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Ammar Ul Haq   April 9th, 2025

"I AM WHO I AM BECAUSE WE ARE": STUDENT THEATER AS A COUNTERSPACE

IN HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

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By Ammar Ul Haq

There are several unique pressures that exist for students of color that enter the historically white campus. Those entering such a space, one established and defined by action to uphold a standard of whiteness, will seek spaces for themselves where the implicit characteristics allow for some relief from these pressures. Vanderbilt University, University of Georgia, and Emory University are all such institutions located in comparable settings, all have a history of resisting integration or, at one point, being an all-white space. The legacy of these histories continue in the pressures that persist. Student theater, defined as that which is run by and for students, independent of faculty input, and with students organizing at all levels, can be one of those many extracurricular spaces where students of color may seek a space of acceptance, belonging and community within their historically white institution. It has those qualities of collaboration, identity exploration, creativity and expression that could provide unique ability to respond to the needs of students of color. To evaluate and characterize these student theater spaces, semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students from the aforementioned universities that participate in student theater, regardless of major or background. First, a review of current literature was gathered on the challenges of navigating a historically white institution, the properties and benefits of space being created and the qualities of theater that may alleviate those pressures that exist for students of color. This review was used to generate several questions through which the interview responses were gathered. After conducting the interviews, their responses were synthesized for common threads and interesting trends. The result of the analysis showed that student theater acted as a space for students of color to be vulnerable and authentic outside of the way they were expected to be navigating a historically white institution. Casting and tension with roles was a pressure alleviated by identity-specific student theater spaces, but the factors that drew students to different spaces varied based on identity. Community and mentorship were major benefits to identity-specific spaces, and non-specific spaces could improve their internal diversity efforts.

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In Southern Africa we have a concept called Ubuntu - which is that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. You can't be human all by yourself. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas what you do, what I do, affects the whole world.

- *Desmond Tutu* [1]

INTRODUCTION

When I founded Ubuntu Theater Group, a student theater group by and for Students of Color (SOC) at Emory University, it was not because of disrespect or discrimination. Though those things can certainly happen to any SOC, pain was not my motivation. My motivation arose when the student musical theater group, Ad Hoc Productions, staged their production of *Fun Home*. I found myself with my castmates in the costume room participating in the best of all post-show traditions: trading old stories, banter, and inside jokes from the show. One of the seniors told us about how he once smoked a bowl in front of the police department. I fired back with a joke about how I wouldn't be able to get away with that.

"Wait, why?"

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[1] Marianne Schnall, "Wisdom Shared With Me By Desmond Tutu: 'We Are All Connected. What Unites Us Is Our Common Humanity.,'" Forbes, accessed February 26, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/marianneschnall/2021/12/26/wisdom-shared-with-me-by-desmond-tutu-we-are-all-connected-what-unites-us-is-our-common-humanity/.

They didn't understand the joke because the premise relies on the salience of my racial identity, something that in all their well-meaning, they could never conceptualize. There is a layer of understanding that is lost when a student of color is alone in a space where their understanding of themselves is completely different from how others understand them. In the second of silence that followed that joke was the moment Ubuntu Theater Group was born. I aimed to make this a space of mutual understanding, of community, and of authentic selfhood. Spaces like this need to exist at any historically white institution (HWI) to support and affirm SOC and to cater to their specific needs. This study will characterize student theater as a counterspace: what makes it effective, when and if it is ineffective, and what can it offer SOC in response to their needs?

The places where these students find their cultural or community connection can differ, which is why the present study will identify the characteristics that make student theater an effective—or ineffective—counterspace at HWIs, and how best to optimize the student-led theatrical space to suit the needs of SOC. The analysis will come in three parts: first, an overview of my positionality, as any discussion of how identity interacts with space will be, intentionally or not, influenced by the identities that I hold. This will be followed by a review of existing literature on the topic. Finally, an analysis of semi-structured interviews with students from Vanderbilt University, Emory University, and the University of Georgia (UGA). The reason for the selection of these three institutions is that this study is executed through Emory University, which is comparable to Vanderbilt University as a private, southern-based, and academically rigorous institution, and is interestingly contrasted to UGA, which is in the same state but is a public university.

Positionality Statement

Before continuing to the literature review, it is important to understand that when discussing topics of racial understanding, tension, and accommodation, it is absolutely impossible for me to separate the influence of my positionality from my analysis. I am a Pakistani man from the Middle East and North Africa from a somewhat wealthy upbringing. Until my undergraduate years, I frequently moved from country to country, shifting from being part of the minority and the majority populations at each school, and growing up in primarily multicultural but Americanized educational setting where the value of multiculturalism and diversity was instilled at a very young age with large events like an International Day Festival. Constant moving and adjustments have caused me to have to re-introduce myself frequently and to confront what my identity looks like as a result of my lacking roots in any particular culture or area. This upbringing has resulted in my becoming an advocate for solidarity amongst people of color (POC), cultural appreciation, reflection, and radical acceptance of different identities. Furthermore, my privileged upbringing, in high contrast to that of my parents', has instilled a constant acknowledgement of that privilege.

I take this time to acknowledge my specific positionality because, though I will attempt to make a grounded and fully-researched conclusion analysis, it will be inevitable that some attribute of my thinking will be additionally informed by my own experiences in the field.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The aim of this review is to examine existing literature to further explain the nuances of student engagement on campus. This review will examine the underlying issues that inform the absolute need for counterspaces while acknowledging the challenges that limit them in their universality. First, there will be an examination of how positionality can impact the expectations that SOC have when entering HWIs that impact student engagement on campus. Building on this, there will be an exploration of the term "counterspace" and sites of joy on campus for SOC. Following that will be a discussion of intracommunity and intercommunity distance and how that impacts the extent of student engagement with campus. Next, there will be some discussion of how institutional attitudes towards supporting minority communities on campus can impact how counterspaces are used. Finally, a discussion of the characteristics that could make student theater an effective counterspace for SOC at HWIs. In totality, this section should identify the need for counterspaces, why they are constructed, when they reach students and when they don't, and what traits student theater has that could provide a unique and effective counterpsace on HWI campuses, all providing sufficient background to expand on student theater's role as a counterspace through the semi-structured interviews that follow this chapter.

Expectations of SOC

The background a student has going into university has a profound impact on how they process being minorities on campus and the extent to which they feel threatened, isolated or defensive on campus. One easy way to examine this is in the racial and ethnic makeup of where students grew up. Students from predominantly white high schools may fare better or engage more with their HWI, whereas students going from being part of the majority in their area would feel a greater shock becoming a minority at their HWI.[2] As such, the latter are more likely to seek refuge in counterspaces where they can find others experiencing the same shock. As Fischer describes, background only has some impact on outcomes, the campus environment and the extent to which it aligns with student expectations have a huge role in the outcomes of that student.[3]

Once on campus, students can have their behavior mischaracterized along racial lines by authority figures like professors or administrators as a result of cultural mismatch. International students from East Asian countries often face this type of mischaracterization, with silence in the classroom being seen as a way to convey focus, attention, and respect in their cultures, while in western universities the same qualities

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[2] Sandra S. Smith and Mignon R. Moore, "Intraracial Diversity and Relations among African‑Americans: Closeness among Black Students at a Predominantly White University," *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 1 (2000): 1–39, https://doi.org/10.1086/303112.
[3] Mary J. Fischer, "Settling into Campus Life: Differences by Race/Ethnicity in College Involvement and Outcomes," *The Journal of Higher Education* 78, no. 2 (2007): 125–61.

convey apathy or disengagement.[4] For other SOC, silence is not just an incapability to speak, but rather the withholding of speech, a conscious decision to not participate based on an understanding of the self in how it differs from those around you.[5] Dalia Rodriguez offers community as a way to understand SOC silence and persuade SOC voice: "Focusing on building community is critical in establishing an environment in which students not only value each other's backgrounds, views and opinions, but also their own."[6] The next section will expand on how a space can be the site of such a community.

Warner's "Counterpublic" and Defining the Counterspace

There is an emotional weight to constant self-explanation that causes SOC to choose silence in the HWI setting, particularly in classrooms, even when the discussions at hand are relevant to race and discrimination experiences because SOC do not want to be constantly responsible for educating others on what they already know as a result of their lived experience. Michael Warner is a pivotal voice in the topic discussed in this study, his collection of essays, "Publics and Counterpublics," has defined a lot of the vocabulary used to describe spaces that serve communities and perspectives outside of the norm.[7] To significantly simplify, Warner presents the "public" as a space that is

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[4] Heidi Ross and Yajing Chen, "Engaging Chinese International Undergraduate Students in the American University," *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2015): 13–36.

