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## Interrupting the White Habitus in the Name of Black Geographies: Black Cultural Inter-Production Through Performance

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*Interrupting the White Habitus in the Name of Black Geographies:*

*Black Cultural Inter-Production Through Performance*

*Senior Project Submitted to*

The Division of Social Studies Of Bard College

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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My father worked tirelessly to give me the space I claimed to need to grow and flourish. As said by Octavia E. Butler in “Parable of the Sower,” the child's seed cannot grow in the shadows of the parent's seed. I sought a space away from home to test my independence, and although he did not initially agree or support this, he gradually revealed his unconditional love. Despite the struggles, he ensured he would help me with his arms open during each return home.

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My older brothers James and Jafet yelled, “Who put you on?!!!” anytime I streamed a Kendrick Lamar song. For exchanging cultural capital with me when we grew up in a home that policed the cultural products we consumed. These two taught me the importance of local

knowledge and introduced me to hip-hop culture I would fall in love with later. I was often the only sibling in the carpool who did not know the lyrics to any hip-hop songs they all connected to. But I am now the sibling who consumes newer hip-hop songs they don't know the lyrics to yet.

To Kendrick Lamar, my first introduction to sociology. His music changed my life, opening my eyes to issues I was ignorant about. Reckoning with a reality I wasn't so comfortable with. To Solange Knowles, who laid out the blueprint to imagine a Black future for me and my community. Whose music was my escape but also my reminder. I was transcending across universes that other Black girls and I created.

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My suitemates, my wonderful friends Carolina and Key, thank you for growing with me. This last semester has been bittersweet, and I have never felt so attached to space as I have with the space we created in Suite A. Thank you for listening and welcoming my late-night tangents. I am so proud of you both!

My mentors, Aracely, Jamesia, Stephanie, and Tahj, thank you all for being such a guiding light in a space so far away from home. We all come from different cities, and yet you all helped me create a home that felt so nostalgic. I felt heartbreak when you all took further steps into adulthood. I had to reconfigure to acknowledge all your paths as inspiration. I am so proud of you all, and I can't wait for us all to reunite someday. Thank you for showing me how it's done.

To myself, thank you for not giving up on yourself. Having such an accelerated undergraduate experience was hard, and I often felt so lost. But with the support system, I acknowledge I was able to persist.

## **PREFACE:**

There have been many spaces where I have been pushed to the outskirts because of a lack of cultural capital. Spaces I was eager to assist in transforming into a place, but my knowledge was not deemed necessary. On my first day at a predominantly white high school, my peers were talking about white classics, and I sat there clueless. The encouraging “too-loud” cheers my partner and I shared at a jazz show at the historically white college we attend were met with sharp stares. I realized the space allotted to further take up depending on my behaviors, knowledge, and interactions.

The intentional labor I had put in as a high schooler made attending a college away from home possible, something no one else in my family could accomplish yet. During my time at this college, I did not just learn the white sociological classics such as Durkheim, Weber, and Foucault (as expected from a Sociology undergraduate). I also learned how to conduct myself in spaces discussing these white sociological classics. I quickly understood the knowledge and skills that could be applied to the cultural spaces I was excited to attend. To enter spaces, my family has yet to grace.

My family’s pride in the spaces I have been able to participate in has always perplexed me. When they update their congregation members on me, they always emphasize how strong-willed I am. I believe they’re nodding to how I refuse to let a space completely change me, but instead, I am adamant about exploring how I can change a space in hopes of a place. The resiliency and imagination of a future is ancestral. My ancestors, too, have been pushed to the outskirts “justified” because of white discomfort with their local knowledge. Garifunas were displaced from their land despite their performances of gender enacted to guard and protect the



land. Garifuna men dressed in “feminine” clothing to trick the British soldiers who planned to displace them from St. Vincent to Central America.

Despite my time in institutionalized spaces, I refuse to forget or ignore the intersectional systematic displacement that attempts to erase the performances, the interruption, and local knowledge through the active displacement of Indigenous people. The research isn't limited to institutionalized spaces; cultural capital is shared in various spaces and places. If you are reading this in the year 2023, you likely have the privilege of being within an institutionalized space at a time when active genocides are happening worldwide. Indigenous people face displacement and genocide; as I am typing this, bombs are dropped, the land is exploited, and resources are extracted from the lands of indigenous people in Palestine, Sudan, and Congo. We then must ask: How can we interrupt these institutionalized spaces to speak for the voices deserving of our solidarity, advocacy, and dedication? That is a question I am actively asking myself, and I hope you are doing the same.

It is time for academia to revoke its cultural gatekeeper status. Instead, rethink academia's lack of accessibility, ensuring that resources, knowledge, and space are, in fact, accessible to those off campus that too often become a bubble. Students have begun the conversation, and it is time for the institution to reckon with its positionality.

## **ABSTRACT**

In this project, I observe how Black folks and students of color interact with Black cultural production within cultural and educational historically white institutions. Black spatial thinkers such as JT Roane have theorized that when Black folks listen deeply to the environment endowed to them (often considered uninhabitable or hostile land), the community finds ways to make it accessible to their social life. Within historically white spaces, focusing on culture or education, the presence of Black attendees and students earns the space diversity capital. My project aims to trace the ways in which Black attendees and students carve out places within institutionalized spaces that have been historically hostile to their community. Throughout my research I observed how often these interactions with Black cultural production within institutionalized spaces are often an interruption to the cultural capital exchange. I then further explore the significance of the interruption to the students of color on a historically white campus which reveals the need for further institutional support. My project then maps the interruptive performances used to interact with Black cultural production. The project aims to explore the intentions behind the need for diversity and how that impacts the cultural capital Black attendees and students of color are able to explore within historically white spaces.

*Keywords;* Nondominant and dominant cultural capital, diversity capital, Black geographies, Black cultural production, performance geographies

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Part of my plan to graduate a semester earlier than the path laid out for early college transfer students at Bard College included fulfilling distributional graduation credits during my first year. Art analysis, the credit I dreaded the most, offered a course on Blackness and Abstraction taught by Professor Kobena Mercer. My dreadful feelings for the arts arose from my insecurity about my performance in literature classes. During my early college high school days, I was once told by a Literature professor to “be aware of reading too deeply into details; you lose sight of the greater thematics. ’ I held my tongue during the rest of the semester discussion about my analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*. I was insecure about my literary analysis of a book written by a Black woman.

When I registered for the Blackness and Abstraction course, I did not expect it to be a demographic of seniors majoring in art history. But to my pleasant surprise, most of the class was Black, my first class of this demographic since middle school. My insecurity in artistic analysis dissolved quickly because of the space transformed by the Black seniors who made the small classroom in the annex to the studio arts building, a metal shed with low and dim lights, a safe place to talk about Black abstract art. The annex, another building named after a donor to Habitus College, is the space for the art history department; the single-level building resembles a container. When opened, The metal shed exposes low, dim lights, which don’t feel very welcoming, and a kitchen in the corner of the building. Across the kitchen stood the classroom where Blackness and Abstraction took place. Down the hall were the professors' office doors and bulletin boards curated by professors. The annex was transformed from a space to a place that could critically and intentionally discuss Black art because of the communal connection developed by Black bodies, acknowledging the other experiences of Black bodies. There were

certain concepts, conversations, and references that only the Black bodies in the room could grasp, identify, and understand. We created a symbolic and physical place surrounding Black art within the annex because of the centering of Black cultural significance. The place developed within the annex facilitated by the professor speaks of the importance of culturally sensitive curriculum and places. The students in the class were unafraid to show up as their Black selves. I felt more comfortable letting go of my attachment to code-switching as a method of gaining respect within white educational spaces. Inside the small classroom within the annex, there was no need to assimilate to the dominant cultural practices held within Bard College because Black culture was the center and focus of the class, not the afterthought.

