 4 da Soul) at TBH but then focused on the meetings and interactions between staff and the Student Strong E-Board and interns. Like interviews, observations were conducted until “theoretical saturation” where newer data began to mirror previously collected ones (Adler & Adler, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My observations included both “first-order” and “second-order concepts” (Van Maanen, 1979). First-order concepts are “facts” such as descriptions of the people, the arrangement of furniture, the seating arrangement of individuals, and “objective” behaviors. Second-order concepts are considered to be more impressionistic as it is based on the observer’s interpretations of and emerging insights related to first-order
concepts (Berg, 2004; Van Maanen, 1979). I observed the nature of participants’ involvement in the setting, their relational transactions with each other, and the roles and activities they undertook. Observations of events took place from 30 minutes to two hours. These observations were taken during regularly scheduled meetings and activities involving the E-Board. They were recorded as jottings that were converted to integrated fieldnotes which combined first- and second-order concepts (Emerson et al., 1995; Van Maanen, 1979).

**Document analysis.** A small document analysis was conducted of publicly available materials (e.g., reports, applications, website, etc.). This was largely for the purposes of contextualizing the program in terms of its philosophy, programming, etc. and linking these to findings that emerge within the context of interviews and observations. This analysis was conducted in an unstructured fashion, consistent with recommendations for when such analyses play a “subsidiary or complementary role” (Peräkylä, 2005, p. 870) in the research design. A list of analyzed documents can be found in Table 3 (Appendix D).

**Data Analysis Plan**

The study’s analytic strategy combined theoretical strands of ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson et al., 1995; Van Maanen, 1979) with a modified grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The assumptions that guided this strategy include: a) the centrality of the inquirer as the analytic tool (Patton, 2002); b) analysis as necessarily iterative and recursive in nature (Yeh & Inman, 2007); and c) the use of multiple data forms and perspectives to achieve a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002).

Grounded theory analysis emphasizes multiple forms of coding to render a comprehensive understanding of a subject (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, as some grounded theory theoreticians have argued, the level of coding completed should fit the data and
task at hand (Charmaz, 2006). As such, my coding took on the following form. I coded data according to themes focused not only on the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences with campus and TBH, but also the actions that they took within these settings. This was necessary given the transactional conception of settings that guided the study and that assumed that settings impact individuals and individuals in turn shape settings. Additionally, my coding for themes occurred at two stages. An initial coding (also known as “open coding”; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998) was performed on the data such that the data were divided into distinct units of meaning related to the research questions. A second stage of coding akin to what Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to as “axial coding” synthesized and organized the data into aggregated categories and subcategories related to the research questions (Appendix E). The purpose of this coding was to return the data to a coherent whole. Transcripts from interviews and focused groups were analyzed according to this two-stage scheme. However, observations and documents received only the first stage of coding and were synthesized into the larger categories of codes that emerged from analyses of the transcripts. I used NVivo to assist in this analytic process.

**Criteria for Findings Credibility and Inference Quality**

I adhered to a series of conventions within the field of qualitative research aimed at ensuring the credibility of findings reported and the quality of inferences made. These included a) saturation, b) reflexive practices c) multiplism, and d) member checks.

**Saturation.** Saturation refers to the point in data collection and analyses where no new insights are gleaned from new data. In the context of this study, data were collected in the form of interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to the point of thematic saturation. That is, data were collected until there were (a) consistent themes repeated across data sources,
and (b) no new themes repeated across data sources. Themes that resulted from saturation can be found in Appendix E.

**Reflexive practices.** Reflexivity is the process by which the researcher becomes aware of the ways in which his/her theoretical dispositions, values, and agenda, etc. impact the research process (Finlay, 2002; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000). Additionally, it refers to an awareness of the ways engagement in the research endeavor impacts the researcher. In an ongoing manner, I noted my emerging (and especially unanticipated) awareness of my impact on the research process and the impact of that process on me. Then, through a process of peer debriefing, I communicated this growing awareness to a scholarly community familiar with qualitative research (Schwandt, 2000). The purpose for doing this is to ensure that there is sufficient critical and scholarly challenge and audit of the study’s methods, findings and conclusions given my close proximity to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

**Multiplism.** The use of multiple methods and perspectives has been thought of as an approach to inquiry that adds “rigor, breadth and depth” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In this study, I used multiple methods (interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis) and multiple perspectives (staff vs. students, high-involvement vs. low-involvement) to arrive at a deeper, more nuanced, and comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon (Greene, 2007; Patton, 2002).

**Member checks.** This is the informal process by which the interviewer solicits the interviewee’s reaction to his/her understanding of the interviewee’s construction. This procedure has been recommended to help ensure that the interviewer has a firm understanding of the interviewee’s construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Member checks occurred at two points. First, during interviews, I occasionally paused to reflect my
understanding of what the interviewee said, and to ask the interviewee if my understanding was accurate or should be modified in some recommended way. Second, a focus group with high-involvement students was conducted to share and solicit feedback on emerging themes.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the data analyses. It represents a synthesis of data collected through individual interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents. Initial codes were combined into larger thematic categories to create a coherent representation (see Figure 1 in Appendix E). This representation catalogued the perceptions and experiences of participants with respect to (a) marginalizing dynamics within the institution, and (b) the ways The Banks House (TBH) facilitated self-enhancing processes that may contribute to psychological wellbeing and academic persistence among African American college students.

Outline of Findings

The results of the analyses are presented in the following order. First, themes related to the marginalization of study participants are presented to begin to answer the first research question, which asked what precisely does TBH counter. More specifically, these results characterize the marginalizing dynamics of the institution, how these dynamics are experienced by study participants, and the impacts of these dynamics on psychological wellbeing and academic persistence. Building on these results, the second and third category of themes answers the second research question. They highlight specific needs that appear to drive participants’ (especially those with higher levels of involvement) participation in the center and the needs that are met by participation. They also describe how the center was experienced by participants. The fourth category of themes answers the third research question, which asked how self-enhancement occurs within the center. It highlights self-enhancing relational transactions that occur within the context of specific roles and relationships. The fifth category of themes speaks to an emergent and unanticipated finding that does not neatly align itself to one
of the proposed research questions, but nevertheless speaks to a critical way in which the self-enhancing processes within TBH are preserved and supported for future generations by current setting members. It details a type of dynamic setting-level “energy,” manifested in contestations of the space that appears to drive efforts to preserve and support the self-enhancing function of TBH.

**Counterwhat?**

When you look at the numbers, like this school is not even built to be welcoming. When you only have so many people who look like me, people who I can identify with culturally, that’s an unwelcoming environment even before I get here—just structurally.

- Lance

The basic assumption underlying the notion of counterspaces is that these settings exist in juxtaposition to some suboptimal state of affairs, essentially countering and reshaping that unideal condition. In the case of African American college students matriculating at predominantly white institutions (PWI), the “counterwhat” is a complex phenomenon that extends beyond specific instances of racial bias. As the results attest, the counterwhat is discrete but cumulative, structural but often without tangible substance. The counterwhat is best understood as an experience of placelessness or outsideness characterized by being socially located away from the center of community. If “place” evokes imagery of belonging, identity and connection, then placelessness is the antithesis of place. Placelessness is the experience of exclusion, non-belonging, unfamiliarity, and disconnection.

Placelessness, as experienced by participants in this study, occurred within a number of specific campus contexts including Greek society, classrooms, student housing and even on the streets. Moreover, the experience of placelessness had significant implications for participants; it informed the ways they traversed, negotiated, and experienced college life. As a result of the ubiquity of placelessness in the life spaces of African American college students, placelessness
appeared to have natural consequences for this group’s psychological wellbeing and capacity to persist academically.

**Greek lines.** The placelessness experienced by many African American college students often began with specific racist incidents early in their matriculation. Allison recounted an incident that occurred in her interaction with members of a Greek society and that became the basis for her awakening to the reality of her placelessness on campus.

Oh I remember the weekend—I cried. I remember my first [experience of racism] because, well, William Cross’ theory, the Nigrescence theory. You have your encounter then you have moment where like it hits you like, “Woooo, like I’m African American in a predominantly White institution, you know what I mean?” So… it was like literally the first month of school I was with a couple of African American girls in my residence hall and we met this Caucasian guy and he was like really nice and talking and cracking jokes, and he was like you guys should just come back to my Frat house and like just hang out. So, I’m like cool. We went and his Frat brothers wouldn’t let us in. They were saying, ‘Oh it’s too full’ and the guy that we were with was like “What are you talking about, like there’s like plenty of room, just let them in!” and he was like “No, dude”. He said something about like the cops are coming, we need to like calm it down or something like that. So, I remember we walked around to the back and we could see that there was like literally no one there. Everyone was like chilling out. No one worried or anything you know what I mean? The party is in full effect and the guy that we were with he picks up on it and he actually said, “Man these are my frat brothers and I had no idea that they were like that.” And he was implying racism.

Interestingly, Allison’s first encounter with racism on campus was not with an individual, but with an organization, a permanent fixture on campus with resources (i.e., a fraternity house) and some amount of power (i.e., ability to grant access to that house). This is a critical consideration for understanding the substance of the placelessness experienced by Allison and other African American college students in their interactions with Greek societies. That is, the placelessness experienced by African American college students has the potential to be social as in the case of being rejected by a specific group of people. Additionally, placelessness is also a
structural-spatial condition as one can be barred entry to a building on campus (i.e., the fraternity house), or at the very least be made to feel uncomfortable navigating certain campus locales.

The physical ecology of placelessness is something African American college students are keenly aware of. Michelle, for example, mentioned that she observed that there are “parties we [Michelle and her friends] probably can’t get in because we’re Black.” Similarly, Lance, in his narrative, recognized that to walk by the fraternity houses is to traverse an unsafe space.

I was walking past the frat houses and I was by myself going to my dorm and there were people sitting on the porch and they’re drinking, and I walked passed and I got called a nigger, like four times, so I mean there are dangers out there whether people want to admit it…for me there are dangers out there.

These quotes suggest that for at least some African Americans there are places where it is difficult or at the very least extremely uncomfortable for African Americans to navigate spatially and psychologically on account of their racial group membership.

**Hypervisibility and invisibility in classrooms.** The classroom context represents another campus setting participants reported difficulty navigating due to their race. The experience of placelessness for African Americans in this context had to do with a paradoxical experience of invisibility and hypervisibility. Bobbi cogently spoke to the nature of this hypervisibility/invisibility paradox when she stated:

I’m the only Black person (in the class). They (classmates) just look at me and I just feel like I’m an alien. And I just, it makes me not want to go to class and I just hate working on group projects because it’s not like high school where you may not know somebody but they’re smiling at you so it can work. But here it’s just like it’s seriously survival of the fittest when it comes to your intellectual level because they already think I’m dumb because I’m a minority and a Black minority so when I actually contribute something worthy, especially, like economic statistics they’re surprised ‘cause they expect the Asian to give us all the answers.
As Bobbi alluded to, one way that invisibility and hypervisibility come into play is when African American students are overlooked in the formation of class groups. On the one hand, their race makes them hypervisible as race becomes the factor that determines their exclusion from a potential group. Simultaneously, members of this population become invisible as they are essentially reduced to stereotyped Black bodies, without any consideration for their potential for meaningful contributions to a group. Danni described this hypervisibility/invisibility in classroom context as an almost routine challenge for her.

I’m used to it now, being the only Black person in class when it comes to group projects [and] I’m the last person somebody wants to work with. But normally I get the highest grade in the class, so that doesn’t bother me… I’m not unable to learn but that’s really how it always is, and you’re usually one of a few Black people in the class, so if it’s not another Black person you don’t have anybody to stick together with…I’ve tried to work with other students; they don’t want to work with me.

Another way that African American college students experience hypervisibility/invisibility is in being called upon to represent the perspective of all African Americans. This often occurs in class discussions that broach the topic of race and call for “the African American perspective.” African American students, often underrepresented in any given class, are subsequently looked upon to provide such a perspective. In that moment, because of their racial group membership these students are made hypervisible and, because there is an assumption of a monolithic African American experience or perspective, they are made invisible in terms of their own unique perspective and experiences. The very act of trying to articulate a monolithic experience or perspective becomes an intense burden to have to negotiate.

In Rhet (Rhetoric) 105 [when] we talked about culture it was Africa. And so they always came to me like, “Why do they do this?” “I don’t know.” I don’t know but the whole class was always looking at me and I felt so awkward like man I know I’m Black but jeez, so it was like a little, I don’t know, a little shocker there…it was just one of me and it just so happened that the topic was about Africa so yeah I always got the looks, the stares, the questions and I don’t know. The teacher did it sometimes too. – Annie
Being a minority in most of those cases, you always have to defend your race. Or you have to be the token and explain why your race even though you can’t explain why your race or ethnicity feels a certain way about something. They always go to you for that representation. So the pressure is like always on. – Lance

The paradoxical condition of hypervisibility and invisibility that accompanies being African American in predominantly White classes contributes to a sense of placelessness for this population because expectations and assumptions are made of them that are not made of other students. The experiential dimension of this condition of placelessness for African American students is a marked sense of not truly being a part of their classes, of being isolated, alone, and othered. Sam summarized the all-encompassing consequences of placelessness within classroom settings when she stated:

It affects everything, the way you wake up in the morning, how you do your homework, whether you choose to go to class, whether you answer questions in class or ask questions in class. It’s like feeling so small, you know, and everybody around you feels like giants...you feel so intimidated. And then, it’s uncomfortable to tell someone. I feel like it’s this way because I’m the only Black person in the classroom [and] just because, you know, people don’t want you to pull your race card because they like to think that [name of university] is beyond that. I spent my entire freshman year being quiet and just kind of struggling on my own.

The “Black” box. Another dimension of the experience of placelessness involves narrow, racialized, and stereotyped ideas about African Americans that color the interactions of this group with members of other ethnic groups. These ideas were not restricted to classroom contexts, but seemed to follow African American college students wherever they went. Byron mentioned, for example, assumptions of athleticism and intellectual dullness that follow him.