[5] Dalia Rodriguez, "Silence as Speech: Meanings of Silence for Students of Color in Predominantly White Classrooms," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 4, no. 1 (2011): 111–44.
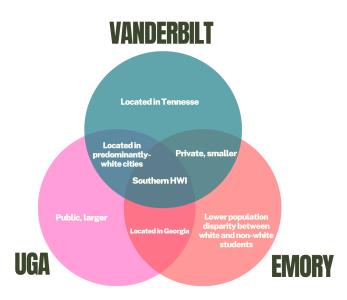
[6] Rodriguez. p. 38

[7] Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics." Public Culture 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/26277.

created, but for strangers and is formed via attention.[8] In essence, it is the space that people speak in that holds the mutual understandings and expectations of those that occupy it. Warner would argue the reader of his essay is a public, that the reader of this very study is a public. Counterpublics, then, are spaces that are created for those that exist outside of the social or cultural norm where the mutual understanding and rules that govern the presentation of oneself in the public are altered.[9] Counterspaces for students of color are spaces where the weight of self-explanation is lifted because all members of that public already understand implicitly. Warner's work gives a frame of thought through which all counterspaces—including this one, and in fact even the very term "counterspace"— can be created, identified and made effective to the needs of those that occupy its "public."[10] Though Warner uses the phrase "counterpublic" in his work, I will opt for "counterspace" to integrate the utility of the physical space in addition to the social space as well as to describe how such a space can be useful for SOC without being designed for the purpose of resistance. Warner's version of the counterpublic requires a sort of conscious resistance to institutional power in the creation of space, whereas the counterspace as used in this study explores more the inherent qualities of student theater practice that offer resistance from the same pressure, whether conscious or unconscious.

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[8] Warner.
[9] Warner.
[10] Warner.

VANDERBILT

Located in Tennesse

Located in predominantly-white cities

Private, smaller

Southern HWI

Public, larger

Located in Georgia

Lower population disparity between white and non-white students

UGA

EMORY

Graph 1. Visualization of Characteristics of the Three HWI Universities

Here, it becomes necessary to define our public: what is an HWI, why is it a public that necessitates a counterspace, and how do these three universities fit in that definition. Most American universities are described as HWIs — they represent universities that are predominantly white as a result of inequity in access to higher education and the still-recent effects of universities being exclusively white prior to integration efforts in the 1950s and 1960s. The term "predominantly white institution" (PWI) is sometimes used interchangeably with HWI, but HWI encompasses the complex history of colonial effort that is baked into the origins of these institutions. The first universities in the United States were explicitly created to displace Indigenous communities and cultures and create sites for Christian expansion, while being built by African slaves whose owners were appointed as college trustees for "providing" the stolen land.[11] Once schools were desegregated, the majority of white students indicated

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[11] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Crystal E. Peoples, "Historically White Colleges and Universities: The Unbearable Whiteness of (Most) Colleges and Universities in America," *American Behavioral Scientist*, January 15, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211066047.

resistance to the inclusion of Black people and other minority students; the law of segregation had ended, but the attitude of segregation would take a much longer battle to bring to an end.[12] Though overt statements of racism to that degree have become more rare (though, importantly, not infrequent) microaggressive experiences are an almost universal experience for SOC.[13] One should not let the "micro-" in the term confuse them, these experiences can be just as harmful, seen as a continuation of those intentional efforts to make collegiate spaces uncomfortable for SOC in ways that white student peers protect through ambiguity.[14]

All three universities have different histories related to integration, but all remain predominantly white to this day. UGA, as a public university, was ordered by law to desegregate, which was met with violent riots that spanned multiple days and resulted in their first Black students, Hamilton E. Holmes and Charlayne Hunter-Gault, being suspended for their safety.[15] Emory was the next to integrate following petitions from Emory faculty and students. Pressure from its faculty and maintaining a positive public image made Emory pursue integration, but not immediately, as the result of a state law that would remove Emory's tax-free status should they integrate their student body. Emory pursued legal action to overturn that law, where the court ruled in Emory's favor, finally desegregating in 1963.[16] Vanderbilt, similarly to Emory, was able to resist

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[12] Bonilla-Silva and Peoples.

[13] Allegra J. Midgette and Kelly Lynn Mulvey, "White American Students' Recognition of Racial Microaggressions in Higher Education," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 17, no. 1 (2024): 54–67, https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000391.

[14] Midgette and Mulvey.

[15] Robert Cohen, "'Two, Four, Six, Eight, We Don't Want to Integrate': White Student Attitudes Toward the University of Georgia's Desegregation," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1996): 616–45.

[16] William B. Turner, "The Racial Integration of Emory University: Ben F. Johnson, Jr., and the Humanity of Law," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, August 15, 2007), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1007261.

integration efforts due to its private status. Unlike Emory, integration efforts in Vanderbilt did not have as much of a rallying support from its faculty, which required a larger inciting incident to influence this critical change. This incident came when Vanderbilt expelled a student, James Lawson, from its divinity school due to his involvement in Nashville's civil rights movement. This resulted in a great deal of protest and, importantly, faculty resignations that ultimately provided sufficient pressure to begin desegregation efforts at Vanderbilt, also in 1964.[17] Despite integrating their student body, the effort to fully embrace and support SOC communities is ongoing, while all three institutions remain predominantly-white, a public that finds its roots in white supremacy and resistance to equitable treatment of SOC.[18]

Having identified the public and the need for a counterspace, it must be established that feelings like joy are beyond a natural, biological impulse, but are tangible feelings that can be influenced, both in their cause and in their expression, by sociological factors. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theory of racialized emotions establishes this lens and further argues that such emotions can be material and have spatial manifestations, an idea that Antar Tichavakunda employs in their exploration of Black joy on white campuses. In a similar sense, sites of white joy can be sites of hostility

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[17] Theo Emery, "Activist Ousted From Vanderbilt Is Back, as a Teacher," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2006, sec. Education, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/04/education/04lawson.html.

[18] "University of Georgia | Data USA," accessed March 13, 2025, https://datausa.io/profile/university/university-of-georgia; Michelle Ricker, "Meet Emory's Class of 2028," accessed March 13, 2025, https://news.emory.edu/features/2024/08/er_meet_the_class_27-08-2024/index.html; "Vanderbilt At A Glance," Vanderbilt University, accessed March 13, 2025, https://admissions.vanderbilt.edu/profile/.

against SOC.[19] A site that is supposed to be for the community-building of the whole campus, and is propped up as such, may not be so for SOC. Such disparities necessitate the creation of, for example, the National Panhellenic Greek organizations, which offer an entirely different experience created by Black culture and tailored to Black students; such organizations can be considered counterspaces in historically white institutions, as their invention was a reaction to civil issues at the time and the barriers preventing Black students from joining white fraternities.[20] Take a probate for example, a large event where historically-Black fraternities reveal their new members in a culturally significant performance that draws upon Black cultural performance elements like strolling or stepping, "strolling was meant to showcase African culture to other organizations and on campuses that were incredibly racist. It was a performance of pride and unity."[21] This is absolutely a space where Black joy has been expressed, a beautiful counterspace made to celebrate a shared racial identity. It is clear, through this example, that emotions are not race-neutral and that they can be manifested in space, and in this particular example, through performance.

Such spaces where joy can be manifested first need to be developed based on mutual experience. An article by Heidi Ross and Yajing Chen examines student engagement amongst Chinese International Students and the formation of their own

[19] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (2019): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418816958.
[20] "The Historical Legacy of the Divine Nine," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed February 26, 2025, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/divine-nine-Black-fraternities-sororities.
[21] "An Incredibly Brief History of Strolling: Being A Multicultural Greek - Alpha Phi Gamma National Sorority, Inc.," March 26, 2020, https://alphaphigamma.org/an-incredibly-brief-history-of-strolling-being-a-multicultural-greek/.

spaces on American campuses in an attempt to explain and combat misunderstandings over their "disengagement" from university campuses.[22] In doing so, they identify cultural differences as the key reason that these students make their own "enclaves," spaces of unity for those with particular backgrounds in campuses where they are in the minority. One of these differences is a difference in philosophy, with their chosen population of Chinese International students being from more collectivist, interdependent cultures as compared to the American individualist cultures.[23] But it is not just cultural, being so few and having less in common with non-kinfolk peers; sticking together has a social and academic advantage, gaining friends and extracurricular experiences dedicated to shared space.[24]

To further clarify the implications of racism that this study utilizes, it cannot simply be described as hostility or violence against SOC. The above example of traditional fraternities, actively uncomfortable for SOC, applies, but campus racism more often takes the form of deprioritizing the needs of SOC. If individual communities did not have specific needs, then the institutional support offered to all would be sufficient for statistically measurable outcomes such as dropout rate or average GPA to be relatively equal among races.[25] However, this is verifiably not the case, which indicates that racial groups on campus need their specific needs met and that there is weight to being a person of color that their peers do not need to carry that affects their outcomes.[26] Peggy McIntosh argues as such in her pivotal essay that white people like

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[22] Ross and Chen, "Engaging Chinese International Undergraduate Students in the American University."
[23] Ross and Chen.
[24] Ross and Chen.
[25] Fischer, "Settling into Campus Life."
[26] Fischer.

her—which, by extension, includes white students—have an "invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious."[27] For example, SOC are more likely to be first-generation students or low-income, which is an added burden that strains their collegiate experience, a strain that white peers do not as often face.[28] Isolation exacerbates many of the issues faced by SOC on HWI campuses. In a study that identifies areas to modify the well-known and broadly appealing "Tinto Theory of Student Departure" in order to better identify the factors that can help prevent the higher prevalence of dropout for SOC, Guiffrida strongly argues that community and cultural connection is a key factor in student persistence to complete their studies.[29] This all suggests that students do not enter an HWI with the same challenges and that these challenges can be localized to specific communities. As such, efforts to engage students on campus need to be comprehensive, including efforts that are directed towards specific communities.