One weekend, I decided to take my partner through the annex because they had never had a class there. As we were walking through the building, I was struck by a poster of a painting hanging on the wall. At first, I conceptualized the poster to be a weak attempt of the art history department at Bard College to gain diversity capital. Sociologist Patricia Banks explains diversity capital as an increasingly valuable commodity acquired by corporations claiming to value diversity, equity, and inclusion. The ethnic community support provided by these corporations may serve to obscure a poor track record with social justice<sup>1</sup>. Although Patricia Banks does apply diversity capital to corporations, the theory can also be applied to universities. Educational institutions gain capital for being diverse and liberal. It makes it more appealing to white liberals and donors.

The poster was the only representation of Afro-Latinidad within the annex amongst posters and paintings of European art. The face of the woman in the painting reminded me of my older sisters, my mom in her 20s, and my grandmother in her teen years. Her face was what I

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<sup>1</sup> Banks, Patricia A. 2022. *Black Culture Inc. : How Ethnic Community Support Pays for Corporate America*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press.

imagined my great-grandmother would have looked like before having children. I stopped to admire the beaded necklace on her neck that matched the flowers behind her and the ones she held. Her braids reminded me of how my paternal grandmother styled my hair when I needed to look “presentable” while we were in a rush. The dim lights of the annex and the result of printing the painting onto the poster muted the colors; I could still tell how vivid the colors were in the original painting. The lighting around her face captured my attention the most. Half my time standing there was spent looking at her face, finding and creating her story. As I broadened my gaze on the poster, my heart immediately dropped. Someone attending, teaching, or passing through the Annex took the time to locate pushpins and pierce them through the breasts of the Black women. Immediately, I removed the pushpins piercing the breasts of the women and then began discarding the pushpins holding the poster against the wall. I took *La Mulata Cartagenera*, 1940, Enrique Grau Araujo, to my dorm room and hung it up. Every day, I woke up excited to know that there was a piece of art in my room that I could continue to admire, decipher, and preserve safely and imagine the story of the woman in the painting.

Banks explains that the Black middle-class purchases Black visual art with Black representative figures because it allows this group to draw from the art to express their attachment to other Black people<sup>2</sup>. Although I am not a part of the Black middle class and therefore could not purchase the painting of *La Mulata Cartagenera*, I acquired a poster of the painting. The painting reminded me of the women in my family, and as I admire the painting, I am reminded of my attachment to my family. As a reminder of my familial attachment, the painting helps me remember who I am and where I come from. Removing the pushpins that penetrated the breast of the woman within the painting made me feel as if I was pulling the

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<sup>2</sup> Banks, Patricia A. “Becoming Black: Consumption of Visual Art and Black Identity.” *Conference Papers -- 2006 Annual Meeting*, Montreal: (American Sociological Association, 2006).

feeling of discomfort the women in my family felt when speaking about their uncomfortable experiences with their bodies and sexuality. The piercing of *La Mulata Cartagenera* reminded me that the bodies of Black women are still fungible, especially in a predominately white institution that prides itself on being progressive and aligning with liberal politics. The Afro-Latina woman depicted the women in my family, who would adorn themselves with beaded necklaces, two braids, and a dress with a slight cleavage exposure. To someone else passing through the annex, the image of the Afro-Latina woman was not completed *unless* marked and penetrated by pushpins through the areola. The other viewer of *La Mulata Cartagenera* needed to mold and manipulate the image of the Black woman in the painting.

Hortense Spillers theorizes that the flesh of Black women is molded frequently until rendered useless<sup>3</sup>. Tracing back the history of chattel slavery, she acknowledges that Black life is ungendered and fungible, especially considering how the state has plundered Black flesh.

Drawing on the philosophies developed by Spillers, Saidiya Hartman states

the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the slave is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion<sup>4</sup>

A passerby or student at the annex penetrated the flesh around *La Mulata Cartagenera's* areola with push pins because of the fungibility of black women and the fungibility of the commodity itself, artistic depictions of Black bodies.

Artistic depictions of Black bodies and experiences are considered Black cultural production, including various creative forms such as dances, music videos, films, fashion, paintings, and much more. Robert J. Patterson describes Black cultural production as a site of

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<sup>3</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

<sup>4</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor Marisa J Fuentes Sarah Haley Cameron Rowland and Torkwase Dyson. 2022. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* [Revised and updated edition] 25th anniversary ed. New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

political critique, reconsideration, and political imaginative possibilities. Political critique is achieved through the identifying of socio-political shortcomings and reconsideration by imagining a radical solution communicated to the masses.<sup>5</sup> Cultural production can now be shared in a solitary space on a larger scale because of virtual accessibility. **For this study, I will focus on Black cultural production when shared in communal spaces to explore the collective interaction and exchange of cultural capital.**

I aim to demonstrate how institutional spaces that highlight Black cultural production, even if in need of sponsorships and donors, therefore diversity capital, can still benefit the intended communities through the intentional sharing of Black cultural production. The social actors who choose to spend their money within these institutional spaces, whether cultural or educational, are choosing to be in historically white institutions that have displaced Black, brown, and indigenous communities. These institutions provide dominant cultural capital by displacing communities that harness nondominant cultural capital. The institution then becomes a site of cultural capital exchange that can either support or police Black place-making and is ultimately commodified.

When Black cultural production is included in institutional spaces, it does impact the transformation of the space into place. Still, I argue that the audience interaction with Black cultural production has the most critical impact on Black place-making. While scholars in Black Place-making studies tend to highlight the migration of Black cultural production and the performers who produce it, this paper aims to highlight how audience interaction, especially within historically white institutions, impacts Black place-making because of the move towards a collective experience. Black place-making is not a solitary experience but a collective one when shared in a space historically that has not invited these social actors. When Black cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Patterson, Robert J. 2019. *Black Cultural Production After Civil Rights*. Urbana Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

production is included within these spaces, it allows for cultural capital exchange to be facilitated; social actors who already made a move towards dominant cultural capital by paying the high price to be in some of the spaces included in my study then have the choice to continue to exchange their nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital. If they choose to continue with the traditional cultural capital exchange, the narrative of the space does not change; it holds the same meaning as it did before the audience arrived. If, instead, the cultural capital exchange is interrupted and nondominant cultural capital is not exchanged for dominant cultural capital, then the significance of the place changes not only due to the inclusion of Black cultural production but also because of the social actors' interruptive interaction. Place-making is the transformation of space, a continuous area that holds no meaning.<sup>6</sup> Space becomes a place precisely because of the meaning people give, how they interact with it, and the archived histories. It is social actors who make a place.

Given the importance of interaction in placemaking, Black geographical studies must attend to the role of performance. Black performance is a tool used to take up space through the expression of embodied experience, including dance.<sup>7</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, in *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, claims that every phase of Black life is unconsciously highly dramatized, an impromptu ceremony.<sup>8</sup> I argue that performance geography does not just encapsulate dances but also interruption; interruption is performance. Performance is an act of Black expression, but I also argue that it is an act of place-making, Black spatial insurgency as theorized by JT Roane. The cultural institutions and historically white educational institutions are both sites of the commodification of Black bodies and Black performance. As shown in the vignette shared, in an attempt to be inclusive—to gain diversity capital, the art history department hung up a poster of an

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<sup>6</sup> Gieryn, Thomas F. "A Space for Place in Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 463–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223453>.

<sup>7</sup> Niaah, Sonjah S. (2008). Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto. *Space and Culture*, 11(4), 343-360.

<sup>8</sup> Hurston Zora Neale. 1969. "Characteristics of Negro Expression." *Negro Anthology* Pages 39-61.



Afro-Latina. La Mulata Cartagenera stood out compared to the multitude of White European classical art pieces hung up. Only for a member of the Bard Community to vandalize the poster. The experience speaks to the inadequacy of a diverse framework that positions the institution that develops or sponsors the events that center Black cultural production within educational and cultural institutions as the primary beneficiaries and the Black attendees as secondary beneficiaries. Throughout my research, I highlight the ways in which Black folks are still able to carve out a place through their performances within spaces that position their participation in these cultural events as secondary beneficiaries.