People assume that I’m an athlete, that I’m here on scholarship. I’ve gotten that a few times in class. “Oh, so what sport do you play?” Uh...really!? I mean, I have to play a sport? Like here? On this campus to go here. Like, okay. “No, I’m here on scholarship actually. If you must know, it’s academic.”
Byron’s emphasis on “here” in his narrative is notable. It suggests that the perception of some African American college students may be that there are strict and racialized parameters around their place in the university. That is, African American college students are here to play sports or are here because of affirmative action. Because these assumptions are not made of the average student, African Americans are disqualified from the same type of place or membership European American students have in the institutional community.

Other students described a black box were general assumptions were made about the types of knowledge and experiences they should have by simple virtue of their racial group membership. Byron, for example, stated that, “They [students of other ethnic groups] expect you to know certain music; they expect you to know about certain athletes; they expect you to know about certain actors and actress… It’s just kinda like, “Oh, well you should know this!” Similarly, Danni noted about her non-Black counterparts,

“They just automatically assume that we all came from the inner city. I’m like, you know, “some of us do live in the suburbs. Suburbs aren’t…for Whites only.” And they’re like, “Oh, that’s surprising. “Did you go to an all-Black school?” “ No, I didn’t.”

Similar to the spatial constrictiveness that characterizes participants’ interactions with Greek societies, there appears to be an ideological or belief-based constrictiveness in the ways African American college students are perceived and what is expected of them on campus.

**Disconnection from the academic opportunity structure.** A small but notable number of participants reported struggling not only in the social dimension of their transition to college life but also in the academic transition. They felt unprepared for the rigor of coursework and uncertain how to access the resources that would aid in their adjustment to the academic requirements of college. For some, this experience of not knowing where to turn for help was an
experience of placelessness as it represented a disconnection between themselves and what should be naturally-occurring supports for them within the institution:

This campus is a vulture… they want you to use resources and research and APA style. They expect me to do math, know science, you know, and be culturally diverse and be accepting and be respectful and it’s like don’t become an alcoholic, don’t become a drug-addict. They expect all these things and they don’t even consider the fact that not everybody is equipped with the tools to handle such a heavy load. - Sam

For Sam, the perceived absence of a clear infrastructure to connect students to academic resources represented a type of callousness on the part on the institution toward students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It communicated that as an African American student her presence on campus is not valued enough to provide supports for her academic persistence.

**In the dorms and through the streets.** For African American college students placelessness can find its way into the most unexpected places. Some study participants, specifically males, described being harassed by the police on campus without just cause and having their parties targeted by the police for no apparent reason. Other participants spoke of stumbling on racist drawings and writings in their residence halls. Lance even recalled an incident his freshman year when a crime alert described, “an African American male, light complexion, 5’8”, 160, which was probably every light skinned male on this campus” and being asked on three separate occasions by residents of his dorm if he had committed a crime. Still, other participants, specifically women, recalled being the recipients of a combination of racist and sexist taunts. They mentioned being called “strippers” and “hoes” as they walked along the streets at night. In fact, for some like Danni, “racism in the streets” was a common occurrence:

I’m in [name of a student organization], so it’s an all minority group mostly African American women. We went out last night to raise money for our organization and every time we do this we always experience the craziest stuff. So we go on [name of a main street on campus] and it’s mostly Caucasians on [name of a main street on campus] and they just say the rudest things, like things I never thought I would hear in my whole life,
like “Oh I don’t support Black people. I don’t give money to Black people. I don’t like minorities. I’m not colored, so I wouldn’t give to colored people. I’d rather buy pizza than to give money to you.” This is all stuff I heard last night; this isn’t even the worst of the things that I’ve heard.

There was a strong sense among study participants that college life brought with it a certain amount of unpredictability as it pertains to racial hostilities and that this unpredictability led to feelings of never being truly safe. No domain of college life seemed capable of escaping the reach of placelessness. Not only were African Americans experiencing placelessness in their interactions with Greek societies and in their classes but also in what should be the mundane, uneventful, and safe spheres of their collegiate experience. They felt excluded in their residence halls and targeted on the streets. The whole campus, as one participant described it, was a “warzone” that required African American students to be constantly on guard.

**The weight of placelessness.** According to participants’ self-report, the cumulative weight of placelessness can have psychological and emotional consequences for African American college students. It can lead to a sense of ambivalence when students consider their feelings about the university. Some participants noted that while they were indeed grateful for the academic opportunities afforded by the university, the price for those opportunities was a steep one paid with feelings of frustration, anger, and despair. Danni put it this way, “if the degree didn’t look that good on paper, I probably wouldn’t stay here.” The weight of placelessness also has impacts for both psychological and academic functioning. Lance, for example, noted the emotional toll his experience has taken on him:

> It just piles up, piles up, piles up and if you don’t deal with it then the slightest thing can set you off, so… There had been days where I had sat in my room and cried because I hated it so much here, literally cried because I hated it so much here. And I wasn’t far from home. I was only 45 minutes away from home.
Sharon shared a similar sentiment about the emotional sequelae of the steady accumulation of negative experiences. She described it as, “nitpicking, nitpicking, and nitpicking, and then eventually it’s like how much more can you take at the end before it explodes?” Sam, in her narrative, described both psychological and academic impairment due to the impact of experiences of placelessness.

It [marginalizing experiences in class] affects your grades, you know, like when you’re sitting around and just kinda letting people just kind of disregard you all the time. I mean, your confidence is to the crapper, you know? And your confidence and how you feel about yourself. [It] affects everything.

The experience of placelessness also appears to have important consequences for feelings of belonging to the university. When asked directly to what extent they felt a sense of belonging related to the university, participants described a tenuous state of affairs. Some described themselves simply as numbered bodies meeting a diversity quota.

Danni: So back to your question, “how do we feel like we [African Americans] fit into this university?” I feel like we’re…like we’re…I feel like we’re tolerated.

Byron: Yeah, I was going to say…we’re just here to…so they could like have more than one percent African Americans at their school. If they didn’t have to have that percent, I don’t think they would even let us in. I really feel that way.

Andrew: So, more like a statistic?

Danni and Byron: Yeah.

Danni: I don’t feel wanted. No other Black person I know really feels wanted by this school. It’s like they took us just to say that they have a couple Black people here.

According to Danni and Byron, the placelessness they experience on campus could be aptly described as misplacement. That is, these participants believed that, to an extent, they were being used by the university for a purpose that was not aligned with why they enrolled at the institution. Bobbi, in her narrative expresses a slightly more nuanced sense of placelessness, one
based on conditional or contingent belonging. She noted that her sense of belonging depends on the part of the university in question.

[I feel I belong] only when I’m at The Banks House or around Black people or around Black events. In my class, I don’t feel like I’m a part at all. Honestly, I just get in, I get out, I take the exam, get the work, whatever. I don’t try to stay around and communicate with peers, even though that would be a really good thing especially if I miss a class. But I don’t know, it just seems so forced and weird talking to other races now.

What accounts for the experience of placelessness touches on the multiple factors highlighted so far: exclusionary practices perpetuated by Greek societies that create unsafe spaces on campus, being invisible and hypervisible in classroom contexts, and the reality that there is no safe space and that racism can find its way from the streets into the residence halls. Perhaps most importantly, amidst these various messages indicating that African American students are unwelcome, there were no messages from the institution saying that they are, in fact, welcome. In this regard, a few participants were careful in their narratives to distinguish between “diversity” and “inclusion.” They noted that the university has a clear ideal around diversity—at least numerical diversity—but ultimately fails to be an inclusive environment for African American students. Sharon provided a poignant example of this when she recalled a series of incidents involving racially-themed memes being posted to social media and the lack of response on the part of the university’s administration to rectify the situation:

That whole page was just full of microaggressions. It was taken to the Student Senate and the Student Senate voted and said that they could still have it. And the only thing that they had to do was change the name of it. Instead of calling it [name of institution] Memes Page, they called it the Unofficial [name of institution] Memes Page. And so they said like, “Oh, that’s how we’re going to solve the problem,” which I think is horrible. And the fact that the [the institution] is okay with their name, unofficial or not being on that, is like what’s going on here? See, in my head, by them doing that, it was kind of like…”Yeah, we appreciate the diversity that’s happening on campus. But nah…We don’t really actually care about you guys.” Basically, it just sent out a message that it’s not that we’re unwelcomed…It’s that we don’t care enough about you. So “care
“enough” is what really is affecting it. Because I know this school loves to say how diverse they are. But just because we’re diverse, which means you know we may have one person from Tanzania, one person from Istanbul, that doesn’t mean we’re inclusive at all. So I think that school, this school, is very confused or… I don’t know. They have this grand idea that we are so diverse but really we’re not. We’re just…we’re not inclusive.

Here, Sharon argues that the seminal issue faced by African American college students is that the university does not care enough about them to institute the conditions that will allow members of this population to feel welcomed on campus. She also submits for our consideration the reality that placelessness is not just a preponderance of exclusion but also a lack of inclusion. This suggests that the racialized social dynamics on campus can be understood to simultaneously communicate two distinct but interrelated messages to African American college students: (a) you are on the outside, and (b) you are not on the inside. While the former speaks more to the social location of this population in relation to the dominant racial group, the latter speaks more to a lack of affection, affinity, caring, and due consideration toward this population. Thus, the placelessness of African American college students has as much to with what this population is not afforded (e.g., regard, consideration) as it is about to where it does not belong.

**Place for some: Challenges from the margin of the margin.** It is important to note at this juncture that the experience of placelessness as described in the preceding section was not uniformly experienced by all respondents. While a majority of participants’ views were aligned with the ideas presented, there was a minority whose perspectives are worth briefly noting. Specifically, some participants either did not perceive the racial dynamics of campus in as dire terms or were not surprised by them. While these individuals, in general, were not dismissive of the experiences of African American college students who struggled with placelessness on
campus, they were clear that their experience was not one of placelessness. Kristin, for example, noted that she felt a strong sense of connection to the university:

I think, I feel pretty connected to the university just because, I’ve always tried to dabble in anything that I could. I don’t like to just stick to doing College of Business stuff, like that’s why I branched out to TBH and then I’m an RA also, so I like try to like make my rounds, so I get like an overall sense of everybody, so I can like connect with a lot more people. So, I definitely do feel a part of the university, just because I did try to just tap into different areas that I could and I think it’s been a benefit because I’ve gotten to know a lot of people where people have reached out to me to help them and people like look to me to be like that mentor to other people, so I definitely feel like it’s been to my advantage to be a part, well feel a part of the university.

Rose, while admitting that racism on campus is an issue did not perceive it in insurmountable terms:

I don’t know if I would say that racism isn’t an issue, but I would say I haven’t experienced it. I do get like, microaggressions or you know um, “Oh you were in Engineering? Really? [laugh] or um, just little things like that, you know.”

African American students who felt more connected to the university tended to be part of the low-involvement sample. They also tended to be, in some cases, lower classmen who reported that they had not observed or experienced racism so far, individuals who knew about the racial dynamics on campus but who had not experienced them directly, or individuals who were accustomed to being part of a numerical minority by virtue of attending a predominantly White high school. These individuals also reported that their transition to college was an unremarkable one and that they have been satisfied with their collegiate experience so far.

**Summary: The counterwhat.** The purpose of this first set of results was to contextualize the marginalization experienced by study participants to provide some basis for understanding precisely what TBH might counter or challenge. Analyses show that for most participants there were experiences of spatial and social marginalization. Exclusionary acts and stereotyped
assumptions, perpetuated mostly by members of the dominant racial group, served to alienate students socially and cause them to feel unsafe in a number campus settings including “fraternity row,” classrooms, dorms, and even on the streets. The result of this marginalization was multifaceted. First, it created psychological distress for these students, leading some to consider leaving the university. Second, it resulted in the perception of placelessness characterized by a sense of non-belonging and some question as to the value placed on African American students by the university and its administration.

**The Push and Pull Toward The Banks House**

I feel like those community bonds are what keep us [African American college students] together and what keeps us here on this campus. I know a lot of my friends who …aren’t here anymore, or didn’t make it to graduation because they felt you know left out and they didn’t have those bonds. And, so I feel like the community aspect of it is really the biggest thing to helping you make sure that we stay through to graduation. – Rashad

Reported responses to the reality of placelessness among study participants varied. Some participants noted that they considered withdrawing from the university. Sam tried to transfer on three separate occasions. Others, like Meredith, reported that they mounted “defense mechanisms,” specifically self-segregating and moving further toward the margin of the institution.

It [self-segregation] can also be a safety mechanism for the entire [Black] community because, I think about why we would be so segregated and I think it’s because we all feel the same way and that’s why there is this urge to bring it together a little bit more. I was gonna say…thinking more from an academics stand point, I’m the only African American in my major. I haven’t had an African American professor, unless it was my “Afro” class. So, I mean [laugh], that pretty much tells you how much as far as diversity I’m seeing and I came from a very diverse place, so for me it’s been a little bit difficult, but at the same time that’s why I obviously got involved in TBH and made sure that I’m getting that balance for myself.
Meredith makes an important point echoed in the narrative of several other high-involvement participants. That is, the trajectory toward The Banks House (TBH) does not start with a desire to be affiliated with the center per se, but to be a part of the Black community. As Allison stated, “I guess that at first it was a way for me to get involved with African Americans, so that’s how I initially looked at it.” But what accounts for the strong desire to be affiliated with the African American community on campus and TBH specifically?  

**Push: escaping placelessness.**

It’s very highlighted how much of the minority you are. I think we’re made very aware of [that]—and it’s good because you don’t want to just walk around not knowing and be oblivious to things—but, since we know that, I think it makes us stay together even more, even more than what we would have naturally done. – Allison

In the above quote, Allison suggests that is the minority experience, the experience of marginalization that leads her and other African American college students to band together.

Similarly, Lance pointed to a preponderance of racist events as the impetus to his seeking out the Black community on campus. He noted, “when I came here I had a couple racial encounters and it kinda caused me to retreat to the Black community, to my safety zone.” Lance’s description of the Black community as his “safety zone” suggests that what is outside of this community—the larger institutional context—is essentially unsafe. He went on to note that “the unwelcoming experiences [on campus] outweigh the welcoming experiences so that’s when I was like ‘hey Black people where are you? Come save me’ and I got involved in TBH.” Thus, for many of these participants, it was the racially oppressive dynamic of the university that led them to self-segregate as a coping mechanism.