<u>Avoiding Generalization</u>

Beyond social identities such as race, sexuality, gender identity, etc., there are also differences in personal identity between members of the same community. What are the differences in values, interests, passions, that result in differing interactions with campus life for those that share similar identities? Kenneth H. Wheeler summarizes a

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[27] Peggy McIntosh, "'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' and 'Some Notes for Facilitators,'" National SEED Project, accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.nationalseedproject.org/key-seed-texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack. p. 2

[28] Fischer, "Settling into Campus Life."

[29] Douglas A Guiffrida, "Toward a Cultural Advancement of Tinto's Theory," *The Review of Higher Education* 29, no. 4 (2006): 451–72.

series of interviews with several of Reinhardt College's first Black students.[30] Among the stories of various students finding different paths to some level of comfort at that campus, Stan Porter's story stood out in how he came from a similar background as other highlighted Black students, like Jay Porter and Cynthia Durham, but did not always enjoy the way his white peers tried to welcome him as Porter and Durham did: "everyone seemed to bend over backwards to make me feel welcomed. At some point I actually found it to be distasteful [...] I just wanted to be accepted for being Stan Porter."[31] Porter attributes this difference to his individual identity, rather than his social one, that he is "not especially political, but more of a 'happy-go-lucky' kind of guy."[32] Though it was more in Porter's disposition to ask for his social identity to not supersede his individual identity, others, like the aforementioned Durham, enjoyed introducing their peers to their own culture and even opening their homes to them. Durham had frequently invited friends to their home, and in doing so un-did some stereotypes and negative perceptions of Blackness from their white peers. The common thread between both, as highlighted by McIntosh, is the hyper-awareness of one's racial identity and the two-ness one can feel as a result of the tension between that ascribed to social identity and that of their personal identity.

What are the implications of all this on the characterization of student counterspaces? Naturally, it would be much too large an undertaking to explore how every possible combination of identities, social and personal, can result in a different experience with student theater. There are limitless aspects of one's life that can affect

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[30] Kenneth H. Wheeler et al., "Black Student Experiences in the Racial Integration of Reinhardt College, 1966-1972," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2018): 339–61.
[31] Wheeler et al. p. 350
[32] Wheeler et al. p.350

their perception, what appeals to them, and what motivates them to engage with the spaces they inhabit. What this does suggest, however, is that one should not conceive counterspaces to have universal appeal, nor should I place that expectation onto any one space. Rather I seek to identify those characteristics of the space that aid in providing the best experience possible for the identities it aims to serve. Acknowledging that there is nuance in any person beyond the sharp social identities society creates should not be considered a limitation; the acknowledgement of confounding identities is, in fact, vital to ensuring that counterspaces can be as effective as possible. So, although this study will not explore these identities in their maximal capacity, it will explore how student theater has characteristics that do — and do not — address the common needs of students from a variety of backgrounds.

Solidarity and Distance between Minority Communities on Campus

Like before, we cannot create monoliths where monoliths are not present, which means there are certain considerations that come from how different communities interact with one another. In the Durham anecdotes, Black students commonly felt that the most accepting students were Jewish white students, who could relate to their experiences of discrimination.[33] Because they could find mutual understanding in their common experience of oppression by the public, Jewish students were not as quick to turn away their new Black peers, for why do to another what you have experienced first-hand? However, the instinct to seek solidarity with other communities is not universal. As one example, international students that come to the United States for

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[33] Wheeler et al.

university may come from more homogenous countries, resulting in less discussion of racial inequality issues.[34] This is not to say such students are indifferent to racism, nor that this is representative of every international student, but rather that the salience of racial identity differs heavily from their American counterparts. The result of this is difficulty in creating solidarity between themselves and other racial minorities on campus. It is important to note that this is not exclusive to international students, any student that does not identify race as a salient aspect of themselves are much less likely to engage in spaces of solidarity.[35] Shanshan Jiang-Brittan provides an example of this in her examination of the racialization of Chinese International students at a predominantly white American university: Black students and Chinese students participated in an event together, drawn by a shared love of hip-hop dance, the cultivation of which has direct roots in Black American culture.[36] Chinese Students found some importance in an event that allowed them to interact with non-Chinese peers, but as Jiang-Brittan illustrates, though there was a positive intraracial interaction happening, there was not necessarily appreciation for the other culture nor an acknowledged solidarity between them: "Rather, it echoes color-blindness in new ways that separate Black characteristics in the cultural form from their roots in the lives of Black communities."[37]

When discussing solidarity, it is also important to discuss the distance between members of the same community. Often, what divides people in the same community

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[34] Shanshan Jiang-Brittan, "Diversity without Integration? Racialization and Spaces of Exclusion in International Higher Education," accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01425692.2020.1847635.
[35] Jiang-Brittan.
[36] Jiang-Brittan.
[37] Jiang-Brittan. p. 8

can boil down to proximity to privilege, and sometimes, proximity to whiteness.[38] Borrowing again from Jiang-Brittan's case study, they found that Chinese International students often had a sort of sliding scale of "Chineseness" through which they assessed their Chinese-American peer's proximity to their own culture.[39] Chinese International students may see a peer as more Chinese if they are more proficient in speaking their shared language and more proximal to American culture if they, for example, dated a white girl. Interestingly, the same interpretation is not reserved for dating non-white Americans. Dating a white person is seen as a positive integration into American society, whereas dating a Black person would be "unacceptable."[40]

In their case study examining intraracial interactions between members of the Black community on college campuses, Smith and Moore argue that growing up in a majority-white environment, holding biracial or multiracial identities, and coming from a different class are the three key factors that create tension in intraracial interaction.[41] Beginning with the first factor as described in their study, growing up in a majority white environment can result in two opposite interactions with student counterspaces. Either they will feel more isolated, feeling the absence of their own, and develop a more salient concept of their own race that results in greater engagement with counterspaces on campus; or they will be used to or comfortable with a primarily white environment, lessening the culture shock felt on HWI campuses and resulting in less engagement with

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[38] Maria M. Garay, Jennifer M. Perry, and Jessica D. Remedios, "The Maintenance of the U.S. Racial Hierarchy Through Judgments of Multiracial People Based on Proximity to Whiteness," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49, no. 6 (June 1, 2023): 969–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221086175.
[39] Jiang-Brittan, "Diversity without Integration? Racialization and Spaces of Exclusion in International Higher Education."
[40] Jiang-Brittan. p. 8
[41] Smith and Moore, "Intraracial Diversity and Relations among African‑Americans."

counterspaces.[42] What factors lead someone to go one path or the other is unclear, but seems to be rooted more in personal identity than social identity, an instance where one can define the salience of the other. In a similar vein, holding a biracial or multiracial identity can create some distance between oneself and the community of all races that they are made up of. The ambiguity in their own perception of their social identity creates some tension with their community, the inability to strongly identify as that race can make some less accepting, since they are confident in their own identity.[43] Socioeconomic status (SES) can similarly be a significant divider within communities. Those from lower SES backgrounds can feel alienated from their higher SES peers, which is a disparity that can exist within racial communities. Though their isolation is not based on racial identity itself, the divisions caused by disparities in SES can overcome the unity one might otherwise feel with their racial group on campus, causing them to disengage with counterspaces that appeal to those communities.[44]

Smith and Moore highlighted the three factors that they identified to create the most disparity between members of the same community, but there are other factors such as gender, sexuality, or religion that can cause disparity to form. The importance of these considerations, and its relevance to this study, is in the construction of a counterspace. One could make a space that is multicultural but targeted towards SOC from various identities, or perhaps identity-specific spaces. One could do neither, and instead make efforts to make existing spaces more accommodating to SOC needs. These different constructions could all have different strengths and shortcomings when addressing all the different distances one can feel from their community. Not only that,

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[42] Smith and Moore.
[43] Smith and Moore.
[44] Smith and Moore.

but students are hardly committed to one space, a combination of spaces may be the solution. The analysis that follows the interviews will explore these constructions to examine efficacy, accounting for the fact that students are hardly generalizable, though may have similar needs.