Drawing on the literature on Black geographies, cultural capital, and diversity capital, I am interested in investigating how institutionalized spaces can facilitate cultural capital exchange. Why is cultural capital exchanged within historically white institutions? What purpose does it serve for Black social actors participating within these spaces? Are Black folks able to carve out a place within spaces that can ultimately commodify their efforts in cultural capital exchange and place-making? Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods open up the conversation of Black place-making by introducing tools to map out the intricate ways Black folks have had to create a place on hostile stolen land, including through performance, as Stanley Sonjah Niaah theorizes.

I am also interested in how performances are translated into nondominant cultural capital, which sociologist Prudence Carter introduces in response to Pierre Bourdieu's dominant cultural capital theory. Bourdieu argues that dominant cultural capital is the transformation of experiences and knowledge into skills to attain socioeconomic mobility, which usually means replicating culture and ideals of white middle-class and "high-brow" culture.<sup>9</sup> Carter responds to

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. (1983). *The Forms of Capital*. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

and challenges this theory by identifying “nondominant cultural capital” and attending to its presence within educational institutions. Similarly, Patricia Banks explores how nondominant cultural capital shared within cultural institutions is commodified.

In order to address my research questions, I aimed to include both an educational institution and cultural institutions within my study to explore the different yet similar processes of cultural capital exchange and Black place-making within these sites whose ultimate goal is to attain diversity capital. To conduct this research, I attended three shows, one festival, and one exhibition in the Northeast. I also completed two charlas with six students total at a historically white college campus in New York State, which I am calling Habitus College. I used these distinct spaces as sources of data because several of these sites are traditionally known to provide dominant cultural capital and, ultimately, socioeconomic mobility, such as a college and “high-brow” cultural institutions such as the Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Other sites such as Crotona Park and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture were ones where large groups of folks connecting on cultural production were guaranteed and ultimately more accessible than the high-brow cultural institutions or the college. The college where Charlas took place, Habitus College, is an educational institution that also aims to present itself as a high-brow cultural institution where students have limited access to the performing arts center on campus. It is mainly used over the summer for artists to be invited to perform for those who can travel to the upstate New York College.

Using ethnographic observations and charlas, I find that performances and interruption of cultural capital exchange within these institutionalized sites that commodify these interactions ultimately serve as a basis for *collective* place-making and community building. The capital

exchanged or interrupted creates a site for Black social actors, whether in higher educational or cultural institutions, to carve out a place for connection and community to be built. My research explores how social actors utilize performance geographies within institutionalized spaces. By incorporating Black cultural production, these spaces not only gain diversity capital for corporations and sponsors but also foster a sense of communal collective identity through the exchange of nondominant cultural capital.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Dominant/Nondominant Cultural Capital**

According to Prudence Carter, the academic setting of the classroom and the school maintains a cultural hierarchy that minimizes and invalidates the cultural experiences and their significance to low-income Black and Latino students. The school, therefore, takes on the role of a cultural gatekeeper, keeping resources closed and only allowing access if a student assimilates to "dominant" cultural practices rather than denying the relevance of their cultural capital and identity. Dominant cultural capital was first theorized by Pierre Bourdieu and was focused primarily on the capital acquired and utilized by dominant and middle socioeconomic classes to gain socioeconomic mobility<sup>10</sup>. The culture of middle-class or elite spaces then becomes the standard culture to earn status and resources. In order to gain status and resources actors must acquire and maintain a particular attention to interests, style and presentation, interests, and interpersonal skills that can be transformed into advantages or resources. The maintenance of these middle-class tastes, interests, and styles often allows access to social white privileges, such as acquiring recognition within an institution for maintaining a certain taste level. In educational spaces, this may look like praise and therefore additional support from teachers or professors which can translate into higher academic performance. In cultural spaces, it may look like dressing in black and white attire which wouldn't distract from the costume of performers. It may also look like talking to your neighbors within these often exclusive cultural spaces which then leads to a networking connection beyond the space. The examples provided within both educational and cultural institutions exemplify how when dominant cultural capital is acquired

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<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. (1983). The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

through the desired participation within these institutions, the capital is acquired when the non-material skills are transformed into advantages for both socioeconomic mobility as well as a particular middle-class status. Often the collective identity shared amongst those who acquire dominant cultural capital is maintained by maintaining the boundaries and distribution of resources and status.

Prudence Carter challenges Bourdieu's hierarchical cultural ideology by claiming that students of color are able to gain "cultural capital" through their connection to the "non-dominant" culture. She defines nondominant cultural capital as "a set of tastes, appreciations, and understandings, such as preferences for particular linguistic, musical, and dress styles, and physical gestures used by lower status group members to gain "authentic" cultural status positions in their respective communities"<sup>11</sup>. Carter argues that there have been different uses for cultural capital other than the traditional attainment of status or socioeconomic mobility. For Black and students of color, the attainment of cultural capital doesn't revolve around status but instead a collective identity.

A collective identity for those who aim to acquire nondominant cultural capital usually revolves around solidarity, a sense of belonging, and responsibility to the collective based on race, class, gender, sexuality, legal status, and culture. The collective identity they earn access to is dependent on the boundaries of authenticity they enforce upon the community they are granted access. One is only able to enforce these boundaries if they are able to earn nondominant cultural capital. Sharing of local knowledge can be used to attain nondominant cultural capital. Students within Carter's study earned nondominant cultural capital through their knowledge and implementation of cultural practices not appreciated within the school, the cultural gatekeeper. The cultural status discussed in Carter's definition of nondominant cultural capital is not the

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<sup>11</sup> Carter, Prudence L. 2005. *Keepin' It Real : School Success Beyond Black and White*, 50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

same status that earns socioeconomic mobility but instead the status to communicate and/or enforce cultural boundaries of authenticity; hence collective identity.

I further elaborate on this argument by applying this theory to Black and people of color of all ages, not only in school but in a multitude of cultural institutions, such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Summerstage NYC, and Lincoln Center Theater. I explore the process of how nondominant cultural capital is acquired within these cultural institutions. I also investigate how the resource of cultural status is granted and utilized by those with nondominant cultural capital. It is important to look at the exchange of cultural capital in cultural spaces because it reveals the purpose and/or significance of the space. Are these cultural spaces majorly used to garner socioeconomic status or cultural status? Theorizing about the spaces of cultural capital exchange opens the conversation for an interruption of exchange within spaces that haven't historically welcomed interruption. How then can the exchange be interrupted without being met with hostility or commodification? Cultural institutions can hold certain unspoken requirements to attain cultural capital, such as timed response clapping throughout a performance, plain and predictable fashion, silence during performance, or quiet conversations during intermissions. The dominant cultural capital communicates that one *belongs/fits right into* the cultural space which may earn audience members socioeconomic mobility or status. The status is earned as the dominant cultural capital acquired is transformed into skills, resources, and potential networks that will fasten one's chance in socioeconomic upward mobility. Although the behaviors and expectations are not explicitly stated (or taught), they are expected nonetheless. These unspoken requirements are usually juxtaposed with the requirements to attain non-dominant cultural capital within cultural institutions. This paper aims to explore said requirements. Those who aim to attain nondominant

cultural capital can also be associated with the goal of attaining a collective identity with community members and cultural status focused on solidarity. Although the presence and importance of nondominant cultural capital has garnered much more attention over the years, it is often manipulated to benefit patrons, donors, and philanthropists who financially support these cultural spaces/institutions of the Black community. Nondominant and dominant cultural capital is not only exchanged between social actors but also ultimately commodified by corporations, patrons, and donors who aim to be recognized for their ethnic community support. Patricia A. Banks describes the exchange of cultural capital at the corporation/ institutional level as diversity capital.