**Pull: A need for place.**
I feel like that’s very important just to say like, “Yeah, I do go to this school and I do feel at least welcome in this one area, whether you know, I feel welcome in the entire other part of the campus, but at least, I know that still I’m a [name of university] student and I have at least some type of place to find, a place to be comfortable. – Sharon

The push toward TBH is paralleled by a unique pull—the promise of the Black community supplying African American college students what they lack or cannot access within the larger institutional context. For participants in this study, the primary lure of the Black community was its potential to create “places” that catered to the unique needs and interests of African Americans where no such place existed. For some participants like Allison, there was a realization during her matriculation that there was a lack of places that cater to the unique needs and interests of African American college students.

As far as like social setting, like the bars, like there’s no diversity in the bars. Some African American group of people has to come together, organize this event so that all the other African American’s can come to that event….But, Caucasians, like they have an establishment already set up like “Brother’s”, you know what I mean? They have like an array of different things compared to African Americans.

However, for other participants, they entered the university looking for places that would connect them to the Black community on campus. Kristin and Sharon, respectively, suggested that their decision to seek out such places had to do with the racial compositions of their settings and social networks prior to entering the university.

I never just had that big group of Black organizations or Black people that I could just like connect with… It’s not a lot of Black students on this campus anyway, so just go to your comfort zone and I never had that comfort zone because I was just like, “oh I have an Indian friend, I have a Mexican friend.” Like it’s just so many people that I’ve been connected to it’s just like, I haven’t tapped into my African American people yet, so might as well in college. I think that’s where I got it from, where it’s like, “I wasn’t really involved in my Black community in high school as much as I should’ve been, but now I have the opportunity.” So I think it’s just that.

My dad went here and my brother also went here. So, he [my father] stayed in the [name of residence hall] which is predominantly White, and he liked it there. He told me to stay
there because that’s pretty much how my high school was. However, I wanted to be surrounded by people who look like me and so, me and my dad set out and we devised a plan for me to live in [name of another residence hall] because we knew that that was where Blacks were concentrated…and then we had the Student Strong program where I got to move in a week early with Student Strong and that really helped me transition into college and into the Black community.

**Summary: The push and pull toward The Banks House.** The appeal of the Black community appears to be associated with two important factors. First, there is a need or desire among African American college students to escape the experience of placelessness and find spaces in which the marginalizing dynamics that characterize the larger university do not come into play. Second, there is a need among African American college students to find places that cater to the cultural dimensions of their personhood. While some encountered this need in realizing the lack of places that allow for a cultural outlet on a PWI, others seem to have had involvement in such places as a goal prior to matriculation.

**The Banks House as Home Away from Home**

I just feel like the university can be an uncomfortable place depending on your background. So, like coming here [to TBH], people look like you. It just makes it more comfortable; it makes you feel more connected. Yeah, it makes you feel connected to the Black population, the Black community ‘cause this is like what the Banks House is supposed to be—where you feel at home. The majority of us come from [a] background that is predominantly African American or predominantly Black, so it’s like coming here makes you feel closer to home because you’re surrounded by [the] Black population. Because when you step outside and go to your classes, depending on your major, you may be the only Black person there or you…may not feel connected to most people in your class. So it’s like when you come here you see people that look like you or have similar experiences. Yeah, pretty much having been in your shoes already. [It’s] like, “Ahhh, finally, the home of campus for us.” – Annie

Across interviews, when asked how they would characterize what The Banks House (TBH) provided them, high-involvement participants, almost unanimously, described TBH as a “home away home.” In describing how TBH existed as a home away from home, participants described
the setting in terms of its ability to engender in them, psychologically, a sense of comfort/familiarity and security/safety.

**Creature and culture comforts.** Participants spoke of two types of comforts at TBH. The first, creature comforts, refer to the dimensions and accommodations of the physical space that were reminiscent of students’ homes. These included the availability of food, the layout/design of the physical premises, and the presence of comfortable furniture.

**Food.** Food appeared to be a particularly important component of the culture of TBH. I observed food being provided for the weekly Lunch and Learns (L&Ls), executive board (E-Board) meetings and different events put on by members of the E-Board through TBH. Also, when I asked participants what were the benefits associated with being involved with TBH, “free food” was the most common answer. In fact, several participants noted that it was the draw of free food through the L&Ls that motivated them to explore what TBH had to offer. Bobbi noted:

> Like at first, my first time going to The Banks House was for some free food during lunch and learn and after that I – well, I guess a few years later, like I don’t mind serving the food during lunch and learn and people know I don’t.

In addition to the obvious biological appeal of food, food is an important part of the comforting atmosphere of TBH because of its accessibility.

> It’s [TBH] a comfort zone. Besides the food, [laugh] the free food on Wednesdays and the free printing, it’s like you can do whatever you want to do. *If you’re hungry, you can go to the refrigerator; it’s like home.* – Annie

> Honestly, it is a house. And I just make myself at home if I’m hungry I’d go into the kitchen get some food leave food here and get it the next day – Bobbi

Important to note in these exemplars is how Annie and Bobbi equate being able to go to the fridge at any time and get food with being at home. This suggests comfort through a certain degree of freedom of movement in the space. Their comments had me reflect on two related
facts. First, at the first event I observed, which was an E-Board meeting, there was food present. Second, after several months of conducting interviews and observations at TBH, I too, felt comfortable enough to rummage through the refrigerator when I was hungry or when I knew there was an event the day before that involved food.

The physicality of home. From the outside and on the inside, TBH is very much a house in structure. It is comprised of rooms clearly associated with specific functions akin to those one would find in a house. For example, on the ground floor there is a large living area replete with couches, lounge chairs and hardwood floors. There is also a kitchen complete with major kitchen appliances, cabinets, and a sink. On the third floor there is an attic that seems to have been converted into a series of offices. The hallways and stairways are narrow and the stairways are steeper than average, suggesting that perhaps these were not designed with heavy traffic in mind. That said, the physical dimensions of TBH seemed to contribute to the sense of comfort students experienced while in the space. Participants, in particular, noted how much, in look and feel, it is like an actual home.

I’ve been in like buildings where it’s just so big and you’re just like you don’t know where anything is, but I feel like in TBH you know exactly where stuff is, even if you’ve never been in there you can kind of get a sense of okay, this is like the family room area, this is probably where most people are, like there’s a kitchen, and then you go upstairs you see the computer lab. So, I think it’s just the size of the house honestly, like people always complain that it’s too small, but I think it’s the perfect size ‘cause you don’t want this big building and then you not getting to interact with the staff and you’re just like sitting in this house by yourself. But you never feel like that because you can always hear if somebody’s upstairs [laughs] from the creaks in the floor. – Kristin

If you just went there to just mess around, it’s like I’m just at home. You know, like you just walk in, sit on the couches, you put your book bag down and it was just like let’s just go talk and let’s see who’s upstairs, let’s see who’s downstairs. You know like, it was just, you know, comforting. – Sharon
The home-like feel to the space seemed to contribute to a comfort in non-movement, that is, in relaxation and lounging in the space. Ice remarked that he, “could sleep on the couch when [he is] in between classes instead of going home.” Bobbi shared a similar observation.

It’s completely comfortable like I always just take off my shoes, take a nap. If I had like a gap in between classes and I don’t want to go to the library because it’s so big, I just come here because it’s more cozy and not as awkward and I always meet people that I may not have seen in a little bit.

Overall, participants’ narratives suggest that the physical environs of TBH were such that they reminded participants of home. Specifically, the physical contexts provided a non-constrictive space for ease of movement and non-movement. Ease of movement was experienced as participants felt free to interact with the house as they would with their own homes.

**Unfettered expression.** In addition to creature comforts such as food and relaxing accommodations that reminded participants of home, TBH provided culture comforts, which are social attributes to the setting that were congruent with participants’ culture. These allowed participants to feel welcomed within the setting and free to express themselves culturally. Annie describes TBH simply as a setting in which African American college students, “can talk and chat. Just relax and not worry about what you say.”

Case & Hunter (2012), refer to cultural expressions as “acts of resistance,” because they allow participants to perform behaviors that are culturally meaningful to them, but are devalued or misunderstood in a non-African American context. Annie, in her quote above, notes that there is indeed a certain freedom of expression that is possible within TBH that may not be possible in other campus settings. Other participants concurred, noting that TBH provided them avenues to behave and interact with each other in ways that one would not in a classroom context. In
essence, there is a type of self-censorship that often comes into play in other campus settings but not necessarily TBH:

I go in TBH just to be a regular person...I feel like when you’re in class you act a certain way because you’re trying to learn, you’re not going to be like this crazy person and when you’re in TBH you can be that person if you want, or you can be that quiet person in class, like just observing, it’s pretty much whatever you want to be. And I feel like the staff definitely tries to get you to just be yourself, especially ‘cause it’s supposed to be like a house environment, so you’re supposed to feel that family sense. – Kristin

Kristin, in her narrative, mentioned that TBH allows her to be herself. This does not appear to mean solely in terms of one’s unique personality or temperament, but also in terms of whom one is culturally. That is, TBH provides a space where one can behave in ways that are experienced to be congruent with one’s own cultural background without fear of misunderstanding or ostracism.

I mean, culturally we have our own way of communication. We even say some stuff that may not sound right to other cultures or races. Like if we say something, this is our space. We can say what we want to say, you know, the same as if I was to go to the Asian American House and they start speaking in another language. I can’t get mad because this is their house, this is their comfort zone. I have to respect them. So, I feel like here I just say whatever I want to say. I can do whatever I want to do because this is for us our own private area where we can say whatever we want to say and just be okay with it, not have to worry about people misinterpreting it. It’s here just like a comfort zone. Because I know it’s TBH, I know it’s for us, so I just feel comfortable doing what I normally do at my house. – Annie

Through my observations, I witnessed many instances of cultural expression within TBH. One instance stands apart, though, as an exemplar of the unique cultural dimension of this setting. Prior to my first meeting with the E-Board, there had been some disagreement between members of the board concerning roles and responsibilities of members. The first meeting I attended was called by TBH director, “Mr. Lucas Bishop” with the express purpose of “airing out” any grievances that still lingered. Toward the end of that meeting and after the conflict had been
addressed, the conversation suddenly turned to “whoopings.” E-Board members recounted stories of their most intense experiences of physical punishment at the hands of their parents. At first, I felt somewhat traumatized by the stories being told and a bit confused and surprised by the sense of candor and humor with which these stories were told and received. There was also a way in which each subsequent story was being told to almost outdo the previous story, “Let me tell you about the time my mama beat me…” These observations suggested to me that this discussion was not meant to be therapeutic or cathartic but was nevertheless significant to these individuals. As time went on, I found the interchange vaguely familiar to me. However, it was not until one of my first individual interviews, which was with one of the individuals present that night, that I started to understand the cultural significance of the whooping discussion and began to understand the whooping discussion as a cultural expression and act of resistance.

Andrew: I think that’s interesting because it reminds me of…when I first met you. It was a shut-in for the E-board. And you guys just started spontaneously talking about whoopings.

Rashad: [laugh] exactly and if you heard bits and pieces of the conversation you would think, these people are crazy! Their parents need to be locked up! [laugh]

Andrew: What shocked me was the fact that as I was listening to it, [I thought] this is very familiar, this is what we do. You know what I mean…we sit around and talk about whoopings.

Rashad: Exactly. Sit around talking about whoopings. Black people always have a whooping story, whether it’s you or someone else, you always have that story.

What unfolded that night in the collective sharing of whooping stories was an expression of something unique to African American culture. Rashad alluded to this when he noted, “Black people always have a whooping story.” Within TBH, African American college students felt free enough to share that story and, as Rashad noted, were not worried that others would label them as peculiar for sharing these stories. Thus, according to participants, TBH is a setting on
campus in which they feel free to engage in behaviors and practices that are congruent with their cultures and that hold special cultural significance to them.

“Safety” to grow.

It’s the fact that you know, “I feel safe in this environment”, and so it might [be] familiar sounds, familiar foods… and so I think that culturally when they come for Lunch and Learn, it might remind them, it’s not mom’s, it’s not grand-mama’s or daddy’s soul food, but it reminds you of home and so maybe it’s something like that. Or it’s just something hearing like some hip-hop or some R&B music will remind you of something. So appealing to all those senses when you come in, people just laughing, and so that’s safe for people, you know. That is safe. – Lucas Bishop, director of TBH

It’s [TBH] just a place just like at home where you grow and you learn and you expand and you go out into the world and you give it whatever you’ve been given at your house. It’s the same way here in TBH. You grow, you learn and you expand and then you take it out on campus, you know? – Sam

So far what participants have described is a sense of comfort in being themselves personally and culturally within TBH. This is similar to the vision of “safety” that Bishop envisions (above) TBH providing African American college students. This is a conception of safety that is predicated on the assumption that there are unsafe spaces that hold dangers for African American students. Indeed, Lance, in his narrative, spoke to this ever-present danger faced by African American college students, while contrasting it with a sense of safety he experiences in TBH:

When you step outside these walls, you… pretty much you got put your armor on. You don’t know what you’re going to run into. So it’s kinda like, that’s the warzone out there; that’s the battlefield. And this is kinda like this is the place of refuge. You never know what you’re gonna encounter, especially on the quad. God, you just never know [laugh]….So it’s a warzone out there.

Bishop, too, agreed with the idea of peril on the outside of TBH:

[TBH] is safe in the sense some of our students are “assaulted” daily by language, by again, climate, you’re feeling excluded, microaggressions, so a safe haven in the sense that when I come to the culture center, I can just be me. I think that’s true for LGBTQs
when they go to LBGTQ center, I think that’s true for women students when they go to the women’s center. I think that’s true for Latino students when they go to their respective center.