The Role of Institutional Attitudes

The extent and characterization of institutional support for the needs of SOC can drastically affect student engagement, the need for counterspaces, and their efficacy. To draw once again on Wheeler's interviews, the aforementioned Durham stated that the same students who were outwardly racist to her in high school did not act the same way in Reinhardt College because there was an institutional expectation of anti-racism, and repercussions for failure to comply.[45] Those students had likely not changed their racist perception of Durham, but the institution that surrounds them caused them to at least diminish their racist behavior in a way that hugely impacted the extent to which Durham found acceptance on campus. She attributed this comfort directly to the school President, J. Rowland Burgess, who began the initiative to racially integrate the college and offered himself as a direct contact for racial incidents.[46] The zero-tolerance policy for racism allowed Durham to feel comfortable engaging with campus life, such as a sorority, choir, and social gatherings.[47] When the institution is able to make minority students feel supported, safe, and have their unique needs met, those students are more

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[45] Wheeler et al., "Black Student Experiences in the Racial Integration of Reinhardt College, 1966-1972."
[46] Wheeler et al.
[47] Wheeler et al.

likely to engage with larger campus life rather than seek out or create counterspaces away from it. Simply put, if SOC are supported and having their unique needs met inherently by the institution they're in, it diminishes the need for the creation of a counterspace.

Not all institutions are built with the same confident, defiant anti-racism that Burgess implemented into Reinhardt. Institutional failure to support the specific needs of SOC will result in activism from those communities, and as such, a need for counterspaces to safely feel supported by others that share in one's activism.[48] So why then, do those institutions resist providing that support? Wesley Strong argues that the suppression of student speech is rooted in administrator attempts to uphold a "rapport with upper classes" in response to the student and worker uprisings of the 1960s, much of which was centered around civil rights issues.[49] Strong takes a socioeconomic look at student suppression on campuses, discussing how universities offer the "branding" of a safehaven from the world and a calm, controlled campus to prospective—namely, privileged, upper-class—students and wealthy benefactors.[50] During those student protests, campuses began changing policies, rolling out their own police forces, and using legal action to limit student activism, all to make it clear that they control their campuses. This ideal of prestige is inherently an image of whiteness, with private universities hesitating—or outright resisting—the desegregation that was occurring nationwide at the time.[51] Aiming for an all-white environment comes as a reaction to the

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[48] Tichavakunda, "Black Joy on White Campuses."
[49] Wesley Strong, "CHAPTER TWO: Repression of Student Activism on College Campuses," *Counterpoints* 410 (2013): 15–27.
[50] Strong.
[51] Wheeler et al., "Black Student Experiences in the Racial Integration of Reinhardt College, 1966-1972."

myth of meritocracy, the idea that opportunity for social and economic mobility is determined solely by effort and individual merit: to admit non-white students into prestigious universities after political action would be admitting that white students there were dealt an easier hand, the "invisible package" that McIntosh described in her essay.[52] That is why these HWIs remain predominantly white today—to uphold the dated ideal of white supremacy.

The Merits of Student Theater as a Counterspace

Student theater, for the purposes of this study, will be defined as student extracurricular clubs that are organized by and made up of undergraduate students to perform for their peers that explicitly have theatrical, staged performance as their primary objective. An example of what does and does not constitute student theater can be seen at Emory University, where they have Dooley's Players, a group that puts on performances of straight plays throughout the year, and the Pakistani Student Association (PSA), which has a large original play as one of their charity events. The former would be considered student theater, as the objective of the organization as a whole is to put on these performances, whereas the latter features a theatrical performance as a singular event serving a different objective of bringing together cultural community and bringing awareness to charity. The PSA show would certainly qualify as theater, but, for the sake of this examination, that student organization as a whole would not be considered "student theater," since the group is not concerned with performance or production, but use it as a tool for the other goals of the organization

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[52] McIntosh, "'White Privilege."

like community-building and charity. Student theater must be open to any undergraduate student regardless of major or prior experience and have students at all levels of production, including organization, direction, cast and crew. All three universities have professional productions through their Theater departments — Vanderbilt University Theater, Theater Emory, and UGA Theatre — that undergraduate students are cast in alongside professional cast and crew members. Student theater lies somewhere in between this PSA charity play example and these professional productions through university departments — created with the primary aim of performance and production but entirely student-run and produced separately from the academic department's influence.

There is catharsis and self-examination that can be found in the pursuit of student theater. In Hannah Fox and Abigail Leeder's article, they outline the cathartic nature of three types of collaborative and biographical theater as applied to educational spaces for students.[53] Specifically, they aim to describe interactive theater as "effective tools in dismantling systemic oppression on college campuses."[54] In this article, they apply the clashing styles of Theater of the Oppressed, Playback Theater, and Autobiographical Theater to create troupes at their institutions with the intention of discussing and enacting social issues, including that of race and cross-cultural interactions. This exemplifies theater as an effective place to bring together communities for social causes and catharsis in environments where they may be fraught in their interactions. This work also corroborates the evolving research on Culturally

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[53] Hannah Fox and Abigail Leeder, "Combining Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre, and Autobiographical Theatre for Social Action in Higher Education," *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 101–11.
[54] Fox and Leeder (p. 2).

Sustaining Pedagogy, a framework and set of educational practices that emphasize pluralism and multiculturalism in such a way that it resists monoculturalism in existing schooling.[55] These frameworks argue that creating opportunities within classrooms and institutions at large for students to offer their experiences, learn from other cultures, and have their own cultural and familial traditions highlighted help to promote racial equity within the educational space.[56] According to Django Paris, "culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling."[57] The work of Fox and Leeder exemplifies these principles and how they apply in the setting of theater education, asking students to tap into their linguistic traditions and their cultural practices to inspire their performances and learn more about their peers. Similarly, theater in the educational space can be a unique way to hold interdisciplinary conversations on a range of issues. This interdisciplinary nature leads it to be an excellent extracurricular option: Dwight Watson describes the "Creative Campus" movement, a project to integrate the arts into other fields through location, which highlighted shifts towards intersections like that between entrepreneurship and the arts in their students.[58] Expanding on the cathartic nature of theater, Bryant Keith Alexander describes their classroom activity of having students perform oral histories, noting how the students filtered the stories through their own selves, using their identities to inform the

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[55] Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (April 2012): 93–97, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244.
[56] "What Is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy?," n.d.
[57] Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice."
[58] Dwight Watson, "Theatre Production and the Creative Campus," *Theatre Topics* 20, no. 2 (2010): 181–88.

performative choices they made.[59] In doing so, performance is an exploration of the self: you make choices and in doing so adopt a critique of the work informed by yourself. In this sense, would a student of color not adopt a critique unique to that of their peers? And as such, theater provides a unique space for self-exploration amongst other students that is not available in other potential counterspaces.

All of the above highlights key background, consideration and questions that will inform the interviews that follow in this study. From the different factors that may impact student integration into their campuses, to the factors that make student theater a potentially effective counterspace, the central body of this study will provide insight from real students of color as to what makes theater effective for them. By the conclusion of this study, there should be key considerations for the construction of effective counterspaces that should be used to improve the existing spaces—or inspire new ones—at HWI campuses.

<div style="text-align:center">

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Introduction

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Why examine the student theater space as a counterspace? While it is true that there are several different effective counterspaces, and that this study has already acknowledged that there is no universally appealing counterspace, student theater has properties that give it unique qualities as a counterspace. The first property is its

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[59] Bryant Keith Alexander, "Intimate Engagement: Student Performances as Scholarly Endeavor," *Theatre Topics* 12, no. 1 (2002): 85–98.

collaborative nature — every person involved has to place their trust in each crew and cast member to fulfill their responsibilities to the show. This trust is tremendous—there is no second take in live theater, so when something is missed, that absence is felt, and by putting oneself on stage, one places all of their confidence into those they work with. The payoff is, typically, an unwavering closeness in the success of this collaboration.

The second property is exclusion—the process of auditioning each production or even deciding what voices get shared and what don't. Deciding what shows to produce, the playwrights that created them, the team that heads that decision, casting decisions, and more all inevitably can be impacted by bias. These components of collaboration and exclusion, seemingly opposite as they may be, create interesting questions about student counterspaces of who gets included, and who does not, that only performance groups like student theater are capable of.

Further complicating this is the decision of this study to examine student theater and not simply professional university theater that occasionally includes students, but is not organized by nor centered around students (i.e Vanderbilt University Theater, Theater Emory.) When the space is run by students, they shape what that space looks like for their peers—a community shaping the experience of other community members. But these are true of any performance group, why not examine—for example—student A Cappella groups that have similar collaborative and exclusionary properties? It is because of the role of identity in theater, asking each actor to take up an identity that is not their own, which equally requires an awareness of one's own identity, and the degree of tension between self and the role.