### **Diversity Capital**

Banks also explores how the Black middle class consumes Black visual art in relation to their identity formulation. Part of formulating their Black identity includes the dimensions of self-categorization, shared fate, individual narrative, collective narrative, and ideology. The black middle class is granted into the spaces of art consumption, meaning the sale and trade of Black art. The Black middle class buying Black art that includes Black representative figures is the process of self-categorization. The visual art piece also allows this group to draw from the art to express their attachment to other Black people<sup>12</sup>. Extending upon Banks' argument concerning the connection of visual art to the Black middle-class community, I apply this beyond the art market and beyond the Black middle-class community. Some events and spaces within my study were free of charge, which garnered attendance from those of all classes. Furthermore, it is not only visual art that is used in my study to explore the collective narrative and ideology amongst Black communities but also the performing arts, which garners different settings and different

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<sup>12</sup> Banks, Patricia A. "Becoming Black: Consumption of Visual Art and Black Identity."

reactions. The cultural events within the study were all sites that ultimately commodified the cultural capital exchange taking place.

Patricia A. Banks warns us against the danger of cultural capital when commodified, what she considers diversity capital. Banks explain diversity capital to be an increasingly valuable commodity gained by corporations who claim to value diversity, equity, and inclusion. The ethnic community support provided by these corporations often serves to obscure a poor track record with social justice<sup>13</sup>. Cultural institutions and gatherings are often supported with the profit of diversity capital in mind. The temporality of social movements is essential to cultural patronage, philanthropy, and donations. These corporations work on their diversity framing by using words, images, and sounds to communicate that their ethnic community support functions as a diversity sign that is repeatedly publicized. Banks highlight institutions such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which commemorates its donors with plaques and sites named after its sponsors. Her work highlights how the use of Black traditions in Black cultural events benefits the Black attendees who want to build a collective identity and the sponsors who get to brand themselves as “diverse.” I apply this to my project because I examine how nondominant cultural capital is acquired within these institutions that garner diversity capital for corporations and donors. Diversity capital translates to economic capital for these corporations as they become more appealing to ethnic consumers because of their ethnic community support. Corporations and donors then provide ethnic community support to cultural events or cultural initiatives that often highlight nondominant cultural capital. The donors and CEOs of the corporations willing to put in the effort would make a guest appearance within these events that center nondominant cultural capital for a photographic opportunity to capture their

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<sup>13</sup> Banks, Patricia Ann. 2022. *Black Culture Inc. : How Ethnic Community Support Pays for Corporate America.*



own commitment to diversity. The cultural capital exchanged or interrupted amongst Black attendees earns these donors' and corporations' capital; diversity capital. Donors and corporations are recognized as diverse, which earns corporations much more Black consumers and developers of educational institutions (including donors) a prestigious reputation. I investigate the requirements for the nondominant cultural capital that could potentially develop a collective identity based on solidarity and community even if diversity capital for corporations and donors was the intended profit. I also explore the agency practiced when participating in spaces garnering diversity capital. Although diversity capital may be the primary goal for these institutions highlighting Black cultural production, the participants within the space manipulate and extract the resources provided within the space, such as creating communal connections. The intent of commodification does not stop the genuine development of collective communal identity, the sharing of nondominant cultural capital.

Other scholars such as Amber Jamilla Musser and Antar Tichavakunda have explored the harms of diversity capital, noting that it leads to affective labor and unpaid diversity workers. These thinkers apply diversity capital to educational institutions and how often when the solution to racism on campus is to admit more diverse bodies to the campus, it leaves the diverse bodies with additional affective labor (invisible yet intense work diverse bodies are expected to take on). Musser argues that affective labor becomes the currency of diversity.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Tichavakunda points out that the affective labor is unpaid diversity work. Both thinkers explore how professors and students of color become unpaid diversity workers, professors unpaid for the additional affective labor they are expected to execute.<sup>15</sup> Having to be mentors and counselors for the students of color on campus, dealing with intersectional structural racism within academia,

<sup>14</sup> Musser, Amber Jamilla. "Specimen Days: Diversity, Labor, and the University." *Feminist Formations* 27, no. 3 (2015): 1–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860813>.

<sup>15</sup> Tichavakunda, Antar A. *Black campus life: The worlds Black students make at a historically White institution*. State University of New York Press, 2021.

needing to be prepared to answer any questions related to diversity.<sup>16</sup> Students of color are expected to demand and create spaces for their community, spend additional time on executing communal events, deal with intersectional structural racism within academia, expected to provide peer pedagogies, and be prepared to answer any questions related to diversity.<sup>17</sup>

However, we know that Black and other communities of color still carve out places within institutionalized spaces despite the risk of it being commodified, and thus, here I am interested in examining how "Black cultural spaces, even if in need of sponsorships and therefore diversity capital, can still benefit the intended communities through the sharing of Black cultural production

Diversity capital increases the socioeconomic status of corporations as their products are shared amongst a diverse audience, the intent of their ethnic community support. The experiences of the participants within these cultural and educational institutions highlight the exchange and distribution of dominant and nondominant cultural capital within spaces that attempt to highlight Black cultural production. The exchange of cultural capital within these "Blackened" places as Black bodies's performances mark the space as part of Black geographies also gain corporations and donors diversity capital<sup>18</sup>. Recognizing the presence of diversity capital does not invalidate the connection and agency enacted within these spaces that allow for Black performances, even if it includes interruption, the antithesis of dominant cultural capital. It then becomes essential to explore the connection made by the exchange of cultural capital within places that highlight Black cultural production to represent the complex social life within Black places rightfully.

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<sup>16</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

<sup>17</sup> Harper, Shaun R. "Am I my brother's teacher? Black undergraduates, racial socialization, and peer pedagogies in predominantly white postsecondary contexts." *Review of Research in Education* 37, no. 1 (2013): 183-211.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. Vol. 53. NYU Press, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1n6ptnn>.

## Black Place-Making and Performance Geographies

Historically, Black, brown, and indigenous places have been stolen, destroyed, and extracted. Leaving these communities displaced in the name of building higher educational or cultural institutions. These same institutions then take decades and even centuries to open up the space to diverse bodies. Often, the environment left/endowed to Black, brown, and Indigenous communities is considered uninhabitable or hostile, and yet the community continues to find a way to make it accessible to their social life.<sup>19</sup> Material conditions— a requirement of place-making as described by Gieryn does not consider the historical removal of materiality within Black place-making<sup>20</sup>. Historical removal of materiality includes all the different ways Black folks have been displaced from their homes, including the Transatlantic slave trade. The systematic removal of materiality positions Black folks to employ different techniques of deep listening to the hostile land endowed to them, including intentional, receptive, and caring maintenance of a place. JT Roane defines these other techniques to be Black spatial insurgency<sup>21</sup>.

The act of Black spatial insurgency, as accounted by non-Black thinkers, is often minimized to the imaginary, the flesh, and geographic determinism. McKittrick and Woods push back against this by centering the geographies of the “colonized, the enslaved, the incarcerated, the disposable.”<sup>22</sup> Western traditions are able to push the geographic experiences of Black communities into the margins through their conceptualizations of development and use of language. To work against minimizing Blackness into the symbolic, Black Geographies is then defined as a mapping of black places that surpasses the limitations of place-making by introducing and normalizing different ways to produce and perceive space: Black places. Spaces

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<sup>19</sup> Roane, J.T.. *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place*. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479845385.001.0001>

<sup>20</sup> Gieryn, Thomas F. “A Space for Place in Sociology.”

<sup>21</sup> Roane, J.T.. *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place*.

<sup>22</sup> McKittrick, Katherine., and Clyde Adrian Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Toronto, Ont. : Cambridge, Mass.: Between the Lines ; South End Press, 2007.

and places of black geographies move away from the hegemonic colonial practices by bringing in local knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Local knowledge produced within these places is sacred to the community, which may also be considered a nondominant cultural capital. The sharing of local knowledge can be used to attain not socioeconomic status (unless used in spaces that commodify Black culture as theorized by Banks) but instead cultural status. The sharing of local knowledge can be used to attain nondominant cultural capital, such as knowing the lyrics to a song considered a “staple” in the Black community or knowing which neighborhood business to support (which popular and safe spaces to go to), or wearing a *Telfar* bag around; a new representation of affordable luxury.