However, Bishop’s and Sam’s quotes that open this section paint a picture of “safety” that encompasses but also extends beyond “protection.” This is an important consideration because to conceptualize the “safety” provided by TBH as simply protection or refuge from discriminatory practices is to essentially frame TBH as primarily a reactive space. This is not how staff and students narrated the idea of safety. Allison, in her narrative even reconsidered her conceptualization of TBH as a “safe haven,” noting that the setting provides much more than protection. She stated, “[I] don’t know if I would say… I don’t know if “safe haven” is a good word. I would say more of just like a home front, more than a safe haven. Yeah, “safe haven” makes it seem that we’re like hiding for shelter or something. We’re not.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines home front as “the sphere of civilian activity in war.” I noted that as Allison described TBH as a home front, the image that came to mind was that of a fort—a fortified structure that provides protection but also a structure in which one can re-arm and launch an affront. In this sense, TBH is not best characterized as a place of retreat but a place to gain the strength needed to face ongoing challenges/struggles. Sam echoed this sentiment in her narrative when she stated,

You wake up in the morning and you need to be prepared to fight. When you wake up there ain’t gonna be roses and lilies and hugs and kisses. It’s gonna be a battle; you gotta stand up for yourself. Stand up for what you believe in. And that support didn’t come from nowhere but here [TBH]

Lisa, a TBH staff member concurred with Sam’s assessment of what TBH provides as a proactive space.

We [TBH] are the trainer in the corner of the boxing ring. You come here, you receive some nurturing some lifting up and some rubbing down. You’re going to go out into the ring, you’re going to get beat up. Hopefully you throw a couple of punches and they’re
going to land. But you’re going to come back to me. I’m going to rub you down. I’m going to give you water. I’m going to put the masking on your face. I’m going to salve your wounds, and I’m going to send you back out there. I’m going to give you some tips, but I’m going to send you back out there. I don’t do the work for you, but I empower you and encourage you to do the work.

Sam and Lisa’s quotes suggest that TBH fosters a proactive rather than a reactive position to the institution. Further, Sam argued that this position helped her in her day-to-day battle with a climate that undermined her efforts as a student. This is not all together surprising as even historically, TBH has been conceived as going beyond protection. In a 2007 letter written by the then director of TBH and that details the core mission of the setting, the author notes that one of two major foci of TBH is to “create a safe place for students to develop themselves individually and collectively” (Author 1, 2007). Thus, the “safety” that TBH provides, based on this passage, is not merely protection from marginalizing dynamics but is safety to develop as an individual and a member of a group.

Consistent with this reframing of safety, several participants noted that they experienced growth as a result of their participation in TBH. For some, like Sam, part of this growth is developing a strong sense of self that assists them in effectively traversing the institution’s marginalizing dynamics. For others, TBH was instrumental in helping them develop personal skills that would aid them in college and in the future. Rashad, for example, mentioned how his participation in TBH boosted his confidence and abilities related to interacting with and helping others. When asked what he will take from his experiences with TBH, he noted,

…definitely understanding how to interact with people and also like in both the personal and professional setting. Like I said, I came in here and I was a shy kid and really didn’t know how to interact with people and my role has developed and changed, so that now I’m the person who not only has to speak first, but I know how to speak first to different people. I’ve seen myself grow and so now I feel like you know I can understand where people are coming from and I can understand where people have come from…the center
has helped me develop and it also helps me understand how I can reach back and help other people develop.

Lance credited TBH for giving him a vision for his future career

Working with the cultural center actually helped me find out what I wanted to do in my life. I didn’t know there was a career center and student affairs. I didn’t know that until Mr. Bishop and Dr. [indecipherable], the director of [indecipherable], explained to me that yes this is a real job, you can make money. You can help people while you are doing it also. And I mean it helped me, guide my life to whatever. It helped me realize what I wanted to do in life.

Kristin noted that by mentoring through TBH she was introduced to what would become a passion of hers.

…a different retreat that I was on, one of the former employees [of TBH], she did a presentation on loving your career, like finding your passion, and that’s why I … got involved with TBH a little bit, because she was just like so motivational, on like you have to find your passion. I’ve been dabbling into advising a little bit and like mentoring and um programming, so it’s definitely like still molding what exactly it’s going to be, but I’ve definitely found what my side passions are, outside of like this is my major, this is what I want to do. I found like that side thing that I know I can keep forever.

Collectively, these narratives suggest that in addition to protection from marginalizing dynamics, TBH provides a certain amount of freedom for participants to develop as individuals. In particular TBH seems to help develop individuals who are better able to negotiate the marginalizing dynamics of the institutional settings. It also aids in developing skills and aspirations among individuals.

**Family matters.** The pattern of relationships between staff and students and among students is perhaps the most important way in which TBH is reminiscent of home to participants. Participants identified staff and other students as taking on the roles of family members in their interactions and relationships with them

…as you know we call Lucas our uncle, our dad or our whatever-the-case-may-be. So, I mean when African American students gets on a predominately White campus, they’re looking for in most cases an African American that they can look up to or an African
American professional that they can look up to or graduate student or whatever the case may be. So, by working through here [TBH], you know, you kinda get those relationships; you get those people who are like your big brothers or your big sisters.
– Lance

They’re like family. Just like, I think her name’s “Sandy” [a staff member]. She makes us cookies and she leaves them in the student office and we walk in and she’s only been here for like three weeks. We walk in and we know she made the cookies for us. So we’re like “thanks for the cookies.” And she’s like “no problem, I was baking.” You know like, I don’t get that on campus. I don’t get that in the classrooms. If I come in here and I’m looking kinda down, they can know. They know off top, like, “what’s wrong, is everything okay, how is graduation going, have you started application?” You know like, they’re really concerned; like these people they care about us. They really do care… I play with Lucas all the time like “you my Black daddy on campus.” [Laughs] And he’s like “Sam”, you make me [feel] so old. But it’s true; these people become your family. They keep you, they support you, and they keep you humble. – Sam

That TBH fosters a family dynamic is not surprising given that this appears to be a core value or philosophy in the setting. On a small chalkboard in Bishop’s office it was written, “TBH is like home, like family” as an exhortation to his staff that the overarching goal of the cultural center is to provide African American college students with a family experience while at the university. Bishop, in his narrative echoed the centrality of family in the philosophy of TBH while also highlighting that the emphasis on family is congruent with African American culture

I think part of it is culture for us as people of African descent, but also...we want to create a family feeling here at the cultural center. I say we’re like a family here for some people...we try to function as a family in the sense we realize that for a lot of our students, navigating this campus and just navigating this experience could be challenging you know, if you’re the first one in your family to go to college or you’re out of your element. You are in a rural area you know, and you’re coming from an urban area. Who’s gonna help you navigate that? And a lot of times and I think all people do this; you look toward the people that look like you.

In providing participants with a family dynamic, TBH seems to be catering to a deep human and cultural need among African American college students. A number of participants
even went as far as crediting the family-like dynamic of TBH for their being able to persevere in the face of the marginalizing dynamics encountered on campus.

…there’s something so much greater than the resources here in this Banks House. The people are phenomenal. [They are] the reason I’ve been able to stay so strong and have my feet on the ground for these four years ‘cause I know a lot of people who just went home. They pack their bag and waved their flag and they were outta here. – Sam

Not everybody’s home: Challenges from the margin of the margin. While the interview participants (high-involvement members of the E-Board) generally agreed that TBH was a home away from home, a different picture emerged among focus group participants, many of whom had little to no contact with TBH. Some participants admitted that they had no contact with TBH because, as freshman, they had not had a chance to visit the center. Others stated that they tended to avoid the TBH because they had heard that the center was not like what it used to be (i.e., “a happening place”). Perhaps the most common reason for not interacting with TBH was because the setting was believed/experienced to be a “clique” and thus unwelcoming.

I don’t go to The Banks House frequently. I went a couple weeks ago, and it was a barbeque. I don’t go just to chill because a reason why… I don’t know. I just don’t go. A reason why I don’t go probably is because I feel like when I go it’s like a lot of clique-y like… It’s like if you’re sitting over here, I walk in, and it’s just like awkward. It’s a group sitting over here, and a group sitting over there. Like… And I don’t know everyone so it’s just like…Oh. I’m just going to sit right here. – Paris

Focus group participants also mentioned finding a “home away from home” in a range of other campus settings. These setting included other cultural centers such as the Native American house and the Latina/a house and with friends of diverse backgrounds who valued inclusivity. Most often however, these settings included other pockets of the Black community such as “Black” organizations and groups of African American friends.

It’s from the Black students on campus, the primary source, and, so, just my friends and being able to laugh and joke or talk about whatever and seeing them and being able text them like “hey, let’s meet up and do something, whenever.” Us just going to events or
hanging out and doing things, just together, it doesn’t necessarily have to be a Black event, but the fact that I’m with another Black student gives me a sense of you know what I’m saying? ‘because, then we’ll, view it from our own lens [laugh] so it’s funny. It doesn’t have to be funny, it could be enlightening [laugh] alright, it could be academic or whatever. And also the Black Chorus, Oh my gosh! Like home away from home, to the max!

This counter-viewpoint suggests that while some African American college students experience a home-like quality to TBH, this is not a universal experience among this population. For some participants in this study, TBH is experienced or believed to be very much un-home-like and unwelcoming (this theme is expanded upon in latter section).

**Summary: The Banks House as home away from home.** The results presented in this section suggest that from participants’ perspectives, the experience of TBH is best described as an experience of “home.” Like home, TBH affords participants certain physical comforts that, in fact, remind them of their homes. These comforts include accessibility to food, lounging areas and furniture, and even the structure and décor of the building. There is also a social dimension to the experience of home. Participants felt free to express themselves in ways that were idiosyncratic to them and that were congruent with cultural norms. Somewhat related to the experience of freedom, there is also a way in which the setting exists as a safe place where individuals could develop or grow personally. Participants spoke of growth in terms of developing a sense of self that allowed them to courageously engage marginalizing dynamics within the institution as well as gaining skills or perspectives that would aid them in their future pursuits. Last, and perhaps most importantly, TBH was experienced as a home in the manner in which it creates a family-like dynamic among staff and students, where staff often take on semi-parental roles in their relationships and interactions with students. In the next two sections of results, how this home/family-like dynamic is created and sustained within TBH is illuminated to
provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which TBH functions as a counterspace for African American college students.

Creating Home: The Banks House as a Dynamic Relational Space

Analyses suggest that TBH creates and sustains an experience of home within the context of placelessness through direct relational transactions. For African American college students who frequent the center, it is their relational transactions with staff and other students that appear to create the experience of home. Further, these interactions seem to occur within the context of staff and students taking on unique roles that foster supportive and nurturing relationships with African American college students. Thus, these roles and relationships can be understood as setting mechanisms that give rise to direct relational transactions.

Staff: Going above and beyond. The roles that staff take are varied and complex. As student affairs professionals, their function is to promote the academic success of the students they serve. However, the title “student affairs professional,” in actuality, speaks very little about the roles these individuals adopt and the nature of the relationships they have students who frequent the center. The results that follow highlight the roles TBH staff takes in relation to African American college students, the relationships that ensue as a result of staff taking these roles, and examples of relational transactions that support students.

Extra-care provider. In the results presented so far, there have been instances where students stated that they referred to Lucas Bishop, the director of TBH, as “Uncle Lucas” or “Papa Lucas.” These affectionate terms speak to the reality that, at least for some students, Bishop serves as a semi-parental figure in addition to being the head administrator of the center. Both Bishop and Lisa, respectively, noted the complex and multifaceted nature of the role TBH staff plays.
We [staff] have multiple hats and so a lot of times it’s like we’re big brother/big sister, mom, dad, social worker, spiritual leader, spiritual advisor, coach, friend, confidant, you know? You get all those hats working in the cultural center and that’s not unique to this cultural center. I think across the country that’s the experiences for a lot of cultural centers because we’re a catch-all for a lot of challenges and issues a lot of students of color deal with. And so, you can’t come this job with a frown or mean look on your face. You have to be open, you have to come here not knowing who or what is going to come through your door… And in our staff meetings we’re talking about budgets …we’re talking about future programming, but at the same time we’re talking about “hey, did you notice that so and so hasn’t been eating? We like to catch things before they get out of control and so it’s just that extra care.

I have to be all things to all students. So, for one experience I have to be one thing, but for another experience I have to be another thing…I want to meet the students’ needs. Some students come to me with academic questions; their social life is great. Some students come to me with social issues; they’re academic life is great. I can’t say that I have it all, but I can point you in the direction where we can find it all.

The role of extra-care provider, according to Bishop and Lisa, requires staff members to step out of their prescribed roles and wear multiple hats to meet the varied needs of the population they serve. The willingness of staff members to shift roles and the fluidity of the roles staff members adopted was noted by some participants. Specifically, participants pointed to the accessibility of staff members and the different types of assistance they received from staff.

Lucas is always there. Not just because he’s director of Student Strong, but anytime you need something; you just wanna cry or you just want to sit and stare in his face, he will allow you do it, just like whenever you need to cope with anything or whenever you need anything you can always depend on Lucas. Anytime you need to talk, anything, I have his number I’ll call. Anything I need, I know I can go to Lucas and talk to him, so I see a lot support from him. And then “Lisa” was my TA. She was my TA, not a TA, she was a professor for Student Strong, Afro 199, which is a component of Student Strong like the class part so we speak all the time. She say, “Hi, Sharon,” and I say “Hi” and then keep on going. And if she has candy or something, we’d eat. I’m sure that if we talk in a serious note, she’d be good too. – Annie
Lucas’s door [is] always open. If you need to talk, just arrange a meeting. He’s given me advice about different things… I didn’t even know Lucas was a community health major till we talked one day and just things like that. He’s taken classes I’ve taken. He’s helped me and stuff; he’s given me recommendations, like this is what you should do, given me resources, opportunities and stuff. – Ice

The capacity of staff to serve as extra-care providers seems to be supported by a philosophy or orientation among staff to be accessible and to care for the entire individual as opposed to only their explicit academic needs. In regard to accessibility, Ice was being literal when he stated that Bishop’s door is always open. I observed this over the course of my several months of observation, although I did not recognize it as a policy or practice for some time. I noted in my first sets of observations, a “laisse faire” environment at TBH where Bishop held most of his meetings (even with me) with his door open. In fact, I had to explicitly ask if the door could be closed during my interview with him. As a result of Bishop’s open door, it was not uncommon for both students and staff to stroll in during meetings to ask questions or announce their presence at the center. It was also not uncommon, as reported by participants, to seek him out as needed.