Methodology

To put these ideas under the microscope, I interviewed students from Emory University, Vanderbilt University and UGA. Semi-structured interviews were selected to provide some guiding points, but allow the flexibility for interviewees to move the discussion themselves. This conversational interview style establishes a social relationship that promotes comfort and vulnerability with interviewees, but provides the focused objective of the research subject. The inclusion criteria were that they must be an undergraduate student who participates in student theater and they must identify as a person of color. Students were contacted either directly through email, through professors, or through contacting the social media of student theater groups. All outreach materials were approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board, as well as exemption status from further review.

The literature review above was used to synthesize thirteen guiding interview questions. As is the case with semi-structured interviews, these questions were not always asked or phrased exactly as written, but were rather used to guide the flow of discussion, and there may have been follow-up questions outside of those written below. These questions were written intentionally to avoid leading the interviewee's response in a specific direction, as that would deny me the richness of discovering why students could have different responses to the same questions. The questions were the following:

1. How do you define your identity?
2. Do you identify with some parts of your identity more than others (e.g gender identity more than racial?)

3. Do you feel like your identity has impacted your college experience?

4. What kind of community did you grow up in?

5. Is your institution similar or dissimilar to where you grew up?

6. Do you feel like there is institutional support for people from your identity?

7. Where do you feel like you find community on campus?

8. How do you primarily engage with student theater? Why do you do theater?

9. What theater opportunities exist for students at your institution?

10. What do you feel is lacking in your student theater experience?

11. What, if anything, preoccupies you while engaging in student theater?

12. How do you plan on engaging with theater in the future, if you are?

13. What is the point of college to you?

There were two interviewees from Vanderbilt, two from UGA, and four from Emory. Initially, the goal for these interviews was to have three from each institution. However, only two from Vanderbilt and UGA demonstrated interest after outreach methods were exhausted, and to get as much variety in student experiences as possible, Emory became overrepresented. Overall, there is still enough variety in their responses to draw larger conclusions about student theater as a counterspace for SOC, however the ability to generalize about individual institutions becomes more limited. This still allows for the intended analysis, which is to characterize student theater as a counterspace in all of its flaws and merits. Examining multiple universities, even if unequally, ensures that the analysis has more broad applications, rather than being a case study for an

individual university. There are some incredible similarities and nuanced differences to be found in these interview responses.

All interviews were conducted over Zoom for the convenience of those interviewed and provide more potential times to meet, even Emory students who could easily meet with me in-person, for the sake of keeping the interview conditions as consistent as possible between interviews. In addition, all interviewees were ensured that their responses will be referenced under a pseudonym and that the recordings of their responses will be destroyed following the presentation of this work. This was to make interviewees feel more comfortable sharing their experience, even negative or critical, without fearing social or academic consequence.

Before launching into the analysis, I will provide an introduction to each of the interviewees, as they described themselves. From Vanderbilt, there was Elene and Jun. Elene is a first-year who identifies as an African-American, Ethiopian-American, and a child of immigrants. Jun is a fourth-year Korean-American who had spent the first half of his life in South Korea and the second half in the U.S. From UGA, there was Indya and Kayla. Indya is a third-year who identifies as non-binary, but still describes themselves as a Black woman first and foremost. Kayla is a fourth-year and a Black woman from South Georgia. From Emory, there was Ethan, Jalen, Susan and Chloe. Ethan is a second-year who describes himself as mixed, he is one-half Thai, one-quarter white, and one-quarter Chinese. Both of his parents are half-Thai, but his mother is half-white and his father half-Chinese. Jalen is a first-year, African-American and Haitian American man. Susan is a third-year, First-Generation, Low-Income, and Mexican-American. Finally, Chloe is a fourth-year, Chinese woman, and an international student.

It is important to note, none of those interviewed shared the same racial or ethnic makeup as me. This unique difference in positionality provided a unique advantage in interviewing these students: our shared identities as SOC allowed them to be comfortable sharing their experiences and trusting they would be received from a place of understanding, but our individual differences allowed for them to go into more detail about experiences they would otherwise think is implicitly understood. This all positioned me as someone with the capacity to understand and listen, which I believe allowed for more comprehensive responses and in-depth reflection on individual experiences.

The Diversity of Identity on the Diversity of Spaces Sought

It was already established in the research chapter that finding oneself dissimilar from the majority population of their campus results in the need for specific counterspaces. But even amongst those interviewed, the spaces where they found such counterspaces varied, and as a result, as did the types of student theater they would engage with. This was even the case amongst interviewees of similar backgrounds, but there was a clear connection between each of their backgrounds and the spaces they engaged with. As an example, let us examine Chloe, Ethan, and Jun. All three of them identify as East Asian, but all with varying levels of "American-ness." Ethan has grown up in America, hailing from South Carolina, in a majority-white small town. He noted that in coming to Emory he actually found its community more diverse than that of his home town, where he would regularly be the only East Asian student. As a result, he felt like he was comfortable in spaces that were majority-white, as he had successfully

navigated those types of spaces before coming to college. He also attributed this comfort to his mother, being raised by someone half-white made his differences feel less salient in white peer environments, since a part of his identity was shared with them. As an example, he offered the recent production of *Spring Awakening* by Emory's student-run musical theater group, Ad Hoc Productions. He noted being one of only two non-white students in the cast, but how that was not an uncomfortable situation for him to be in. Despite strongly identifying with his race and ethnicity, he did not feel those identities were salient in performance spaces where he is the minority: "It's something that you notice, but it doesn't really change how I interact with people."[60] Despite this, Ethan said he felt the most community through the Asian Student Organization, meaning that he seeks spaces where others are similar to him, but when it comes to theater his background allows him to comfortably participate in spaces where he falls into the vast minority. Compare that to Chloe, an international student from China where she described herself as falling into the vast majority. She stated multiple times that she has an interest in engaging with others across cultural lines, but that in the theater setting she primarily engages with the Emory Chinese Theater Club because it provides her a space where she can participate in something she enjoys with people from the culture she belongs to. This is consistent with Jiang-Brittan's findings: as an international student, she naturally surrounded herself by those of a similar cultural understanding to her, her enclave.[61] Also in concert with Jiang-Brittan, Chloe has a self-described interest in intercultural connection, but still finds herself in community with those of her same

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[60] Virtual Interview between Author and "Ethan," Atlanta, Zoom, December 19, 2024.
[61] Jiang-Brittan, "Diversity without Integration? Racialization and Spaces of Exclusion in International Higher Education."

background to ease the strain of being dissimilar to others at Emory.[62] Interestingly,

Chloe never describes herself as Asian, nor describes her race as a reason not to engage

with other student groups, but rather cultural differences; describes how she was

worried about auditioning for other groups, many of which typically end up with

majority-white casts, because she was worried about her accent and her cultural

differences. Unlike Ethan, her distance from American-ness and her comfort with those

of her own kin resulted in her exclusively engaging with theater within an

identity-specific counterspace. Contrast both with Jun, who spent the first ten years of

his life in Korea and the latter half in a small town in Washington, similar to the one

Ethan grew up in. He noted that he doesn't feel fully comfortable in either space:

> For me, I don't really got one [a community on campus.] My dream community
> would be an Asian artistic community, but that doesn't really exist. My other
> Asian friends, none of them are artists, all they do is talk about engineering and
> drink. On the artistic side, I would love to connect with them, but none of them
> understand where I come from, my background, and why I think this way, and so
> I've felt very lonely.[63]

Though it sounds like something resembling the Emory Chinese Theater Club would be

Jun's ideal space, he describes feeling distanced from Asian international students and

from Asian-Americans that have spent their whole lives in the U.S because of his

cross-national upbringing. Chloe and Ethan have much stronger ties to their

environments, and as a result they have clear spaces where they're comfortable. Jun

isn't as hesitant as Chloe to participate in spaces where he is the minority, but he isn't as

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[62] Jiang-Brittan.

[63] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jun," Atlanta, Zoom, February 3, 2025.

comfortable as Ethan, and he directly describes above the exact type of counterspace missing on his campus that would alleviate that loneliness.

This same idea can be further explored when looking at Kayla, Elene and Indya, who all identify as Black women. Like the previous example, they hold that identity to varying saliences. Kayla and Indya both describe themselves as Black women very proudly, Indya describing it as "such a specific experience that I refuse to alienate myself from other Black women," despite being non-binary.[64] Kayla, similarly calls herself Black before calling herself a woman, she believes the intersectional experience of being a Black woman is unique to the experiences of being Black and a woman separately. Indya describes this sentiment as her identities interacting "like a soup," where she exists as Black in all her identities, and vice versa.[65] It's a way of "moving about the world" that is a conglomerate of all the things that make up her identity.[66] Elene may feel similarly, but she described herself primarily as an Ethiopian-American, identifying slightly more with being an immigrant than being of her race.