Performance geography, as theorized by Sonja Stanley Niaah is an example of local knowledge produced through the place-making, Black geographic practices within Black cultural spaces. It is the “physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual activity that enacts a human existence, specifically in the “black Atlantic” space between violation, ruptured roots, and self-reconstruction”<sup>24</sup>. Niaah’s work focuses primarily on the physical aspect of performance geography, specifically dancing, but it should be noted that there is an array of physical examples of embodied performance geographies. The embodiment of human existence, performance geography, may disregard the unspoken requirements to attain dominant cultural capital. Performance practice’s macro and microspatialities reveal spatial categories, philosophies, and systems; Niahh describes this to be a requirement for life<sup>25</sup> My research traces the use of performance geographies by social actors within institutionalized Black cultural spaces, that through their inclusion of Black cultural production, acquire diversity capital for corporations and sponsors but communal collective identity through the exchange of nondominant cultural

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<sup>23</sup> McKittrick, Katherine., and Clyde Adrian Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Niaah, Sonjah S. “Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto”

<sup>25</sup> Niaah, Sonjah S. “Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto”

capital. Performance geography, a local knowledge shared by those who perform in Black spaces, gain cultural status within their community to lead further performances, a tool of Black place-making I aim to explore the interaction between Black cultural production and the community of consumers within these spaces, including which spatial categories, philosophies, and systems are revealed through their interaction. The institutions I explore do not only focus on cultural ones; they also include an educational institution that solemnly attempts to include Black cultural production. In doing so, I attend to how these spaces affect Black consumers' consumption of Black cultural production. Additionally, spaces are transformed into Black places for Black folks to consume and celebrate Black cultural production through their expression of performance geographies.

## **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview of the Study**

My study aims to explore how black folks interact with cultural spaces and places that include or center their community, even if these spaces have been commodified to attain diversity capital for corporations. Black cultural production has been utilized to gather Black folks into spaces they may have traditionally been excluded from, and often, it is expected that there should be maintenance of dominant cultural capital to validate their inclusion within these spaces. I aim to explore how Black folks in Black cultural spaces and white spaces, which include Black cultural production, connect with Black cultural production. I aim to precisely identify the performance geographies utilized within these spaces and their role in Black identity formulation, place-making, and community building. **My research question is: how do Black folks' connection to Black cultural production inform their identity formulation, place-making, and institutional navigations? I investigated this question through two different methodologies. One is ethnographic observations, and the other is Charlas.**

In sum, this study will help us understand the potential of the interaction with Black cultural production in historically white institutions or commodified Black cultural institutions to surpass diversity capital.

#### ***1A. Ethnographic Observations***

The ethnographic observations were facilitated in New York City and Washington, DC. I observed the audience and attendees' behaviors and interactions. Over the summer and fall of 2023, I attended five different Black cultural spaces, including a museum, a festival, two dance shows, and a multidisciplinary show. I attended the National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and revisited the museum to ensure that there was a

variety of interactions to observe. I attended on both Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which are when most museums reported more foot traffic.

Additionally, I attended dance shows such as the New York City Ballet, with music composed by Solange Knowles, located in the Lincoln Center, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I also attended concerts such as “The Cry of My People,” a show curated by Solange Knowles’ initiative Saint Heron, which presented artists such as Claudia Rankine, Linda Sharrock, and Archie Shepp, located in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. As well as “The Birth of a Culture,” a celebration of hip hop in the South Bronx’s Crotona Park, including DJ artists such as Grandmaster Flash, Tony Touch, Pete Rock, and much more. I chose to observe these different sites because I wanted my sample of institutions to include/center an array of Black cultural productions while also dependent on sponsorships and donors. The majority of these institutions all assisted in attaining diversity capital for corporations. For instance, during the grand opening of The National Museum of African American History and Culture, signs were plastered all around the museum with logos from the donors and corporations who provided financial support, such as Target and Bank of America. The museum not only acknowledged but honored its sponsors by thanking and representing sponsored contributions. The playbills given out at Lincoln Center Theater included pages of a list of sponsors who financially contributed to the New York City Ballet. Programs given out at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater included the names of sponsors such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, Jerome L. Greene Foundation, The SHS Foundation, and Harkness Foundation of Dance. Even after the conclusion of Eldorado Ballroom, Van Cleef and Arpels still expressed their support for Saint Heron’s Eldorado Ballroom performances within the Brooklyn Academy of Music on their website. The Birth of A Culture, organized by Summerstage, held

performances on a stage with banners honoring sponsors such as Capital One, Subaru, The National Grid, and Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Additionally, I aimed for my sample to include institutions with a variety of costs to attend. Some events were free, such as The Birth of A Culture at Crotona Park and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The other events, Eldorado Ballroom, The Cry of My People, The New York City Ballet, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, cost anywhere from \$50 to \$120 depending on the desired seating arrangement. All of these institutions were potential sites for cultural capital exchange because of the variety of audiences welcomed. The inclusion of formal and informal Black cultural events also represented an array of performance geographies, exploring what movements were welcomed in which spaces.

When conducting observations, I remained at each site for 2-3 hours, depending on how long each performance was. For example, when observing the plays and concerts, which have a set beginning and end, I arrived 20-30 minutes early in order to observe how people prepared for each event, including interactions with other audience members. I also left 20-30 minutes after the conclusion of each event so that I could observe how audience members reflected after performances and any significant interactions amongst each other.

When taking ethnographic field notes, I paid close attention to the dress code and what people were wearing to these cultural events. I also attended to the implications of the style and fashion of audience members within the cultural space, sounds that were made during intermission and the performances, reactions to the visual and/or performing art, and their interactions with other audience members. I also observed the demographics of the crowd, including age, race, and gender. I used what Nancy Lopez calls “street race” to identify people of



color, particularly Black people, in these sites, looking at phenotypes such as skin color and hair texture<sup>26</sup>. This, of course, introduces the possibility that I miscategorized those that I observed. Yet, given the ways in which race operates through the external racialization of others, I believe that my findings provide important insight into how Black people navigate Black cultural spaces.

I took notes during each event, which were quick jottings while on site and more extensive field notes when I arrived home that same day.

### *1B. Data Analysis*

The field notes taken at each cultural event were converted into narratives that were qualitatively coded into a codebook, including an array of codes. The qualitative coding relied on the use of repetition and salience to identify emergent themes. These were used to name community building, connections to spatial arrangements, connections to each other, reactions and interpretations of Black cultural products, and forms of performances conducted by audience members as emergent themes. I then connected these themes to literature that discusses similar ideas.

### *2A. Charles*

My study also focused on how undergraduates of color navigate a historically white institution through their use of Black cultural production. Highlighting affinity places that focus on interpreting Black cultural production through an intellectual lens shared through peer pedagogies. My research question is: How do students of color engage with forms of Black cultural production while navigating a traditionally white institution? And how do their understandings of Black cultural production shape and inform their identity formation,

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<sup>26</sup> López Nancy, Edward Vargas, Melina Juarez, Lisa Cacari-Stone, and Sonia Bettez. 2018. "What's Your 'Street Race'? Leveraging Multidimensional Measures of Race and Intersectionality for Examining Physical and Mental Health Status among Latinxs." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649217708798>.

place-making, and institutional navigations? To explore these questions, I conducted two charlas, with a total of six participants.

Charlas are informal chats between the researcher and study participants that are grounded in mutual recognition of knowledge and expertise. This methodology is similar to focus groups in that it includes a conversation between multiple participants and the researcher. However, it is different due to its “vertical thinking, not horizontal, meaning that researchers and women in the field are intellectually on the same plane”<sup>27</sup>. As such, participants were asked several questions but were also able to raise their own questions and ideas while conversing with each other. Participants analyzed art and responded to the questions posed by the researcher and each other. Charlas is then a site of Black art consumption where participants will leave creating their own critical questions in response to the art presented. Rather than traditionally collecting sociological data through interviews or focus groups, I selected Charlas as the methodology of the study because of the targeted participants. I myself am a student of color, just like my participants – I feel no need to speak for my community. My community possesses the agency to bring to the forefront how they are represented within the study. Interviews and focus groups place the subject as a spectacle to be observed for the study. In an effort to be conscious of the participants within the study; Black, Indigenous, and college students of color– I wanted to remove the hierarchical element implicated within interviews and focus groups.