Accessibility and care for the entire individual coincides in ways that are reminiscent of home to participants. In terms of how care plays out in staff interactions with students, there often is a prioritizing of students’ presenting concerns (whatever they may be at the moment) above the explicit aim of supporting students academically. This does not mean that academics take a back seat. Rather, as Bishop noted, there is often a relationship between extra-academic concerns and academic concerns, and this relationship necessitates an attending to a larger swath of issues:

I’m amazed about how many times students want to come, and I think it might be something serious, but they just want to talk about relationships or you know, break ups or stuff like that. And I’m like “oh, okay. I thought we were gonna talk about classes or
scholarships,” but you know, that’s important to them now, so I’m going to skirt that off and then pull the grades in [later] because I need to know what’s going on with their relationship because that could be impacting their grades, so it’s one of those things where you almost become a detective too. And that’s something I had to learn as a professional and I learned that from a colleague. He said that you have to be nosy and not be in a very intruding way but you need to know what’s going on with your students

The attention to and prioritization of the entire individual over academic concerns or the business of Student Strong does not go unnoticed by students. In fact, staff attending to and prioritizing a larger set of student issues, from the narratives of some participants, appears to not only benefit the students, but is a defining element of their experience of TBH as home. As Lance stated:

If I have a problem, any problem, I’ll go upstairs and close Mr. Bishop’s office door and I will have a conversation with him and I’ve cried with Mr. Bishop in his office, anything. If I’m sick, Mr. Bishop, he’ll be like, “well maybe you should go to McKinley, maybe you have this, maybe you should do this.” [He] will actually do something like that. They take care of me, so that’s what I mean I’m taken care of when I come to the cultural center and my family takes care of me. That’s what I mean by it. They love me here. I love them too, they just don’t know it. [Chuckle and sigh] I’ll never admit it. [Laugh]

Important to note in Lance’s narrative is the fact that he equates the accessibility of Bishop and Bishop’s willingness to attend to his entire personhood with family. He seems to conclude, based on his observation of how Bishop and other TBH staff relate to him, that they care for him in much the same way that members of a family are concerned with each other’s welfare.

Similarly, Kristin had the following to say about the nature of the relationships she has with staff and what precisely gave rise to them

We’ve all like connected with staff members to get that comfort in TBH. I just like go in there when I was like having a bad day and I would just talk to whoever...well usually it’s Lucas. He’ll be like, “okay what’s wrong, because I can clearly sense we’re trying to talk about this stuff and you’re just like, your mind is in a completely different place.” So, I think it’s just that they know me and they have that idea of like when I’m in a different mood than I usually am. So I think it’s just that connection that they’ve built with me even though I didn’t even know I was building a connection with them at times... I feel like they built an understanding of who I was before I even knew it, so
…they’ll know if something’s wrong with me and then I won’t even have to say it and we’ll just talk about it because they’ll like sense it…

Kristin highlighted another important element of the experience of family: being intimately known. From Kristin’s perspective, the quality of the relationship/connection she had with staff was a function of the extent to which staff was familiar with her idiosyncrasies, in this case her mood fluctuations. With staff knowing her so well as to know when her mood had shifted, there was a sense of comfort that she experienced in TBH. Participants noted in their narratives that they observed staff going the extra mile to get to know students in order to make them feel welcomed. Kristin noted in this regard:

I feel like they do that a lot…I see Lucas and Lisa always reaching out to somebody that they don’t know, especially when they are at programs and they can like kind of look at the room and see like, “oh, I don’t know this person, who are you?” I definitely feel like they will go the extra mile and build that connection with those people ‘cause I know Lucas has had like conversations with people just walking through the house and they were just like trying to see what TBH was and Lucas would sit and talk to them for an hour and it’s just like he doesn’t have to do that, but it’s just like they definitely give you that sense of welcoming as soon as you walk in, they’re like trying to get to know you.

**Accessible role model.** In addition to being extra-care providers, staff occupied the role of *role models* to participants. In this regard, participants expressed a desire for professional African American adults from whom they could derive guidance as well as encouragement. Lance described the desire for this type of role model in this way:

When African American students gets on a predominately white campus, they’re looking for, in most cases, an African American that they can look up to, an African American professional that they can look up to or graduate student or whatever the case may be.

As the literature attests, for many African American college students, college is a kind of training ground and last stop before the working world. As such, participants are exploring future professionalized selves. The unique benefit TBH staff provide in their role as role models is accessibility. Participants describe staff as accessible role models in two ways. First, because of
the similarity in racial-ethnic background between staff and students, students see a vision of their future selves that is more in line with who they are as a member of a visible minority group. In other words, staff members are essentially modeling what it means to be a Black professional to individuals who will soon make the transition into their professional lives. Sam, in her narrative spoke to what it means to see professionals who look like and have similar interests to her.

There was a woman named Frances who worked here. And she kept up with the daily news, so we found out Wendy Williams or celebrity gossip websites [from her]. And it was just like, all these people, educated people that let you know they’re real like, I’m educated and I’m real and I listen to music like you listen to music.

Sam described TBH staff members as being “real” in the sense that even though they are professionals, they are still relatable in their interests and the ways they interact with others. TBH not only provides a space for participants to interact with staff who take this stance, it also allows for a steady stream of Black professionals who model this stance and who essentially navigate the worlds between their racial-ethnic backgrounds and professional roles. This stream occurs primarily within the context of the weekly Lunch and Learn events. Sam also reflects on the benefit of having access to this steady stream of Black professionals. She suggested that it is helpful not only to see Black professionals who are relatable but to see Black professionals who challenge the dominant narrative concerning African Americans’ place in society.

It’s people with PhD’s and master’s degrees and all this stuff. And a lot of times they look just like me. And, if anything, that really captures our attention to know that people study in so many things. Like we are scholars. We’re not just hood rats and thugs, we’re scholars. We’re educated people.

The second way in which staff members are accessible role models has to do with the family-like relationship they forge with participants. That is, in addition to being relatable role models, staff members are also approachable role models. A number of participants described
having tenuous or non-existent relationships with faculty and advisors in their respective majors.

However, in TBH staff they found professional role models with whom they found it easier to interact and develop mentoring relationships.

They feel like role models in a sense. Like, I see them in a professional setting, but also in a personal setting. Well I shouldn’t say setting, but in a personal demeanor, and so it’s like I see them doing x, y, and z on campus and you know working with programs like that and they’re still a good person at the end of the day, so I feel like you know they are role models and they are a family... it’s like they’re the upper-generation like the grandparents and parents, and uncles and aunties and things like that. Like with my professors...I feel like I have to take on a semi-formal tone at all times. – Rashad

I definitely connect with the staff, like going out on retreats with them, um, because it’s like you can go to these people whenever you need to, specifically like talking to Lucas and Lisa. They’re just those people, they’re just like us, they were students, they know what we’re going through so it’s like having that comfort in older people and people that want to mentor you, want to be those people for you definitely has helped. – Kristin

Interesting to note in Rashad and Kristin’s narratives is that the precursor for the mentoring relationship between them and staff is a particular type of relationship, one based on the good-will of the mentor and the certainty that he/she is “a good person at the end of the day” and “want[s] to mentor you”. Equally noteworthy is the desire for a more informal dynamic between the would-be mentor and mentee. Rashad noted that this is sometimes hard to come by in professors, but that it seems to occur quite naturally within the context of TBH where the dynamic is deliberately informal and family-like. Once again, as Bishop remarked below, the family-mentoring dynamic is not happenstance but a result of deliberate efforts on the part of staff to take on specific roles that will lead to specific relational transactions.

I think our relationship as staff members to the students is we want to model professionalism for the students but we also want to model just that sense of that you’re home you know, and that you can trust the staff here.
Bridge over troubled waters. Participants reported that staff members also functioned as persons who could connect them to valuable university resources and who could help them navigate challenging or uncertain courses in their collegiate life. Some participants noted that, traversing the college experience can be a challenging endeavor. For example, it is not always clear which classes to enroll in or which academic opportunities to pursue. And, those who are charged with helping students in these regards (e.g., academic advisors, professors) are perceived by many participants as ineffectual at best and cold or uncaring at worst. Consequently, some students find they are intimidated or even in conflict with those who could help them. Staff members at TBH (according to participants) have been known to step into the gap, using their knowledge and relationships with various unit on campus to connect students to resources and to advocate on their behalf.

Bobbi recounted a number of challenges her freshman year while trying to access assistance from advisors. She recalled being made to feeling like a “social service case” and “another number” and not receiving the encouragement she needed. However, her interactions with TBH staff provided her a markedly different experience. She noted, “The Banks House gives that specialized attention… talking to Lucas and Lisa, they can easily suggest something.” Other participants concurred with Bobbi’s assessment of the academic assistance rendered by TBH staff, mentioning asking staff about specific classes and/or professors.

In addition to offering advice or guidance, the assistance offered by staff can take the form of connecting students to others who can help them. Bishop described TBH as a “catch-all for a lot of challenges and issues that students of color deal with.” This requires that staff, in addition to wearing multiple hats, must be able to direct students to other resources when an issue is outside the staff member’s area of expertise or when another resource is able to render
additional assistance. Lance described TBH staff as connecting him with persons who could assist him in his career-related pursuits.

[TBH] put me in connection with people that can help me accomplish my goals…It put me in contact with “Dr. Smith” who is now my mentor for my NAFSA undergraduate fellows program, which is for people who want to go on to student affairs and higher education.

In a similar fashion to what Lance describes, over the course of conducting this study, Bishop (without my asking) served as a “connector” for me, putting me in contact with several individuals he knew who were doing research on BCCs and could offer me useful insights. For example, after a meeting with just the two of us, he introduced me to a colleague who was visiting who was once the director of the BCC at another institution. That person then took the time that day to call a researcher he knew and arrange a meeting between the researcher and me.

I also observed Bishop’s concerted efforts to connect students with persons who could help them in the next steps of their lives. For example, during the spring of my involvement with TBH, the E-Board was organizing an event that would have African American alumni come to campus. While the main thrust of this event was around having these individuals contribute financially to TBH, Bishop encouraged members of the E-Board to also see it as a networking opportunity. He told them that there could be people attending who could offer them and internship or their first job. As such, they should not pass up the opportunity to interact with these persons.

**Students: Giving back by paying it forward.** The TBH Staff appears to have an indispensable role to play in making TBH a home away for home for many of this study’s participants. The roles they occupy and the types of relation transactions that ensue from such roles make for an environment that is supportive of a variety of student needs. Likewise, students who frequent the center play a critical role in TBH being experienced as a home away
from home for students. Like the staff, students occupy roles that create supportive relational transactions. Moreover, the relational transactions that emerge from these roles are quite unique in their capacity to help African American college students ameliorate some of the psychological consequences of the experience of placelessness on campus.

**Mentors.** Among the participants in this study there was a strong desire to mentor African American lowerclassmen. High-involvement participants, many of them upperclassmen, felt a sense of indebtedness to those students who mentored them when they were lowerclassmen. They credited these individuals as the reasons they were able to successfully navigate those first trying years of the college experience. Reflecting on the important role their student mentors played in their academic persistence, they recognized the need to now occupy this very role to ensure that newer classes of freshmen and sophomores could be given the same opportunities to persist.

Similar to staff, student mentors help African American college students traverse the vicissitudes of the college experience. Rashad and Kevin, respectively, described the type of support offered by other students as being crucial in their persistence on campus and the main reason that they now mentor.

My sophomore year here, it was a big struggle for me. Like, socially, academically, things like that. And so I found that the people that I was involved with in Student Strong helped me. They were there to call me almost everyday like, “Rashad are you doing your work” or “Rashad are you doing what you’re supposed to do?” I forgot about that. “Are you doing what you’re supposed to do?” And you know, people were there to actually pat me on the back when I needed it and kick me in the butt when I needed it. So, you know it was more eye opening and it was very visible the way people were able to help me out so I felt it was my duty to help back, reach back.

I had a mentor, this RA [residential assistant] that was in my building. She kinda’ helped me out with a lot of things. I don’t want for anybody else to not have a mentor. I’m pretty self-sufficient as many people on campus are, but if you need someone to lean on, like ….you need someone to be like, “Good luck on your finals,” because sometimes you
don’t hear it. Nobody’s asking you what you got on this test [or saying], “Oh, you should go to office hours to get help and what not.” I want to be there to be able to help somebody else.

What Rashad and Kevin described above are relational transactions in service to support and accountability. Specifically, upperclassmen check in on lowerclassmen on a consistent basis to ensure that they are doing what is necessary for their academic success. That said, mentoring accomplishes another important function in the lives of African American college students. It helps students become connected to communities on campus. Mentors, having substantial knowledge and experience with various organizations on campus are uniquely positioned to connect new students to communities that might be of interest or assistance to them. Indeed, Rashad mentioned that it was his mentor, in fact, who introduced him to TBH. Similarly, Sharon argued that being mentored plays a critical role in facilitating involvement with the institution. She noted:

I feel like you do need mentorship. So, everything that I do, I’ve always had a mentor and I’ve always had a mentee. Ever since I was a sophomore, I had a freshman mentee. So, by doing and being involved, by taking my mentee to those various events, getting them involved on campus, that’s, that’s what keeps me involved. You know, the fact that I have a mentor who’s like “yeah, you should be a part of this” and so I’m part of that. And then I’m telling someone else to be a part of it so I’m going to continue to go to these events.

A majority of the high-involvement participants I interviewed mentioned providing mentorship to lowerclassmen, especially through their roles in Student Strong. Some mentored students directly and other supported group leaders whose role it was to provide mentorship to students in Student Strong. Participants being mentored (and becoming convinced of the virtues of the mentoring relationship) and then turning around and mentoring other students provides a type of relational continuity whereby the process of student mentoring continues over time within TBH in an almost self-sustaining fashion. Sharon, Rashad and Lance all spoke to this in
the quotes recorded above. What is particularly illuminating is that they described their mentoring relationships and orientation to mentoring by referencing how they were mentored and what their mentors provided them. This modeling of mentorship that takes place among participants seems to serve to ensure that these types of relationships and supportive relational transaction continue among students who are involved with TBH, especially through involvement with Student Strong.

_A community of othered._ Through mentoring relationships students provide support and receive support that is primarily geared toward academic progress and involvement with campus communities. There is another type of support that emerges among students within the context of TBH. This support is specifically in response to the marginalizing dynamics that ensue within the larger institutional context. Participants described TBH as a place where they could talk and “vent” about racial incidents that may have involved them or implicated African American students or African Americans more generally.