Kayla is also more familiar with theater than Indya is, and the small changes between these three do lead to large differences in how they engage with student theater. Kayla is comfortable leading Next Step, the musical theater group at UGA, which she noted was a majority-white space. Her being comfortable in her own skin as a Black woman causes her to create strong connections with SOC around classes, in hallways, and in social situations, but also choose to take leadership roles and promote diversity within Next Step and take on more of her personal identity as an artist. Indya, by contrast, participates more in a different theater for Black students on campus that

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[64] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya," Atlanta, Zoom, January 30, 2025
[65] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya."
[66] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya."

does smaller workshops and events instead of larger productions.[67] Unlike Kayla, Indya pursues theater much more casually and as a result preferred a counterspace that focused on community rather than artistic production. Neither is a more effective counterspace in general, but rather their individual drives, even in two people that describe their identities similarly, lead them to find counterspaces that better suit their individual needs within the same institution. Elene, as a first-year still navigating campus, describes her spaces as "split," she has the friends in Black-specific spaces and then her friends in theater. One unites her with others based on social identity and common understanding, the other based on personal interests and shared passions, and having both spaces available helps her feel comfortable on campus. There are aspects missing in both that she tries to fulfill with the other. All of these examples suggest that it is a combination of spaces and a variety of spaces that most effectively help students engage with their HWI. This is consistent with Ethan and Chloe's experiences, where Ethan has theater as his passion fulfilled by A Cappella and theater and the Asian Student Organization to fulfill his need for community amongst kinfolk. Chloe is the reverse, she has Emory Chinese Theater Club as her way of interacting with others like her, and her multicultural sorority, Theta Nu Xi, as a way to have more diversity experiences.

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[67] Indya requested in their interview that the name of this group is not stated, but is comfortable with it being described.

The Merits of Theater as a Counterspace

As described in the previous section, minute differences in identity can have huge ramifications on the spaces they choose to engage with to find connection and community on campus. So what is it about student theater spaces, specifically, that appeal to all of these students?

Kayla has ambitions of being an actor after college, pursuing theater primarily and film as well. Colloquially, people often say that acting provides one with the opportunity to be someone other than themself. Kayla, interestingly, says that theater gives her the chance to show emotions and characteristics that, as a Black woman, she feels like she isn't expected to portray or is not encouraged to portray. The roles she finds most appealing are those that allow her to be more emotional, to cry, to show sadness, to show vulnerability. It can be argued that her connection to theater comes from its ability to resist the "Strong Black Woman Schema," the idea that Black women are expected to suppress their emotions and be caregivers, and the negative effects that can have on the mental health of Black women.[68] Kayla's account suggests that, for her, theater is one way for her to express emotion and break out of the negative effects of such a cultural expectation. Jalen had similar sentiments describing his experiences in Ubuntu Theater Group and AHANA (African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American) A Cappella, Emory's multicultural A Cappella Group. He described both as a space where he can "be weird, be not weird, give people a hug and dap them up."[69] Theater and

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[68] Kelly Yu-Hsin Liao, Meifen Wei, and Mengxi Yin, "The Misunderstood Schema of the Strong Black Woman: Exploring Its Mental Health Consequences and Coping Responses Among African American Women," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2020): 84–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319883198.

[69] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jalen," Atlanta, Zoom, February 26, 2025

acting invite openness and vulnerability in their practice, it only makes sense that there is an inherent quality in student theater groups that makes those that participate comfortable to be themselves in ways that subvert cultural norms and pressures. Jalen and Kayla have a wealth of experience in theater, so it could be argued that their comfort could come from them being in a space where they're pursuing a passion of theirs, not an inherent quality in theater itself. However, Indya's experience as a newcomer to theater refutes this argument. Indya's participation in student theater came from a place of exploration, just wanting to try something new, so when asked why they chose to continue participating in their group's activities they said:

> It's been really cool because when I first got here, I was still learning a lot about myself and how I want to present to the world. When I went to [student group] stuff it was like, you're supposed to be silly, you're supposed to be theatrical. But nobody was being silly or theatrical, so I took on the mantle and became super extra, and nobody judged me for it! [...] That was the first time at UGA I felt like "oh yes, I'm going to be really loud about my existence. It made me feel more confident, I guess.[70]

All of these experiences show that student theater is a space where SOC can exist as themselves in a non-judgemental space, and when at a HWI where one may feel the pressure of being perceived as other, such spaces shed them of the weight of those perceptions. Cultural pressures like the Strong Black Woman Schema that Kayla described are destroyed by a space of openness because a failure to be vulnerable is antithetical to theatrical practice. Theater asks one to be perceived on their own terms.

Another advantage of student theater is the opportunity for storytelling it provides. Jun, Chloe and Susan all come from a background of film, and all stated that

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[70] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya."

storytelling is their primary interest for their career path as well as the main reason they participate in student theater in addition to participating in film. Jun describes storytelling through artistic mediums like film as a "hard, bitter medication wrapped up in hard candy."[71] Though his heart lies with film, he enjoys theater because it allows him to see stories that get put on, live, from start to finish, a different way of presenting stories that allows him to think more about what makes a good story. Susan describes herself as a storyteller as well, sharing that within film she has always enjoyed screenwriting the most. It is this love of storytelling that first made her gravitate towards theater, since that was the best way to storytell with the resources she had in high school. It is also for that reason she particularly loves directing within theater, the opportunity to take a story and bring it to life. Susan describes the intimacy and confines of the stage to be happy restrictions that provide the best platform for certain stories to be told all in one go. Chloe has an almost identical experience with theater, developing a love for storytelling throughout her life and using theater as the best medium with the resources she had, showing that even in other cultural contexts, theater provides the same medium for effective storytelling. Two conclusions can be drawn from their accounts. The first, that part of theater's appeal is as a creative medium that provides a space for those interested in storytelling to tell those stories, even those with a larger interest in other mediums like film. The second, that theater is an accessible medium for storytelling with few resources. Theater can be extremely costly and resource-heavy, but it can also be effectively done with nothing but a blank stage and people to tell the stories through. This is a range of accessibility that other mediums may not have for avid storytellers.

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[71] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jun."

Jun mentioned that theater's unique properties made him a better storyteller, and similar sentiments echoed across the interviews of the opportunity to grow as an artist, and as a person. Jalen discussed how he first began doing theater in high school as an "easy A" class, but fell in love with performing. One of the things that he loved about it was actually the rehearsal process and the role of the director. Something that he really loved, and said he didn't see much in other spaces, was the one-on-one effort that directors make to help you improve and develop. On the other side, Jun and Chloe both see theater as a way to improve themselves as artists and creatives. Jun says that a senior film major's advice to try theater to become a better filmmaker was "the best advice he had ever received."[72] He argued that theater redefines good writing, shows a way more effective relationship between the director and actor, and the attention-to-detail and work ethic required to get the scene right. As he mentioned, "you only get one take in a theater performance."[73] Chloe and Susan both felt like the limits of student theater, in particular, required them to wear multiple hats. Both described being cast and crew simultaneously on certain shows because of constraints in personnel, and how that made them each stronger producers and directors. Having both experiences showed them how to be flexible, how to problem-solve, and how to understand the requirements of all parts of production. Though this was a practical limitation, both saw the limits of student theater as something fulfilling, that they enjoyed investing energy in a difficult project and learning new things outside of their comfort zone, the student environment being the safest place to do so. Aside from development as an artist, many saw participating in student theater as a way for them to grow as people. Ethan

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[72] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jun."
[73] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jun."

discussed a disconnect between his view of college and his parents', and how that led to his participation in student theater. He felt like, growing up, a lot of the things he did were out of obligation, and not out of passion. When he came to college, he felt like his parents saw the experience as a means to an end, a way to get his education, whereas he saw a need to grow as an independent person, and that included indulging in his passions even if they are irrelevant to his career. He sees student theater as one of those passions, and though it is entirely extracurricular for him, he describes it as a space of enjoyment that is necessary for college life. His description of student theater as a site of joy, for joy's sake, harkens back to Tichavakunda's findings. Even for students with no intention of being artists as a career, theater offers a space of personal development to indulge in artistry without the pressures that come with an educational environment. Even Kayla, who does want to be an actor professionally, describes that another appeal for her is pure fun. Hearing the audience applaud and shout, having a space where there is no time to dwell on other things in life, makes theater a vital part of her everyday experience. Though it may seem like these opportunities are not directly related to relieving the pressure of an HWI, SOC need places to be productive, motivated, and fulfilled, spaces that allow them to endure through HWI pressures.