The charlas took place in a liberal arts college in upstate New York, which I will be referring to as Habitus College. Habitus has prided itself on the philosophy of students being trained to direct themselves with the institution providing the resources for the student to learn the skills. Like many other liberal arts colleges, it flaunts its supposed commitment to civil

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<sup>27</sup> Abarca, Meredith E. 2007. “Charlas Culinarias: Mexican Women Speak from Their Public Kitchens.” *Food and Foodways* 15 (3–4): 183–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710701620094>.

rights. The campus has been open to refugees since the 1950s and continues to selectively open its door to students suffering at the hands of international war. The college is consistently brought up within mainstream media because of its radical or conservative involvement.

Additionally, I decided to facilitate Charlas as a site of Black media consumption because of the lack of institutional support for Africana studies within Habitus's campus. Africana studies is considered a concentration and not a degree-earning program. Over the course of Fall 2023, there were two charlas sessions. In total, I acquired six students to join the study. Students were asked to engage with cultural artifacts, whether music video, film, or album, for 25-30 minutes. The other 30-45 minutes were dedicated to discussion amongst students. Participants were asked to watch a short film (and/or music video as well as listen to two music albums, the images and lyrics of which address criminality, communion, resistance, sexuality, femininity, and spirituality. I did not tell participants ahead of time the specific music video, film, or album they were to consume because part of my research includes observing how participants react to the cultural products in real time. I also prepared questions for the charlas on topics such as artist intention, purpose, and significance, but often, these questions weren't necessary as participants came up with their own.

Participants in Charla 1 consumed Solange's 'When I Get Home' short film (00:20-23:12) and Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' music video (1:55-5:40). Participants in Charla 2 consumed Solange *When I Get Home* album "We Deal with the Freak'n" - "I'm a Witness" (15 minutes) and Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly* album "Institutionalized" and "Mortal Man" (15 minutes).

These cultural products were chosen because they include themes that were emergent within my ethnographic observations. Themes include community building, Black movement, performance, and spatial arrangements.

### ***2B. Participants***

I recruited college students of color who were at least 18 years of age and attended Habitus College. I recruited them by advertising and reaching out (via email and in-person) to affinity student organizations and spaces on campus. I also placed recruitment flyers around visible areas within common centers on campus. Finally, I used snowball sampling to ask participants to refer me to other students who might have been interested in participating in my study.

Within the two charlas, there were 6 participants total. The first charla had four participants: one Latine junior, two Black women juniors, and one Black woman sophomore. In the second charla, there were two participants in total. Two Latines, one a junior and the other a senior.

### ***2C. Data Analysis***

Data analysis within this project consists of transcribing recordings of data collected from Charlas. After the transcription, I utilized qualitative coding focused on affinity group participation, connections to spatial arrangements on campus, connections to each other, reactions and interpretations of Black cultural products, and forms of Black placemaking. As with my coding of the ethnographic observations, my qualitative coding relied on the use of repetition and salience to identify emerging themes.

### *3A. Methodological Approach*

I chose these different data sources because I wanted to encapsulate the variety yet similar interactions with the other institutionalized spaces. The cultural spaces included ethnographic observations because these events were single-day timed constraints experiences. Because of this, I was able to gain a heightened and controlled sensorium, including visualization of spatial arrangements. This was where I was able to observe the audience as performers. The educational spaces included charlas because of my positionality as a college student. Data from conversations with college students about Black cultural production, I acquired intimate knowledge about the significance and intention behind their interruptions and performance. These two sources of data relate to each other because the ethnographic observations introduce the interaction with Black cultural production within institutionalized spaces, and the charlas speaks to the intentions and significance behind these interactions. The methodologies work together to provide an understanding of cultural capital exchange and place-making within a variation of institutionalized spaces.

## Chapter 4: How Much Capital to Build Community?

### *Interruption as Performance: Creation of Space through Interruption/Performance*

A few cultural institutions within this study have an intertwined history, such as the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, although created before the construction of Lincoln Center, has long existed in the shadow of Lincoln Center. Built-in 1861, the Brooklyn Academy of Music is America's oldest performing arts center. The founders had much interest in "high" art and classical music.<sup>28</sup> The original building burned down in 1906, which led to the construction of Brooklyn Academy of Music's current building, 30 Lafayette Ave. 1967, A few years after Lincoln Center's grand opening, the Brooklyn Academy of Music was in need of a renewal.

Harvey Lichtenstein, the executive director, led this transformation towards a "preeminent, progressive cultural center."<sup>29</sup> The institution struggled as people flocked to Manhattan as the cultural center of New York City, and few recognized Brooklyn as a valid candidate. Lincoln Center was then able to receive excellent traction. Brooklyn Academy of Music found ways to distinguish itself from the other cultural centers around New York City. The BAM Local Development Corporation, a \$630 million project aimed to create a new neighborhood of theaters, museums, libraries, dance studios, art galleries, and housing, all designed by some of the greatest architects in the world, led by Lichtenstein and his chief assistant, Jeanne Lutfy.<sup>30</sup> In trying to distinguish itself from Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music repeated Lincoln Center's "urban renewal." During the beginning of the Local Development Corporation, local residents of Fort Greene were concerned that this

<sup>28</sup> "Program for Musical Concert with Mixed Bill - Brooklyn Academy of Music - Google Arts & Culture." Google. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/program-for-musical-concert-with-mixed-bill-brooklyn-academy-of-music/LQFMUc7S2-HiQ>.

<sup>29</sup> "BAM through the Years." BAM.org. <https://www.bam.org/about/history/bam-hamm-archives/bam-through-the-years>.

<sup>30</sup> Traub, James. "The (Not Easy) Building of (Not Exactly) Lincoln Center for (Not) Manhattan." The New York Times, April 25, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/25/magazine/the-not-easy-building-of-not-exactly-lincoln-center-for-not-manhattan.html>.

initiative was going to fasten Fort Greene's gentrification, which some may argue it did.<sup>31</sup>

Brooklyn Academy of Music is now within what is now considered the Brooklyn Cultural District. Grateful for his leadership, the Harvey Theater was named after Harvey Lichtenstein. The other theaters, Howard Gilman Opera and Fisher Theater, were named after donors Howard Gilman and Richard B. Fisher. Fisher was also a prominent donor of Habitus College (an institution we will discuss in the following chapter)

### *The Listeners of Solange as Curator and Composer; BAM to Lincoln Center*

Solange Knowles sat on the balcony within the Howard Gilman Opera Theater in the Brooklyn Academy of Music not as a performer or composer but as a curator. Solange Knowles curated the Eldorado Ballroom series for Saint Heron. Saint Heron is a multidisciplinary creative group that expands cultural conversations and communities. In Brooklyn, flowers were blossoming, and the chatter on the street got louder by the second. Everyone traded their heavier coats for their light, compact jackets. People arrived at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to attend the Spring 2023 music series, *Eldorado Ballroom*; the music series was named after the third ward cornerstone in Houston, Texas, Eldorado Ballroom, from the 1930s to the 1970s. It was the nightlife venue for Black folks in the third ward to experience live music showcases. The music series in the Brooklyn Academy of Music began the same day as the reopening of Eldorado Ballroom in Houston to celebrate this historical moment. On Saturday, April 8, many folks ranging from young millennials in their 20s to folk in their 60s walked into the Brooklyn Academy of Music in their long mesh dresses, collared shirts and slacks, and huge colorful church hats. Similar to the demographic and attire worn at the Eldorado Ballroom in Houston. This night's event was named *The Cry of My People*, featuring the poet Claudia Rankine, singer

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<sup>31</sup> Hoffman, Claire. "Bam Meets Its Critics." The Brooklyn Rail, October 19, 2007. <https://brooklynrail.org/2002/10/local/bam-meets-its-critics>.