Participants described two types of forums in which communities of othered convene to discuss racial happenings. The first can be characterized as a formal forum where a more intellectual kind of discussion takes place. This can include Lunch and Learn events or other events where there is a specific agenda devoted to racial issues. For example, in the aftermath of the proliferation of racial-themed memes in 2012, TBH organized an event called “Black State of the Union” that brought together various African American students and organization to talk about campus climate issues, particularly in reference to the racially-themed memes. There were members of the university administration present at this event. Another formal event reported by a participant was a “Think Thank,” which is a semi-structured discussion that sometimes occurs after a Lunch and Learn and is usually facilitated by a student for a student audience.
The second forum, and the one most referenced by participants consists of informal, impromptu conversations where individuals “vent” about racially marginalizing events that either vicariously or directly impacted them. Sharon, describing these conversations, noted:

It’s probably more of like, just between friends, like “Oh this happened to me today,” and you just tell your story. Not really telling like anybody about it for a particular reason, but you know, “can you believe this happened?” Or, “this person said this in class.”… We’ve talked about some things, something that relates to Black culture and everyone turning to me and wanting to know my opinion of it. And it’s like I can’t talk for the whole Black race. So, I remember that happening, if you were wondering about that…I would say informal is…you know, it happens all the time.

According to Sharon and other high-involvement participants, discussions around marginalizing experiences on campus are commonplace within TBH. This suggests that TBH provides a venue in which these discussions can take place. In this regard, participants indicated a unique characteristic about TBH that lends itself to the emergence of these kinds of conversations: a shared understanding among members of the setting. Given that the majority of persons who frequently access the center are African American, there seems to be a shared understanding and appreciation of the racial realities of collegiate life on a predominantly White institution. This, in turn, facilitates intimate and painful discussions around racially marginalizing dynamics. Lance had the following to say about the importance of that shared experience to facilitating relational transactions that are not only supportive of the individual but ameliorative of the psychological distress that ensues from marginalizing experiences.

In most cases it’s, “Yeah, I’ve had the same experience and this is how I dealt with it” or “Girl, you can’t worry about that, things like that.” You know what I’m saying? “I’ve been there, done that I’m still here you know?” I think that shared experience goes. Once again, once you’re outside of here or you’re in the battle zone, you feel like you’re alone. You feel like you’re a lone warrior, so once you get here and you see that you have other troops, it’s like okay I can make it through. You know? It’s like I actually do have people here supporting me. I’m not here alone, and it’s just that shared experience that you identify with.
Lance argued that it is having a community of persons with a shared experience around marginalization that is ultimately beneficial to persistence. In this specific case, it is being able to talk to other African American students who are intimately familiar with each other’s struggles and who have a similar understanding of the roles race and racism play in the lives of African American students. Lance spoke more expansively to this point, noting why the shared experience is so important to African American college students.

I guess it’s just like, when I come to The Banks House I’m there and I can identify with people… So, for instance if something happens in the media, so just for example after Trevon Martin thing happened. People on my floor were like well why are you upset? Why are you upset?! And then you like I said you have to defend why you feel a certain way because they don’t understand it, but then when you come to The Banks House people are upset with you and it’s just like, okay yes! I have some camaraderie. I have people who feel the same way as I do. Which in the dorm rooms especially in my dorm room, it was just like you were alone. It was bad. You were like the only person there.

Lance argued that one runs the risk of having their feelings and thoughts about marginalizing incidents invalidated when they are shared within the larger university context. However, sharing those thoughts and feelings with individuals who have a similar understanding and experience of them—as tends to happen within the context of TBH—has the potential to displace the loneliness, isolation, and ultimately sense of placelessness that some African American college students experience on a PWI. In addition to communicating to African American students that they are not alone in their experiences, being a part of a community of othered also provides a sense of validation for the experiences and perceptions these individuals have related to marginalizing dynamics in the institutional context. Thus, the relational transactions that occur within these discussions seem to begin with a student relating a story in the hope of receiving confirmatory feedback related to a particular perception or experience and
ends with a chorusing of said perception or experience. Sharon described this relational transaction best when she stated:

Especially if it happened to one of you (in a community of othered), and there are two other people, then you’d always feel like “am I crazy for feeling this way? Am I justified?” I guess that’s mainly why you tell people, to like just justify your feelings.

Sharon suggests that there is something powerful and perhaps therapeutic about sharing and then having someone agree with your perspective on a situation. Later in her narrative she describes in more detail the therapeutic effects accompanied with being validated by another.

You kind of like, let out some steam. So…you know they’re obviously venting about what just happened. So, people could be like “yeah, I understand.” I feel like people just need to vent, you know, for people to say like “yeah, I understand where you’re coming from.” Like, you’re not the only one. You’re not the only one going crazy. This really is happening.” ‘Cause, then you always have your support system around you, you know, whether they’re saying um, you know, “I agree” or “that was wrong” or “yeah, I totally understand where you’re coming from.” Like it’s just…it makes you feel better.

It is important to note in regard to a community of othered and the relational transactions that they facilitate, having a shared experience is a necessary but insufficient criterion for the experience of validation to occur. Both Lance and Sharon’s narrative seem to suggest that a crucial component of the validating relational transaction is who is doing the validating. Not only should this person share in the experience of marginalization but they should also be invested in the recipient of the validation in a way that communicates genuine care and concern. For example, Lance recognized, “I actually do have people here supporting me” and Sharon mentioned a consistent support system that she goes approaches for these relational transactions. This is consistent with what participants noted as being important for mentoring relationships between staff and students and fits with the overall understanding of TBH being a family and a home away from home.
Summary: Creating home: The Banks House as dynamic relational space. The results in this section highlight direct relational transactions (as a self-enhancing process) that occur within TBH. These transactions were supported by specific mechanisms, specifically roles and relationships. Both staff and students adopted distinct roles related to the students that frequented the center and from those roles emerged relationships. Specifically, staff occupied the roles of care providers, role models, and resource connectors that fostered relationships characterized by genuine care and concern (similar to the types of relationships within a family structure). Subsequent direct relational transactions between staff and students were supportive of students both psychologically and academically. Students occupied the roles of mentors and members of a community of othered. Similar to the roles of staff, these roles facilitated relationships characterized by genuine care and concern and emphasized the shared experience of African American college students on a PWI. The direct relational transactions that emerged within the context of these roles and relationships provided high-involvement participants with two benefits related to their psychological wellbeing and academic persistence. First, they provided students accountability and assistance navigating the general challenges of college life. Second, they validated the marginalization-related experiences of African American college students in ways that appeared to lead to decreases in psychological distress.

Fighting for Home: The Banks House as Contested Space

There is a final means by which TBH (as a family- and home-like context) is crafted and shaped over time. Within TBH there was evidence of ideological contests over the mission and function of the center. Said another way, there was ongoing debate over the identity and image of TBH as a setting. These contests found their way into meetings with the E-Board and even in the final focus group which comprised individuals of the E-Board. Moreover, depending on the
issue being contested, the opposing factions differed. Contests took place among participants and between participants and people who did not utilize the center. These contests are important to consider because they seem to represent a belief system that informed the agenda of the center and the actions of those who frequent the center. More specifically, participants (specifically high-involvement participants) acted in ways to preserve or recapture their ideal of what TBH should be and the function it should serve. Thus, these ideological struggles represented participants’ efforts to fight for their home.

**Clique or family?** The most resounding criticism that arose among low-involvement participants is that TBH is a “clique” or “cliquey”. TBH was perceived as being an exclusive setting that catered only to a subgroup of students. This, in fact, was a recurrent theme in the first three focus groups.

The Banks House is very cliquey. Um, if you walk in and none of your friends are there, people will look at you like, “what are you doing here?” Like when I went for the barbeque, I felt like when I walked in, it was like um, Greeks like in a corner right here. And then it was like friends over here and some more people sitting over there. It was just like real cliquey. – Paris

Yeah, that’s how I feel when I walk in there. Especially one day I went in there to print, it was just awkward like… when I walked in, somebody looked at me like, “um, who are you? What are you doing here?” – Amy

A majority of low involvement participants described TBH as unwelcoming. Even some of the participants who had not been to TBH noted that they had heard that TBH was either a clique or cliquey. Those who saw TBH as a “clique” believed that the home-like atmosphere of TBH only extended to students who work there or who are a part of the Student Strong E-Board. In keeping with this sentiment, one participant referred to Student Strong as “Lucas’s clique.” There was the perception among these participants that for those who did not belong to this exclusive group, there was no red mat of welcome at TBH. Those who viewed TBH as
“cliquey” felt that at TBH events students tend to become siloed into different groups based on either Greek society or student organization affiliation; if you are not a part of one of these groups no one acknowledges you or goes out of their way to welcome you.

The high involvement participants were very much aware of these negative perceptions of TBH, especially the one that characterizes TBH as a clique. Rashad, for example, acknowledged that this was his perception before becoming involved with TBH.

Like actually my first time walking into TBH, from what I heard, I heard it was cliquish, I heard that people stare at you if you don’t know or they don’t know who you are. So, I remember my freshman year I wanted to come to The Banks House but I stood with my hand at the doorknob the entire time and walked away, my first time coming here. And it took me, no it took my mentor actually to grab me and say no come on, I’m going to introduce you to everyone, before I was comfortable enough to actually come in.

From the very first meeting I observed at TBH, the issue of TBH being perceived as a clique has been a matter of considerable debate. To clarify, this debate has been with the idea or contention that TBH is not family- or home-like, as opposed to actual persons who hold this particular view. At that meeting Bishop asked the E-Board members who were present why more freshmen were not attending the events that the board was putting on at the center. A number of answers were advanced including those that would suggest that there was something perhaps different or unique about this freshman class that resulted in them not being very interested in the events TBH and other organizations advertised. In countering this explanation, Bishop stated, “they think we as an organization are cliquish.” “But we are not” was the quick and seemingly exasperated retort of one of the E-Board members, which was accompanied by several sighs of agreement. “I’m just telling you what I’ve heard from students” stated Bishop. What followed from Bishop were prescriptions on how members of the board could be more welcoming, such as instead of just texting students about events, talking to them face-to-face and
bringing them to the events. He also emphasized the idea of going above and beyond what they are accustomed to doing as outreach to really foster relationships with the freshmen.

High-involvement participants appeared painfully aware of the negative ways TBH was being perceived. Whenever there was mention of TBH being seen as a clique, this was followed by sighs of exasperation and swift rebuttals. Participants contested this perspective, sometimes quite fiercely. In one of my first interviews (which was with Bobbi), I brought up what Bishop had said to get some clarification on what ways TBH was being perceived as a clique. She had the following to say about Bishop’s comment.

I think it is a clique, but clique would not be the right word to use. We are more of a family. That’s how every organization is. Of course, we’re going to be inclusive with the organization but we’re open to more participants.

Of particular interest in Bobbi’s quote is her reframing of TBH as a family. This reframing was not unique to Bobbi. Many of the high involvement participants explained the clique perception as a misperception and normalized the dynamics within TBH by stating that these dynamics are what one would expect in a family or even an organization. This is not to suggest that participants saw TBH as not having issues or challenges. The unanimous conclusion at the final focus group that included several high-involvement participants was that TBH was not meeting its potential (this is discussed more expansively in the next section). Rather, participants described a great deal of frustration with the fact that TBH was being perceived as a clique and unwelcoming despite their ongoing efforts to create a welcoming and home-like context for all students who enter the setting.

The recurrent theme of TBH being a clique coupled with participants reactions to this perceptions suggest that current efforts to make TBH be home-like and family-like is, in part, driven by a desire to contest the image of TBH as cliquish and unwelcoming. As previously
noted, the increased outreach efforts of the E-Board (at the prodding of Bishop) has been to prove that TBH is not a clique and is indeed welcoming.

Thinking about the past while looking to the future. A second site of contention for participants was around what was perceived by high-involvement participants to be an unfulfilled promise TBH holds for African American college students. Both high and low involvement participants spoke of a heyday at TBH when the center was “the place to be.” A few of these individuals reported experiencing it to an extent as freshmen; others heard about through upperclassmen at the time. The narrative around what TBH used to be is a nostalgic depiction of TBH as the most popular convening place for African American college students. This was a place that was always filled to capacity with students eager to take advantage of what the center had to offer.

The programs run out of TBH were a lot stronger maybe like three years ago. I have this perception—because obviously I wasn’t here—that it was so strong and everyone was so into TBH and used TBH so much. Like they [upper classmen at the time] told me about how they would like, everybody would be at TBH studying at like 2 a.m. for big tests and stuff. People would just be hanging out. And, so I’ve heard these crazy great stories about Student Strong, about TBH, about how it’s just really like the safe haven for people. – Allison

According to participants, when compared to the TBH of several years ago, TBH of today is seen as having lost its direction. High and low-involvement participants alike agreed that the center has lost much of its previous draw. They further claimed that in light of the number of people who utilized the center in previous years, TBH of today is believed to be underutilized by the general African American student population.

I go in there but it’s always empty when I go in unless I go in for a specific meeting. Um, it’s…I feel like it’s lost the true meaning of it all, and I feel like um, especially the classes that come after my class, have a whole different experience with The Banks House than I do. -Sharon
TBH is falling off. Nobody utilizes TBH, really. My organization has our meetings there strictly for the purposes of trying to get people to come to The Banks House. – Danni

There were people there and people went there because like I said, they felt like it was their house. They felt like it was home. But then, it was like now, it’s like a whole switch. People just go there to do work and then they leave and that’s pretty much what it’s there for. – Byron

There appeared to be a shared perception among students that TBH is not as attractive as it once was to African American college students. Some attributed this shift to a change in center staff. Others blamed upperclassmen for not continuing the legacy of introducing lowerclassmen to TBH. Still, others pointed to the lowerclassmen as not being interested in taking advantage of what TBH has to offer and cited poor underclassmen turnout for other organizations’ events as evidence of this. Regardless of the specific attribution held by a given participant there was a shared sense of loss. High-involvement participants felt that the organization in which they were so highly invested was not living up to its full potential. One participant went as far as describing the center as becoming “irrelevant.”

The idea that TBH was not fulfilling its full potential was an issue that was quite charged among high-involvement participants. Indeed, in the final focus group it was a matter that was passionately discussed.