<div align="center">Are SOC-only groups the solution?</div>

All interviewees had varied experiences in theater, and the analysis thus far has examined student theater as a counterspace from the larger public of campus, it is time to adjust the microscope further and examine SOC-only student theater groups as counterspaces from campus life and from predominantly-white student theater scenes.

Every person responding described specific issues navigating student theater that they felt were unique to SOC.

To begin this analysis, we must begin where every production begins: the audition room. Multiple actors felt like they had to be excellent to be cast in the same roles as their white peers. Elene, a first-year who had just done a few productions at Vanderbilt University, said the following:

> If I'm the only Black person in the room I feel like I have to do better [...] I just feel like I have to be really, really, good, or I'll just feel like I won't get in, you know what I mean? But, like, I know I know I don't have to because in a lot of these plays or whatever they probably need to have a Black person cast, because it probably looks a little strange. But I don't want things to be handed to me, which is probably why I try really hard because I want to make sure I'm there because I deserve it.[74]

There is a wealth of conclusions to draw just from this quote. Firstly, Elene described the two dueling pressures of being a SOC in the audition room: feeling like you have to be better to be cast for the same role, and questioning if your casting was earned or for the group to meet the minimum requirements of diversity to keep up appearances. Though it may seem positive that majority-white student theater groups feel it would be wrong to have a cast with no SOC, there is an element of self-doubt in any SOC tied directly to the space and not the intention of those doing the casting. Kayla describes the same feeling on both sides of the audition room: "We have to be twice as good to get half as far."[75] She provides the example of her audition for the musical *Heathers,* for the role of Heather Chandler, a popular girl and bully, originally and typically portrayed by white actresses. She entered the audition room feeling like she would not get the role: "this

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[74] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Elene," Atlanta, Zoom, December 14, 2024
[75] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Kayla," Atlanta, Zoom, February 25, 2025

role belongs to a white girl [...] the director would be stepping outside of the box to cast me."[76] Even after landing the role, she felt an additional pressure to "live up to it."[77] On the flip side, Kayla recently got to be on the other side of the audition process as part of the same student group's next project, and noted that the SOC who auditioned were criticized much more harshly than their white counterparts, noting microaggressive statements made. Not only that, she felt like as the only woman of color on the other side of the table, "they put that labor on me to be the DEI regulator or something."[78] Not only is there a pressure to perform at a much higher level than white counterparts to feel deserving of your casting, but there is also the weight of responsibility to ensure other SOC are not disrespected, instead of that responsibility being equally shared amongst all members. Jun had a similar lament, stating that if there's a minority role in a show, it's all he will get, and that he doesn't even have to audition. Though this may seem like high esteem, it is disparaging, as the role does not feel earned. The only interviewee that, interestingly, did not report the same pressure in the audition room was Ethan. As already stated, Ethan has the most self-described proximity to whiteness being raised by a partially-white parent and in a predominantly white environment, which does suggest that SOC that come from backgrounds prior to their HWI where they are not in predominantly white spaces feel a greater pressure in the audition room than their SOC peers from predominantly-white environments. Jalen, who has only grown up in predominantly-Black environments and has not even been in a predominantly-white

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[76] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Kayla."
[77] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Kayla."
[78] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Kayla."

theater setting, feels some anxiety over future castings: "If I'm the only Black person or person of color there, I'll definitely feel some type of way about it."[79]

This last statement by Jalen does beg the question of what happens when the roles being cast are not suitable for SOC. Almost every interviewee had an example of an experience where a casting was done without consideration of racial tension. Elene mentions acting in the ensemble of Vanderbilt University Theater, the professional or faculty wing of theater at Vanderbilt and the equivalent to Emory's Theater Emory. As an ensemble member, Elene was required to fill several roles from scene-to-scene, and they mentioned the discomfort they felt when one of the other Black women in the ensemble was asked to be a maid in a scene without consideration of the racial dynamic between characters if she was to play that role. Kayla had a similar experience where she raised the concern that a Black actress auditioning for *Grease* should not be cast as the teacher named "Miss Lynch" because of the connotation of that name for Black people. When that concern was ignored, she was "unsurprised" when the actress turned down that role. It becomes clear from these anecdotes that many roles were not written with actors of color in mind. Kayla describes that part of the issue was there were not enough actors of color auditioning for *Grease* because many did not feel like the story was for them. The difficulty is that when SOC stories are told, it is difficult to find enough SOC to cast. Jun describes a production of *Blues for an Alabama Sky,* a play that takes place in Harlem and features an all-Black cast that could not find enough actors to fill every role. There was one role, a doctor, that he was asked to play. The character was obviously written to be a Black man, and he felt uncomfortable with the tension between his identity and the character's identity, especially when the dialogue utilized

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[79]   Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jalen."

African-American Vernacular English that he was not comfortable using. It was this experience that led Jun to conclude that "student theater would never do an Asian story or any play that heavily features an Asian role, and it's not their fault!"[80] Even Ethan, who we have already discussed felt less pressure in the audition room, felt a greater sense of racial salience when conflicts would arise. When Ad Hoc Productions attempted to do a production of *RENT,* it was eventually discontinued because of racist incidents that occurred within the production.[81] Ethan mentioned feeling much more aware of his racial identity in those moments, especially when there was mediation and department involvement to resolve conflicts and ensure that the proper resources were provided for affected students.

The opportunity to have a space where the only participants are SOC is one that alleviates many of these issues. There is not much a predominantly white student theater group can do to change what is inherent about a predominantly-white space unless it is made significantly more diverse, a feat that is next to impossible at any HWI. This does not mean that such efforts are in vain — on the contrary, the best thing for SOC is to have the option of a counterspace within student theater as well as efforts to be more included outside of that counterspace. But there are benefits to a SOC-only counterspace that go beyond just issues in casting and pressures in auditioning that come from being surrounded by peers and mentors that share your lived experience. Jalen went to a predominantly Black school his entire life, yet found participating in Ubuntu Theater Group's production of *Today is My Birthday* by Susan He Stanton to be

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[80]   Virtual Interview Between Author and "Jun."
[81] The nature of these incidents was not described in detail by the interviewee, but they cited microaggressive language towards certain actors and crew and a failure to acknowledge the racial element of the AIDS crisis that *RENT* is inspired by.

the one of the most rewarding theater experiences he has had. The reason was the shared passion and community. Although in his prior experiences he got to be around others like him, he thought being in the collegiate space and working with others of the same and different backgrounds resulted in a more energized and passionate experience. He recounted running lines backstage and everybody striving to perform as best as they can, a drive he felt was missing in high school. He also describes the community aspect, even after the production was over he still saw his castmates across campus and greeted them frequently, the connection shared from bringing a student project to fruition lasted long after the final curtain closed. For a first-year especially, that connection was huge in making him feel like he belonged at his HWI. Kayla discussed her best friend that she met by doing theater, and how they gravitated towards each other because they were usually the only other person of color in the room. Kayla noted that before meeting this friend, she found herself code switching when interacting with others on campus because UGA was overwhelmingly white, and she felt like she had to do it to assimilate. But after meeting this friend she felt comfortable being more authentic on campus and speaking as herself. The way Kayla found an older student to be comfortable with, she was that older student for someone else. She describes a first-year Muslim student that was in a production of *John Proctor is the Villain,* where the director, a graduate student, made them uncomfortable with remarks about how her hijab was "jarring" against the costumes. She went to Kayla, who wasn't involved in the production, as an older SOC she felt like she had someone that could understand how she felt. Elene, Susan, and Indya all described similar experiences with mentors they found in the theater space. Elene talked about how much it meant to her that one of the only other Black students in her cast, a senior, would help her through her lines and

encourage her to keep trying hard at her performance. Susan talked about how she felt hesitant to join student theater, but meeting a Resident Advisor that was a SOC and was openly excited about student theater made her more comfortable to try it at Emory. Indya talked about how, after her first time trying theater through her student group, the encouragement of senior students to run for an executive board position was validating and how she wants to create a similar approachable space. The fact is, the most important contribution that SOC-only theater groups have is the opportunity to connect people to others, to create a community and a network that extends far beyond the walls of the theater. As Indya perfectly summarizes: "My walls go down and suddenly I'm me again — when I'm around another person of color."[82]

Of course, there are other issues that are unique to SOC that even a SOC-only theater space cannot entirely amend. One of the reasons Susan was hesitant to join student theater was that she felt the barrier of entry was too high. Indya thought similarly, choosing to join a group that does smaller workshops instead of large productions because it was more approachable. Jalen and Indya both noted the high time commitment of theater, and how they both noticed their SOC peers would have more on their plate, as Indya says: "I worked hard to get here, I'm going to do everything."[83] Jalen, similarly, said that if he could give any single bit of advice it would be to "especially as a POC, manage your load. A lot of us are going for difficult majors. Manage your workload so that your presence on stage is unstoppable." But as noted in the aforementioned McIntosh essay, there are issues that affect SOC more than their white peers that make it incredibly difficult to manage that load. Susan mentions being a