Linda Sharrock, who hadn't performed in New York since the 1970s, and saxophonist Archie Shepp. Each performer had up to an hour to share their art, followed by an intermission. As the lights dimmed within the Howard Gilman Opera Theater, Archie introduced himself to the audience as a jazz saxophonist. Then, he revealed aspects of his background, hometown, and where he traveled to. He then led his band into the first song while the audience moved their heads along to the rhythm. Audience members were seated throughout his performance, listening to the sounds of jazz fill up the theater. While each band member was provided an allotted time for a solo, audience members continued to move their heads to the newfound rhythm provided by each instrumentalist, especially the rhythm of Shepp's tenor saxophone.

Archie transitioned to another song by providing the background of the song, including where it had been performed before. As he continued to recount his past experience, he was interrupted by an audience member, a Black woman dressed in slacks and a button-down blouse. Getting up from her seat and taking slow steps closer to the stage where Shepp sat, she pointed at Archie with a huge smile on her face, saying something along the lines of her and Archie sharing a distant relative. Archie, slightly taken aback at first, laughed along with her and nodded his head as she traced their shared lineage. He admitted he wasn't too sure how familiar he was with the relative she mentioned but thanked her for taking the time to reach out; he planned to take steps to look into it. The rest of the audience seated at the Orchestra level began clapping and cheering along with the woman's interruption and Archie's response.

This differed from my experience in the David H. Koch Theater at the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, another space showcasing Solange Knowles's cultural production, her New York City Ballet composition. It shall be noted that the space was not only showcasing cultural production from a Black artist but from a diverse group of artists such as musical producer James



Blake, costume designer Alejandro Gómez Palomo, choreographer Gianna Reisen, and much more. Spring of 2023 included the New York City Ballet, which included a composition from Solange Knowles. She became the second Black woman to compose for the New York City Ballet. People refer to the show as “Solange's Ballet,” centering her art over the multitude of artists that developed the New York City Ballet’s programming.<sup>32</sup> Many people were excited to witness Solange’s art, and the gravity of her commission, a Black woman composing for the New York City Ballet, encouraged many to refer to the event as her own. This is not the first fine arts institution at which Solange has displayed her art. Her art has been included in institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum and Sydney Opera House.<sup>33</sup>

Lincoln Center was built from the 1950s-1960s through the Lincoln Center Development Plan, which included the destruction of San Juan Hill, a predominantly working-class Black and Latino neighborhood, and the displacement of the families living in San Juan Hill. More than 7000 families and 800 businesses were displaced, so Fordham University, Lincoln Towers, and the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts could be built. Many of those displaced families headed to Uptown to find homes in Harlem. The construction of the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts attempted to destroy the nondominant cultural capital shared within San Juan Hill by destroying the place itself. San Juan Hill was rich in culture and performing arts; it was not the right cultural capital. Instead, Lincoln Center’s creation was to serve as a site to exchange dominant cultural capital<sup>34</sup>.

Everyone shuffled into the theater; chatter and quiet laughter were shared amongst audience members. People spent time adoring the architecture and intricate lighting of the

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<sup>32</sup> Howard, Nandi. “Solange Knowles Left the Audience in Awe at Her NYC Ballet Debut,” *Essence*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.essence.com/celebrity/solange-knowles-nyc-ballet-debut/>.

<sup>33</sup> Kim, Michelle H. “Review: Solange’s Collaboration with the New York City Ballet Is a Treat for the Eyes and Ears,” *Pitchfork*, September 30, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/review-the-solange-scored-work-for-the-new-york-city-ballet-is-a-treat-for-the-eyes-and-ears/>.

<sup>34</sup> Hostos, Aurora F. “New York’s Dance of Displacement.” *Lincoln Center*. Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://www.lincolncenter.org/feature/legacies-of-san-juan-hill/new-yorks-dance-of-displacement>.

theater, but their attention was quickly diverted as a tall young black man entered the theater with whom we all assumed was his partner, a Latina woman wearing an off-the-shoulder red long dress. But it was not the length of the dress nor the boldness of its color, but what her partner was wearing, a cream blazer with sequins meticulously threaded along every inch of it. As he walked down the theater to the second row, the chandelier lights bounced off his blazer sequins, blinding his spectators if they stared for too long. He matched this with cream slacks that only reached above his ankle to show off his loafers. In an effort to balance the effect of staring too long, spectators also squinted their eyes towards the accessory he adorned, a prominent Christian Dior colorful and embroidered tote. Everyone's eyes within the theater followed his every move up until he sat down in his assigned seat, the second row of the orchestra level. As he sat there waiting for the performance to start, His suit shone under the light compared to the older white men who surrounded him in black suits. The performance was created a few minutes after the presence of a Black audience member adorning a colorful and textured outfit interrupted the attention of audience members. Lights dimmed down, signaling the attention of the audience, and *Partita* was performed. The first intermission welcomed new audience members who were preparing to enjoy *Play Time*, which was composed by Solange, including a group of Black women wearing their afros and different braided styles in various long, colorful chiffon dresses.

As they were being escorted to their seats at the back of the orchestra directly below the upper balcony, a couple seated in the middle section of the orchestra engaged in a conversation garnering a bit more attention from other audience members. A Black man with locs tied back to a ponytail, wearing a white loose linen button down in the row in front of me, excitedly exclaimed to his partner, "Do you remember that song by Keisha?!" His partner, a Latina woman dressed in a long floral dress, pats his chest with one hand and puts her finger to her lips with the

other. “Shushhhh, Deandre!” She looks around to see who saw her and her partner’s disruption of the unspoken etiquette employed during intermission. She was met with stares from three white women sitting in my same row.

I begin with these two vignettes to illustrate the multitude of performances embodied by audience members that disrupt or interrupt the cultural spaces that center Black cultural production, which facilitates cultural capital exchange. Lincoln Center and Brooklyn Academy of Music included Black cultural production through Solange’s composition and curation. The playbill distributed upon arrival at Lincoln Center included names of donors and philanthropists and advertisements from corporations such as Hermes, Rolex, Prudential, and Tiffany & Co. The literature at the Brooklyn Academy of Music didn’t include names of supporting donors, philanthropists, or corporations. Van Cleef and Arpels’s website still mentions their support for Eldorado Ballroom, although the event happened months ago. Corporations, donors, and philanthropists are recognized for their support of Black cultural production. The recognition serves to present these corporations, donors, and philanthropists as being committed to diversity. This is how cultural institutions commodify the exchange or interruption of the exchange of cultural capital. Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music are both sites where cultural capital can be exchanged, mainly because of their inclusion of Black cultural production. The ways in which audience members interact with the cultural institution and cultural production facilitate the exchange or *interruption* of the exchange of cultural capital. I observed Black audience members, with extra money and extra time to spend time within cultural institutions that have historically displaced marginalized communities, interrupt the cultural capital exchange traditionally facilitated there. The Black women who disrupted Archie Shepp’s performance to discuss their supposed familial lineage disregarded any spatial regulations that

were monitored within the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a historically white cultural institution. Although I cannot speak to her intentions, the boldness of her act invalidated any chance of acquiring dominant cultural capital, meaning she also doubly disrupted the traditional cultural capital exchange. An exchange of her nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital. The dominant capital would then be used as an advantage for socioeconomic mobility or middle-class status. Those observed within my investigation were instead interrupting the traditional cultural capital exchange explained above and maintaining their nondominant cultural capital. It also served to carve a place for others to sustain their nondominant cultural capital: collective identity. Even if the collective identity was built with the audience and performer. Through bodily and audio interruption, audience members also become performers, carving a space just as the traditionally paid performer does.