Allison: Yeah. And I think this is what we need [continuity]. I think that through this transitioning it just got mixed up and I think the continuity is just what we’re lacking and I think once we all get on the same page in some kind of way, I think that’s when we’ll start taking off.

Bobbi: And, like Allison said, we know the ins and outs of TBH so, if we don’t do it then who else is? Because as much as we hate it – I know this one girl, she was heavily involved in it, and she was just so upset and she would get so passionately upset to see Student Strong not working out like it could and like how she remembered it, and it’s just like, if we’re not gonna do it then nobody else is because nobody else has that passion for it like we do. As much as we hate it sometimes...
Bartholomew: But once again, like when we say we hate it sometimes, that’s a passion. We feel some type of way towards it for it not being the way we want it to be, you know?

Andrew: So you have a reason to be upset.

Bartholomew: Right.

Bobbi: Cause it has so much potential!

Bartholomew: Exactly. Because I know the service it can do for the students and if it’s not meeting that then I get upset.

Toward the end of the dialogue it becomes apparent that the frustration and the angst toward the unfulfilled potential of TBH, as experienced by participants, have their roots in a deep investment and belief in the potential of TBH. There is a strong desire among participants to return TBH to its former glory. Bobbi described this passion as a motivation to action. This suggests that at least part of what fuels the ongoing efforts of participants to have TBH be a home away from home for African American college students is this shared belief system around returning TBH to the way it once was [as perceived by participants]. This belief is based on a shared notion of what TBH once was and what it might yet be.

**Summary: Fighting for home: The Banks House as contested space.** This section highlighted what could be understood to be two central thrusts or energies driving high-involvement participants’ efforts to have TBH be a true home away from home for African American college students. The first thrust is a reaction to a direct affront or challenge to the identity of the setting as it is understood to be by high-involvement participants. Specifically, participants appeared highly motivated to dispel the notion that TBH was unwelcoming and cliquish. Participants held to the idea that TBH should be a home and a family to all students who use the center. The second thrust has it basis in an idealized way that TBH should be. Participants held to a nostalgic and almost mythical view of what TBH had been and used this as
a compass to guide their ongoing efforts. Consequently, the driving desire among participants is
to return TBH to its former glory and to ultimately have it meet its full potential. The
mechanism that undergirds these thrust is a shared belief system among high-involvement
participants. This shared belief systems is comprised of a type of mythology around the nature
of TBH and what it has accomplished in the past related to African American college students.
This is accompanied by a vision of what TBH of today can be.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

“for those who have no space that can be safely called home, there must be a struggle for a place to be” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 5)

Many African American college students attending predominantly White institution (PWIs) encounter marginalizing dynamics that place them at risk for unfavorable psychological and academic outcomes (Clark et al., 1999; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2011). Past research suggests that this population is able to mitigate this risk through adaptive processes that occur at the individual and setting levels; however, much of this research has focused exclusively on individual level processes (Brondolo et al., 2009; Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2005). As a result, little is known about the self-enhancing process such as narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relation transactions that are theorized to occur within counterspace settings. Given this gap in the knowledge base, the purpose of this study was to better understand how self-enhancement occurs within a counterspace for African American college students. This was accomplished through conducting an ethnographic case study of a Black cultural center (BCC) on a PWI. Black cultural centers have a history of being places of refuge for African American college students from the onslaught of racial marginalization (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006; Stovall, 2005). As such, this type of setting provides a useful case in which to study self-enhancing processes (and the mechanisms that support these processes) that assist in the adaptive responding of African American college students to marginalization.

Summary of Key Findings
This section presents key findings from the analyses related to the marginalization experienced by African American college students enrolled at a PWI and the ways participation in a BCC promoted the self-concepts of these individuals in the face of marginalization. Additionally, these findings are integrated with the larger body of literature concerned with the adaptive responding of African American college students. This is followed by implications of the study’s findings for advancing what we know about the role of settings in the adaptive responding of African American college students and supporting BCCs in their role as counterspaces to this population.

**Metacommunications of “placelessness.”** The notion of placelessness as a defining feature of the collegiate experience of some African American college students is supported by a growing number of studies that suggest that members of this population attending PWIs often experience feelings of isolation and non-belonging (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Guiffrida, 2003; Strayhorn, 2011). Additionally, a lack of incorporation into the institution can have deleterious implications for the academic outcomes of this and other minority populations on PWIs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998; Lang & Ford 1992; Littleton, 2002; Ponterotto, 1990). That said, what was particularly noteworthy about this study’s findings around placelessness was that African American college students described their marginalization on a PWI in terms of spatial boundaries and demarcations in addition to social boundaries. Specifically, they noted feeling unsafe in certain locales where there was increased risk for them falling prey to interpersonal acts of discrimination (e.g. passing by the fraternity houses). This finding suggests that the marginalization this population experiences is both a social and spatial phenomenon (Patton, 2006). If this is indeed true then it stands to reason that the importance of
a counterspace for African American college students lies not only in its provision of an affirming social environment, but a physical boundary that marks a distinct locale in which African American college students feel safe from the psychological assaults that occur within the larger institutional context. Scholarly work in critical human geography lends credence to this contention and more generally to the important role physical space plays in the experience of place. Theorists have argued that identities, marginalization, and resistance among marginalized populations are all tied to specific locales (Keith & Pile, 1993; Massey, 1994)

**The Banks House as home away from home.** What The Banks House (TBH) challenged was the metacommunication and experience of placelessness. A majority of participants noted that the experience of placelessness motivated them to seek or carve out “places” on campus—physical and social settings in which they experienced a sense of belonging, connection, and affirmation as African Americans. This motivation among African American college students is consistent with findings that suggest that this populations actively seeks racially affirming campus settings as a way to negotiate their sense of belonging at a PWI (Grier-Reed, 2010; Patton, 2006; Strayhorn, 2011) Interestingly, many participants with higher levels of involvement in TBH noted that in becoming involved with TBH they were trying to connect to the African American community because of the placelessness they experienced in the larger institutional context. This ultimately suggests that one avenue through which African American students may experience a sense of belonging to and incorporation within PWIs is through participation in BCCs and similar settings (e.g., ethnic student organizations; Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Guiffrida, 2003; Lewis & McKissic, 2009).

There was unanimous agreement among high-involvement participants that TBH represented a “home away from home”. The search for home is understandable given that this is
the first time many of these students are living away from their families (Museus, 2008). It is also consistent with the narratives of home and family that characterize African American culture (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Last, the imagery of home is also fitting when juxtaposed against the notion of placelessness. That is, within a context of non-belonging and institutional estrangement, the idea of a “homefront,” as one participant described TBH, becomes necessary for one’s psychological survival (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006). As bell hooks (1990) argues, *homeplace* is important for African Americans because it provides a site in which they can find the dignity and sense of worth denied them in marginalizing contexts.

Past research suggests that BCCs and similar settings are racially affirming and supportive of one’s sense of dignity and worth as an African American (Grier-Reed, 2010; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Shaun & Quaye, 2007). For the purposes of this inquiry, TBH was conceptualized as a counterspace precisely to uncover the ways this setting promotes a sense of dignity and self-worth (i.e., self-enhancement) among African American college students. Analyses revealed the presence of one theorized self-enhancing process—direct relational transactions—that was supportive and affirming of African American college students (Case & Hunter, 2012). This process of self-enhancement appeared to be supported by specific setting mechanisms, namely *relationships* and *roles*. Roles refer to the orientations individuals have to each other. They dictate, in many ways, the nature of relationships between persons (Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995). Staff took a number of unique roles toward high-involvement participants including, extra-care providers, role models, and resource connectors. Relationships refer to the unique pattern and tenor of transactions between individuals. Participants described the relationship between them and staff as one characterized by genuine care and goodwill. The direct relational transactions that ensued from these roles and relationships provided students
with “critical navigational skills” (Lewis & McKissic, 2009) that enabled them to traverse the vicissitudes of the college experience. In one of the few empirical studies of a BCC, Patton (2006) similarly found that BCC staff played a monumental role in creating the positive “atmosphere” that characterized that setting. The author went on to note that staff possessed knowledge and skills that ultimately helped African American college students navigate the college experience. The importance of these supportive transactions between staff and students cannot be overstated given the difficulty these students often experience accessing support within the larger institutional context (e.g., from professors and advisors; Fisher & Hartman, 1995; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Patton, 2006).

In addition to engaging in direct relational transactions with staff, students who frequented TBH also had transactions with each other that were supportive of their psychological wellbeing and academic performance. For example, students adopted the role of a “community of othered” that validated the experience of validation and provided support that ameliorated psychological distress. This conclusion is consistent with findings from a few empirical studies which highlight that students, as a community, can be supportive of one another in ways that ameliorate the distress associated with marginalization (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Museus, 2008). There is also support for this finding more broadly. Specifically, a “community of resistance” (hooks, 1990) or a “psychological community of others” (Jones, 2005), is argued to provide a context that is validating and affirming, and that ultimately buffers against the deleterious impacts of marginalization on the psyche (Brondolo et al., 2009; Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Mellor, 2004).

This examination was not successful in yielding compelling evidence of other self-enhancing processes occurring within TBH (i.e., acts of resistance, narrative identity work). Past
studies have highlighted that one of the crucial functions of BCCs and other ethnic student organizations is to provide a venue for African American cultural expression (Lewis & McKissic, 2009; Museus, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Case & Hunter (2012) termed behaviors occurring within counterspaces that represent cultural performances as “acts of resistance.” These behaviors connect individuals to their culture in meaningful ways but are also devalued within the larger societal context. While there was some evidence of acts of resistance within TBH (e.g., whooping stories), the precise mechanisms that gave rise to such behaviors were not illuminated through the examination.

There was also little evidence from the analyses of narrative identity work, or participants (re)crafting the ways they saw themselves and their group. This is surprising given that the students were in the emerging adulthood developmental period—a span of time characterized by identity negotiation (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2003). Also, given that these students are part of a racial minority group, it was expected that there would be identity negotiation contoured by recognition of the realities of race and racism (Arnett & Brody, 2008). It is possible that with longer and more intense engagement with the setting and more targeted questions, evidence of narrative identity work might emerge. It is equally probable that narrative identity work was not a salient self-enhancing process in TBH. The pervasive narrative within this setting centered on “home” and “family.” This narrative seems to naturally lend itself to direct relational transactions that are supportive of individuals and ameliorative of their distress. This is not to suggest that narrative identity work did not occur within the setting, rather it may be that the more prominent or critical form of self-enhancement for high-involvement participants was direct relational transactions. This possibility raises the very interesting question of the
relationship between a counterspace’s philosophy and the self-enhancing processes that emerge within that setting (Case & Hunter, in press).

Some of the results suggest that there is a relationship between a setting’s philosophy or belief system and the nature of the self-enhancing processes that occur within it. Specifically, the last category of findings highlighted a belief system among setting members regarding the identity or essence of TBH. There was a type of mythology built up around how TBH used to be and a subsequent nostalgia for how things were. This resulted in what can only be described as an “energy” or “thrust” that seem to invigorate participants’ efforts to have TBH be the home away from home they envisioned. This energy was manifested in high-involvement participants’ attempts to reach out to non-members and engaging in direct relational transactions that would allow these individuals to feel at home and with family when they visited the center. This is similar, in some ways, to findings from the empowering community settings literature.

Specifically, it has been found that a setting’s belief system tends to specify the precise behaviors setting members should engage in order to attain desired outcomes (Maton & Salem, 1995; Maton, 2008)

Finally, it is important to note that in regard to perceptions/experiences of TBH as a counterspace there are important individual differences. That is, not all the students who participated in this study experienced TBH as a counterspace. Many low-involvement participants were quite clear that TBH was experienced by them as unwelcoming and exclusive. There are a couple possible explanations for this. First, as a number of high-involvement participants seem to indicate, there might be a minimum level of involvement in a counterspace that is required before participation in that setting is self-enhancing. Thus, it is possible that with
higher levels of involvement in the center, individuals who did not experience TBH as a
counterspace may come to do so.

The second possibility, which hints at person-environment fit, is that there might be
something about TBH that is attractive to some individuals and repulsive to others. As Guiffrida
(2003) argues, “although all African American students who attend a PWI share some
experiences, it is a mistake to consider them a homogenous group whose cultural needs can all
be met through involvement in African American student organizations.” Therefore, even with
higher levels of involvement, some individuals might never experience TBH as a counterspace.
If this is the case, what might predict whether a person will benefit from a given counterspace
probably has to do with attitudinal factors. Research findings from the racial identity literature
have challenged the idea of a monolithic African American perception and response to
marginalization. This literature has highlighted distinct ideologies among African Americans
toward race and racism which then predict varied responses to the reality of marginalization
(Hunter & Joseph, 2010; Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes 2005; Sellers, Chavous, &
Cooke, 1998; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Some individuals, for example prefer to self-segregate
while others prefer to assimilate into the mainstream or dominant culture (Sellers et al., 1998).
Thus, it is possible that some African American college students are averse to the very idea of
TBH. Among low-involvement participants, some indicated a preference for social networks
that were diverse in composition, an ideology consistent with Multiculturalism that has emerged
in African American emerging adults’ racial identity profiles (Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007;
Hunter & Joseph, 2010; Rowley, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998). This line of reasoning raises the
question of who benefits from involvement in counterspaces such as BCCs and on under what
conditions? It also suggests caution in assuming that all African American college students use BCCs or other ethnic minority student organizations to adaptively respond to marginalization.

**Limitations**

The findings of this inquiry must be considered within the context of the project’s scope and certain methodological constraints. Because of the study’s design (i.e., ethnographic case study) caution in generalizing these findings is recommended (Patton, 2002). The BCC that was the focus of this study is one of many such settings across the nation, each with its own unique history, mission, and programming. This was an in-depth exploration of one BCC at a PWI to provide some understanding of how African American college students may use BCCs and other campus settings in their adaptive responding. Consequently, the self-enhancing processes and mechanisms identified by this inquiry may not hold true for other BCCs on other campuses. These processes and mechanisms represent possibilities and not certainties in understanding how African American college students may use participation in a given campus setting as an adaptive response. Variation in processes and mechanisms can be expected from setting to setting and campus to campus.