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[82] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya."
[83] Virtual Interview Between Author and "Indya."

low-income student, having to work multiple jobs and send money back home to her family, a stressor that prevented her from participating in student theater in her first year and made her feel like she was "a year behind" on her peers. Some of this is alleviated by student theater specifically being run by students. Susan stated that seeing a student-run production was more inviting to her and felt like a space she could more safely learn from, ironically, more of an educational opportunity than working on a Theater Emory show that operates directly through the Emory Theater Studies Department. It could be argued, from her assessment, that department-run theater provides some insight into professional theatrical practice and an opportunity to work with professional creatives, as well as the opportunity to be in larger-budget productions. While these are useful experiences, students largely take a passive role in their involvement, whereas student theater acts as a sandbox through which they can develop artistic skills through practice and self-improvement, as well as pursue an independent vision in a far more active way, especially for students who take up a directing or producing role. Student theater also means that, more often than not, those organizing a production or event will be facing similar hurdles that any student is facing, and can provide understanding even if they can't provide accommodation. The "student" in student theater appears to be the key to maximizing the potential of the space. None of this invalidates the benefits of having SOC-only groups available, but it does offer considerations that, when addressed, could make such spaces incredibly powerful mediums of connection between a student and their campus.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE

RESEARCH

Conclusion

From the interview analysis, two clear conclusions can be drawn. The first is that student theater groups have attributes to their activities that help relieve some of the weight of being perceived as an SOC at an HWI, but that student theater spaces that are dedicated to SOC or specific communities are most effective. Student theater provides community, authenticity, and an opportunity for personal growth as a person and as an artist, but often student theater spaces can alienate SOC by being predominantly-white spaces, adding pressure in the audition room that white peers do not face and potentially creating tension within the casting choice each group makes. The burden often falls on SOC to be the advocate for their own representation, a weight that makes others reluctant to join. Further, the predominantly-white nature of student theater and the heavy time commitment make the barrier for entry for SOC extremely high, when SOC are much more likely to be first-generation, low-income or be committed to many more student organizations, all of which make it less likely they could devote the time necessary to a student theater production. POC-only counterspaces offer a mutual understanding within the space that alleviates issues in auditioning and casting, as well as providing a network of intimate connection outside of the theater setting and mentors that can guide and advocate for new students entering the space.

The second conclusion is that non-SOC specific groups still have a big role to play, as many SOC find their communities by engaging with multiple spaces. Non-SOC

specific groups need to make persistent efforts to put on shows from a variety of voices and make incredible efforts to increase the diversity they see in their participants and executive boards, while SOC-specific groups needs to focus on the interpersonal and community aspects of the space to best accommodate the unique challenges that could bar a SOC from entering the theater space at all. One solution could be to offer a variety of experiences at varying difficulty levels, like a mix of short plays, full-length plays, cabarets and workshops. Institutions need to support these spaces with any resources available as well as counterspaces that might exist outside of student theater. It is possible, as observed by some of those interviewed, that their connections via social identity come from somewhere else and student theater is a way to connect with others over a mutual passion, in which case both the student theater and non-theater counterspaces need adequate support to fully operate at a level that adequately addresses the needs of any student from any background.

The culminating conclusion is as follows: Student theater, just by nature of being surrounded by peers in a creative space, is an effective counterspace for SOC at HWIs made even more effective by forming counterspaces *within* the student theater scene that are tailored to SOC. This does not relieve non-SOC specific groups from any duty, rather it is most effective if SOC have multiple options for how they want to engage with student theater, and non-SOC specific groups need to continue to work on diversifying the voices they stage and addressing SOC-specific pressures in their organizations. Student theater in particular benefits from the "student" aspect and needs to focus more on building that peer network. These spaces are effective for any student, whether experienced in theater or not, whether working towards a professional career in the arts

or not, there is something to be gained for any student willing to participate in student theater.

This brings me back to where this research first began: Ubuntu Theater Group. The conclusions found above reinforce my personal experience trying to create and shape a student space for SOC at my HWI. When the idea for Ubuntu was first conceived, I was originally concerned with creating large-scale productions and straight plays the way that other theater groups at Emory did. I wanted to follow the model that was already established, the one that attempts to imitate the way professional theater companies create a season of traditionally staged works. I encountered that it was challenging to get people involved into a new group and find the funds or resources to begin with the same kind of work without university support. After an initial failure to earn an official university charter, I had to re-evaluate what the space could look like. In the words of our faculty advisor, "sometimes the fruit that is easier to reach is sweeter." We refocused our attention from purely artistic production to efforts in community-building, such as mixers for SOC with similar interests in theater, an open mic for Black History Month, and collaborating with non-profits like Out of Hand Theater to use performance as a medium for important conversation about race equity. This shift better matched what SOC were looking for, it was beyond just another theater group, it was a space to engage with your community and give back. There were options for those to be involved in various levels if the time commitment for a full production was too high. Importantly, none of this would be possible if there was not a supportive, pre-existing culture in other groups that found diversity to be an important virtue. The invention of Ubuntu called on other groups to re-evaluate their diversity efforts in a way that gave SOC many more options and lowered the perceived barrier of entry for student

theater. However there are still ongoing challenges in this regard: the burden to monitor diversity efforts still falls primarily on SOC, as Ubuntu was once asked to "police" the Ad Hoc production of *RENT* instead of that effort being handled by the directors and production team. Most groups still imitate the "season of full-length plays" model of theater, hindering the ability to offer a variety of different experiences. There is also, unfortunately, the perception that a group like Ubuntu is less prestigious than that of its primarily white counterparts. During last semester's auditions, one actor cancelled his audition for Ubuntu's production because he "couldn't believe he got a callback for Dooley's Players," indicating that work needs to be done to disperse this perception. For Ubuntu's future, it would be most beneficial to continue the community and service events that intertwine its season outside of the mainstage production, as well as encourage other groups to continue their diversity efforts.

<div align="center">Limitations and Recommendations</div>

This analysis took tremendous effort to undertake, and there have been some significant findings, but there are several limitations that must be acknowledged that could point to future research on similar topics. The first is in the sample of students. As mentioned earlier, even though every student interviewed had a unique perspective to offer, there were several voices missing from the analysis. It is noted that Chloe and Susan were the only international and Latinx students respectively, and that the majority of interviewees were Black and East Asian. Though this is still valuable, more voices from these key demographics would only strengthen the analysis. In particular, it is noted that Susan and Chloe are both Emory students, so the voices of students from

similar backgrounds at Vanderbilt University and UGA were absent. This also requires me to revisit a limitation stated earlier, which is that Emory students were overrepresented in the interviews. This was because of limitations with recruitment efforts, but perhaps a similar study conducted over a greater period of time or with in-person visits could recruit more students. Alternatively, one could do a far more in-depth case study of a single organization and delve more deeply into that community's individual challenges. Finally, there were identities that were not even included in this study because there were not willing participants from those identities. While human identity is so complex that it would be impossible to encompass every combination of perspectives, a larger variety of backgrounds that were untouched such as, but not limited to, Muslim students, Desi students, trans students, and mixed-race students could have enriched this analysis significantly. Further research could conduct a similar analysis amongst a larger variety of students from even more institutions: this study was primarily limited by scale. These limitations, though important, do not invalidate the findings of this research, and instead light the fire for exciting new work to continue in further characterizing student theater as a counterspace for SOC at HWI.

The conclusions that arose from this research are also translatable to other spaces. A similar type of research approach can be used to evaluate other artistic spaces, like dance teams, choirs, glee clubs and a cappella groups, or even other extracurricular experiences entirely like club sports. This work established the importance of space at the HWI for undergraduates and how extracurricular experiences can act as counterspaces for SOC, so it would be reasonable to approach other extracurricular spaces with the same attention as this work and evaluate how those spaces can be best shaped to meet the needs of SOC. The need for this type of research has become more

urgent, with threats to DEI programs in universities that could result in less support for SOC needs at their HWI as well as fewer SOC being admitted.[84] While it is too early to observe these effects in this work, future work would benefit from that consideration. These socio-political conditions make the need for counterspaces so much more dire, and this work provides considerations that not only highlight the efficacy of these counterspaces, but also the power for SOC to create their own spaces in resistance to these pressures.

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[84] Olivia Hampton, "Schools, Colleges Have 2 Weeks to Ban DEI. An Education Expert Warns It Won't Be Easy," *NPR*, February 19, 2025, sec. Education, https://www.npr.org/2025/02/19/nx-s1-5300992/the-department-of-education-has-given-schools-a-deadline-to-eliminate-dei-programs.

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