This study uncovered evidence of the presence of a theoretical construct, self-enhancement, in the form of direct relational transactions. Despite the compelling narratives of participants, one cannot be absolutely certain that the transactions observed by the author and reported on by participants are directly associated with the enhancement of individuals’ self-concepts. What this study provides is evidence of a process within a BCC that is theorized to enhance the self-concepts of African American college students in ways that promote psychological wellbeing and academic persistence. Future research, using different
methodological and analytic procedures, is needed to establish whether direct relational transactions predict enhanced self-concepts and favorable psychological and academic outcomes.

**Implications for Theory, Future Research and Student Affairs Practice**

The findings of this inquiry suggest that at least some African American college students engage in self-enhancement through the use of counterspaces, specifically BCCs. Black cultural centers have been a mainstay of the collegiate experience of many African Americans over the decades (Bankole, 2005; Hefner, 2002). However, it is not the only setting members of this population may use as a counterspace. Scholars have identified a number of other counterspace settings for African American college students enrolled at PWIs including Black Greek societies, study halls, African American faculty-student networks, and informal social networks (Grier-Reed, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Low-involvement participants in this study also identified other spaces on campus where they felt at home as an African American. These included ethnic student organizations, other cultural houses, and residence halls that were comprised of students of color. This suggests that there is likely a landscape of counterspaces for African American college students to access on PWIs (Solórzano et al., 2000). Two research questions follow from this observation whose answers will further refine our understanding of the framework. First, what is the relationship between availability of counterspaces and desired outcomes? For example, given the deleterious impacts marginalization can have on wellbeing and academic persistence, one might expect that the more opportunities to be involved in a counterspace, the better outcomes one would find among the population of African American college students at a given institution.

The second and related question concerns whether involvement in more than one counterspace results in better outcomes than involvement in just one counterspace. On the one
hand being engaged with multiple counterspaces may increase the opportunities for self-

enhancement by simple virtue of having more than one setting to derive self-enhancement.

Indeed, a number of high-involvement participants in this study mentioned being members of

more than one ethnic student organization. On the other hand, perhaps self-enhancement is

contingent on a deep familiarity with a given setting. That is, one has to develop relationships

and roles in order for self-enhancement to occur. In that case, one individual with prolonged

engagement with one counterspace might experience better outcomes than an individual with

multiple but superficial involvements with counterspaces.

The findings of this study have implications for the general Counterspaces framework.

Within research on counterspace settings, traditionally the “who” that comprises the

counterspace has been considered most important. That is, the characteristics of the persons

present within the setting have been assumed to be the major determinant of whether self-

enhancement occurs (Case & Hunter, 2012). Scholars have emphasized the importance of

communities of resistance, psychological community of others, or communities of othered who

have shared experiences of marginalization and who are less likely to reproduce marginalizing

processes in their interactions with other setting members (Jones, 2005; hooks, 1990). The

findings of this study suggest that both the “who” and the “what” (i.e., extra-individual elements

of the setting) are important to the emergence of self-enhancing processes.

In terms of the who, BCC staff seem to play a monumental role in creating conditions for

African American college students to thrive (Patton, 2006). The leadership of this setting

seemed to be important because of the tone it set for the roles and relationships between

members of the setting. High-involvement participants unanimously stated that the experience

of TBH is one of home and the experience of setting members is one of family. It is likely not a
coincidence that this is the dynamic that staff reported they wanted to create for students. Thus, in the context of BCC staffing, it seems important to have staff who can execute a particular vision for BCCs (Patton, 2006). This is consistent with other findings that suggest that program staff can play a critical role in the emergence of processes that support marginalized populations (Case & Hunter, in press; Lavie-Ayaji, & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). This particular finding also has direct implications for student affairs practice. Specifically, it implies that careful consideration must be made on the part of student affairs professionals and university administrators in selecting staff that will promote the conditions necessary for BCCs to be experienced as counterspaces.

As it regards the what, many high-involvement participants pointed to aspects of the physical environment of TBH that contributed to the setting being experienced as a home. As mentioned previously, the physicality of settings represent a dimension along which place is experienced (Keith & Pile, 1993; Massey, 1994). Specifically, the physical structure’s resemblance to a house, the availability of food, and the comfortable furniture seem to add to the experience of home. This suggests that the extra-individual elements within a setting can be important components of the atmosphere of the setting, especially when they coincide with the character of the social dynamics within the setting (Patton, 2006). This is not to suggest that the physical environment of a setting is sufficient to support self-enhancing processes (especially as these processes are by nature social), but it is possible that they may add to or enhance such processes. The implication of this observation for student affairs practice is as follows. If school administrators and student affairs professional seek to create a home-like atmosphere within BCCs or other cultural centers, it may be useful to consider the extent to which the physical environment of the setting is congruent with this ideal (Patton, 2006).
The findings of this study inform the counterspaces framework by suggesting that both interpersonal (relational) and extra-individual (aspects of the physical environment) contribute to the emergence of self-enhancing process. In addition to this contribution to the framework, the current inquiry makes another contribution worth mentioning. Specifically, given that there was only evidence of one self-enhancing process occurring within the BCC, this suggests that a given counterspace may only give rise to a subset of all self-enhancing processes. Further, it suggests that counterspace members do not need to be engaged in all self-enhancing processes to benefit from their involvement with a counterspace.

Across PWIs there appears to be growing interest in multicultural centers that cater to multiple groups within one physical setting as opposed to several different settings, each responsible for catering to the needs of a particular population (Hefner, 2002; Princes, 2005). Such proposals have been met by some student affairs professionals and scholars with apprehension because of the fear that multicultural centers will be unable to respond to the unique needs of African American college students (Princes, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that there may be reason for caution, at least as it pertains to some models of multicultural centers. High-involvement participants highlighted the importance of having a community of othered—a group of individuals who share a similar history, culture, and understanding of and experience with marginalization. This community, through direct relational transactions, validated the experiences of participants and aided in ameliorating the distress participants experienced. Additionally, there was evidence that TBH allowed for cultural expressions that participants feared would be misunderstood by members of the larger institutional community. It is quite likely that these setting elements, considered important to some African American college students and seemingly linked to their adaptive responses, may
be lost with the introduction of multicultural centers. This is not to suggest that MCCs cannot be useful to African American college students; the question is whether they can fulfill the same function of BCCs (Princes, 2005). Can a MCC be a counterspace for African American college students? This is once more a question of the importance of the “who” in the space for the emergence of self-enhancing processes. At the very least, this study suggests that the model of multicultural centers that would likely be most optimal to African Americans is one in which there is a single physical structure but separate “interest” spaces for different cultural groups.

Conclusion

In addition to individual-level responses, some African American college students engage in setting-level responses to the marginalization they experience on PWIs. One campus setting that supports these responses is the Black cultural center. This setting—as a counterspace—challenged the metacommunication of placelessness experienced by the African American participants of this study. Self-enhancing direct relational transactions among students and between students and staff appeared to help students navigate the complexity of collegiate life, access needed resources, and mitigate the distress related to experiences of marginalization. These transactions were supported by distinct roles held by setting members and caring relationships between them. Findings coincide with the growing understanding within psychology that space and place are important to desired outcomes in human functioning (Case & Hunter, 2012; Maton, 2008). It also is in keeping with the idea that the settings African American college students participate in can help offset the psychological and academic impairments associated with their marginalization (Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006; Strayhorn, 2011).
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### Appendix A: A Summary of Key Terms and Concepts

#### Table 1

A Summary of Key Terms and Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanisms of Adaptive Responding: collection of individual and interpersonal processes that promote psychological wellbeing in the face of racism</th>
<th>Challenging Processes: self-enhancing processes within counterspaces that promote positive self-concepts in the face of denigration</th>
<th>Setting Mechanisms: precise mechanisms that give rise to self-enhancing processes within counterspaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-protection</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancement</td>
<td>Narrative identity work, Acts of resistance, Direct relational transactions</td>
<td>Interactions with setting features, including: Belief Systems, Relationships, Roles, Resources</td>
</tr>
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Appendix B: Participant Demographic Information

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Classification</th>
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<tr>
<td>Allen**</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Allison*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartholomew**</td>
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<td>Annie</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
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<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
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Table 2 cont.

**Low-Involvement Sample**

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<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates individuals who participated in both an interview and a focus group

** Indicates individuals in high-involvement sample who only participated in member-check focus group
Appendix C: Interview and Focus Group Protocols

Student Interview Protocol

Demographic Information and Context
1. What is your age?
2. What is your college classification?
3. How would you describe your racial/ethnic identity?
4. How long have you been a student at the [name of university]?
5. What is your major?
6. Where did you go grow up
7. Where did you live prior to matriculating at [name of university]?
9. Where did you go to high school?
10. How would you describe the population of this high school? SES? Racial composition?

Campus experiences/perceptions
1. How would you characterize your experiences so far as a student at the [name of university]?
2. To what degree do you feel a sense of belonging at this university? [Follow-up: What accounts for this?]
3. To what degree have you felt accepted and embraced by the university community? [Follow-up: What accounts for this?]
4. Have you experienced being treated differently? [Follow-up: How so? How often?]
5. What do you think accounts for this?

Initial experiences and current involvement with TBH
1. How did you first learn about TBH?
2. What did you think the purpose of TBH was at that time?
3. What were you looking for or hoping to find the first time you came to TBH
4. How long have you been involved with TBH?
5. In what ways/capacities are you involved with TBH?
6. How do you feel about what you do with TBH?

Benefits of Involvement
1. What keeps you involved with TBH?
2. Do you have a desire to be more involved? Is there anything that is keeping you from being more involved?
3. What is important to you about your involvement with TBH?
4. What do you see as the benefits (if any) of being involved with TBH?
5. What do you see as the drawbacks (if any) of being involved with TBH?
6. In what ways does being involved with TBH help you?

Dynamics
1. What is it like to be involved with TBH [Follow-up: What do you like about your involvement? What don’t you like about your involvement?]?
2. Is there something that TBH provides you that other places on campus do not? If so, what?
3. To what degree do you feel supported by the center or people within the center?
5. To what degree do people in the center help you to cope with stress? How about stress related to racial experiences?
Staff Interview Protocol

Demographic Information and Context
1. What is your age?
2. How do you identify racially/ethnically?
4. How long have you worked at TBH?
5. What is your position/role?

Campus experiences/perceptions
1. What is your sense of the experiences of African American students on this campus?
2. Have you witnessed or heard about African American students being treated differently because of their race? Follow up questions: How often? In what ways?

Roles and relationships
1. Tell me about what role you see yourself playing in the lives of students who use the center?
2. How would you describe your relationships with them?

Philosophy
1. In your own words, what does TBH seek to do for African American college students?
2. To what extent do you think TBH accomplishes this?
3. What is the philosophy of this program in relation to these students?
4. What is your philosophy for working with these students?

Benefits
Tell me about what TBH means to you.
What benefits do you think students get from their involvement with the program?
What do you think it is about TBH that is helpful or beneficial to students?
Focus Group Protocol (Low-Involvement Participants)

1. What is it like being a student on this campus?

2. What have you found most surprising about your experiences so far?

3. What kind of challenges have you faced on this campus?

4. Are there places on campus where you feel uncomfortable?  
   [Follow-up: Where? Why?]

5. Are there certain places that you go where you mostly feel comfortable?  
   [Follow-up: What about these places lead to this feeling?]

6. What perceptions/opinions do you believe people have about African American college students on this campus?  
   [Follow-up: Where do these perceptions/opinions come from?]

7. Have you heard about “The Banks House”?  

8. What do you know about it or have heard about it?  
   [Follow-up: What are your perceptions or opinions about it?]

9. For you, what might be the appeal of being involved with something like TBH?  
   [Follow-up: What are the advantages of being involved with TBH? What does it provide you?]

10. Do you think that there is something that TBH would provide you that would be hard to find elsewhere on campus?  
    [Follow-up: What does TBH provide you?]

11. What disadvantages are there associated with being involved with something like TBH?  
    [What might keep someone from being involved with TBH?]

12. I understand that some people make a deliberate choice not to be involved with TBH. I wonder if this is the case for any of you and what has led you to make that choice?
Focus Group Protocol (High-Involvement Participants’ Member Check)

1. What is it like being a student on this campus?

2. What have you found most surprising about your experiences so far?

3. What kind of challenges have you faced on this campus?

4. Are there certain places where you feel comfortable?
   [Follow-up: What about these places lead to this feeling?]

5. Are there places on campus where you feel uncomfortable?
   [Follow-up: Where? Why?]

6. What perceptions/opinions do you believe people have about African American college students on this campus?
   [Follow-up: Where do these perceptions/opinions come from?]

7. What is the appeal of being involved with something like TBH?
   [Follow-up: What are the advantages of being involved with TBH?]

8. Is there something that TBH provides you that is hard to find elsewhere on campus?
   [Follow-up: What does TBH provide you?]

9. In what ways do you think your college experience would be different if you did not have TBH?

10. In the interviews I have conducted so far, I have heard… [Mention findings from interviews as well as focus groups with low-involvement participants]… In what ways do you agree or disagree with X finding.
### Appendix D: Documents Included in Analysis

#### Table 3

*Documents included in analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Summary of content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Strong Application</td>
<td>Describes program, volunteer and paid positions, and requirements and responsibilities for position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBH History (Author 1, 2007)</td>
<td>Describes the history, purpose, mission and vision of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Strong Report (Author 1 &amp; Author 2, 2007)</td>
<td>Describes the historical need for the program, the goals, outcomes and components of the program, and preliminary outcome data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBH website</td>
<td>Describes the organization in terms of its purpose related to African American college students and the wider institutional community and its associated programming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Concept Map

Concept map depicting major analytic themes and their hierarchical ordering.

Figure 1

Placelessness

- Greek lines: Spatial and social exclusion
- Hypervisibility/invisibility in classroom contexts
- The Black box: Racialized assumptions & Problems navigating resource/opportunity structure
- Interpersonal discrimination in dorms and on streets
- The weight (i.e., effects) of placelessness

Need for place

- Escaping the experience of placelessness
- Finding a place to which one belongs

TBH as “home” (i.e., a place)

- Physical environment similar to home
- Family-like environment (due to direct relational transactions)
- Staff adopted roles that promoted caring relationships and supportive relational transactions
- Students adopted roles that promoted caring relationships and supportive relational transactions
- Students’ efforts to create home driven by belief system around how TBH should function