The movement across the aisles, which divide the rows of seats from the stage closer to the commissioned performer, Archie Shepp, showed the disregard for spatial arrangements between performer and audience. Additionally, her communication with Shepp in the middle of his performance blurs the divide between performer and audience. By attempting to communicate her own Black geography that accounted for the ruptured roots she traced, which Shepp was unaware of, her interruption became her performance. Her disruptive performance during Archie Shepp's performance establishes her as belonging alongside the paid performer. As she tried to recount the shared relative between Shepp and herself, a potential familial lineage, she established Shepp as part of her community, closer than others in the audience. That communal tie between Shepp and herself (because of their supposed shared relative) allows her to carry out her disruptive performance. The woman's exchange of nondominant cultural capital between Shepp acquired her communal ties with other audience members who appreciated her

disruption; those seated at the orchestra level, which consisted of a majority Black audience, laughed and clapped along to the interaction. By doing so, by enacting a performance geography, she gives the Howard Gilman Opera Theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music a new identity, one forever impacted by her performance or what we would consider her interruption. BAM then becomes a cultural space that welcomes performance geographies, even if it disrupts the dynamic between performers and audience members, rather than policing it, which impacts those who will later occupy BAM. The audience members are given space to perform as well.

On the other hand, the Black man dressed in the embellished suit in the David H. Koch Theater was not cheered or admired like the Black woman's disruption in the Howard Gilman Opera Theater. His disruption was silent as compared to the Black woman's, but it still stole the eyes of the majority white orchestra level. His fellow audience members said nothing to the man but stared in silence, disrupting their own private conversations to create a spectacle of the Black man who did not wear the white and Black suit's unspoken dress code. Their stares turned spectacle made it clear that the majority white audience who were able to afford these \$100-\$150 tickets did not approve of his choice in disruption. The stares and spectacularization of the man's outfit took on a quiet form of policing and disciplining those who do not align with dominant cultural capital.

The Black woman enjoying the *Cry of My People*, curated by Solange Knowles, had a different space to perform while attending a cultural event that centered on Black cultural production than the Latina woman who silenced her Black partner who was enjoying a cultural product including the composition by Solange Knowles. The Latina woman attending the New York City Ballet, including *Partitia*, composed by Solange Knowles, was attempting to gain a dominant cultural capital granted by participating in the spatial regulations of the Lincoln Center

Theater of Performing Arts, such as maintaining hushed voices during intermission and especially performances. Her partner's interruption of the spatial rules, as well as the silent interruption of the Black man dressed in a sequined blazer and the black women interrupting Archie Shepp, did not and would not gain dominant cultural capital within these spaces because they were not following the strict rules and regulations necessary including a policing of audience voice/tone levels, audience performance, and audience dress code to attain dominant capital. Instead, the Black folks enjoying these cultural events earned nondominant cultural capital, a capital acquired within marginalized groups, groups whose cultures aren't viewed as the standard, high-brow whiteness.

*Alvin Ailey Dancers Are Not The Only Performers Here: Sonical Interruption*

Two months after my initial visit, I was back at the Brooklyn Academy of Music but now welcomed by the early summer breeze. Before the opera house was named after a prominent donor of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Alvin Ailey made his debut as a dancer on the opera house stage on April 21, 1956. Two years later, he formed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.<sup>35</sup> The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was formed and led by a group of African-American modern dancers who believed in giving “back” dance. The dance company became known as the American cultural ambassador, sharing the uniqueness of the Black experience in America. After performing in the White House, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater earned a residency at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Years later, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returned to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the summer of 2023.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> <https://levyarchive.bam.org/Detail/entities/2007>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bam.org/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater>

*Cry*, the second performance within the program, was one dedicated to Black women and performed by a Black woman. As she danced, the theater at total capacity stayed silent, encapsulated by her movement or uncomfortable with the message her movement evoked. It was different from a few minutes ago when the audience couldn't stop clapping and laughing alongside the previous performers. As the music faded away, the performer began sitting on the stage with her back towards the audience, then swaying her back from one side to the other slowly until her back reached the floor of the stage. The music stopped, signaling the end of her first dance, but the audience was utterly silent. That was until a Black woman sitting in the orchestra's last row yelled, "GO AHEAD," and the audience immediately began clapping. The performer stood still in her position, ready for the next track to begin. During this dance, the performer lip-synced along to the music, which included the yells of a woman. The curtains started to lower, but that didn't stop the performer, who continued to dance behind the curtain. Immediately after, a black woman sitting in the orchestra level's second-to-last row yelled, "I KNOW THAT'S RIGHT." The clapping began from the audience once again.

In two separate instances of Jacqueline Harris's dance, a dance dedicated to Black women, performed by a Black woman, Black women within the audience led the response and ultimately supported Jacqueline Harris's performance. The exclamation of "I KNOW THAT'S RIGHT," a common phrase used within the Black community, indicates that her reaction was addressed *to* her community because of her use of language: Black vernacular. Again, she acquired nondominant cultural capital through her disruption of the spatial regulations audience members are expected to follow. She, along with the other Black woman who previously disrupted the audience's silence, acquires cultural status amongst those who attend these events with the intention of attaining collective communal connection through nondominant cultural

capital. Their performance and the disruption of audience spatial regulations marked these two as invalid candidates for dominant cultural capital and instead candidates as leaders of collective communal connection. They are both performing alongside the performer, marking their support and communal connection with the performer while also marking their support and communal connection with other audience members by leading the community's reaction and support.

The Howard Gilman Opera stage, occupied by different Black performers at other times, permitted audience members to exhibit and trace performance geographies. The two separate Black women guided their community into building a space that celebrated the performer. By guiding the rest of the audience, they were able to reclaim their position as the primary producers of performance geographies within the space. In her mapping of performances, Niaah states, "In instances in which performers have had to create space to meet their need to celebrate in the face of oppression and repression, the adoption of the philosophy of limitless space and boundarylessness allows for the reclamation, multiplication, and transcendence of space."<sup>37</sup> The first Black woman who yelled out "Go Ahead" disrupted the boundary of "appropriate" audience reaction; by doing so, she reclaimed and transcended the space to celebrate the Black performer whose dance was dedicated to Black women but didn't initially receive audience support. The sounds: auditory interruption was a performance; one enacted to take up space for the collective even if it was just her, the performer, and the other Black women interrupting, performing through sound.

The Black woman's reclamation of space through her appreciation of the performance transcends the spatial implications of a theater which another Black woman then enacted; multiplied. Because of this multiplication of performance geography, the Black woman acquired cultural status, leading her community within cultural spaces. The Black women yelling out "I

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<sup>37</sup> Niaah, Sonjah S. (2008). "Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto".



KNOW THAT'S RIGHT” followed the steps of the women who yelled out minutes prior and also became leaders within the cultural space. A theater that a few months earlier (as mentioned above) during a completely different medium of black cultural production (jazz musical performance) was marked by a Black women’s performance geography (interruption of Shepp’s introduction to his performance), which transcended the space she was allowed to take up as an audience member. Black women’s reclamation of the space allows it to continue to multiply, encouraging other Black women to reclaim spaces as theirs even if their reclamation is one that hosts a boundaryless space between the audience and the performer.

Katherine McKittrick explains that “Dominant geographic patterns can often undermine complex interhuman geographies by normalizing spatial hierarchies and enacting strict rules and regulations.<sup>38</sup> The strict spatial rules and regulations, when followed, can assist one in attaining dominant cultural capital. This explains why the Latina woman at the David Koch theater felt the need to police her Black partner’s tone. The active silencing was supposed to *correct* her partner’s interruption of cultural capital exchange. To remind those around her that even if her partner interrupted their cultural capital exchange, she knows better and will actively correct and police their exchange. Despite his interruption, they shouldn’t be read as outsiders; her active silencing showed they still fit in. Those who attain dominant cultural capital within cultural institutions can then be considered participants or contributors to establishing the significance of the cultural institution in dominant geographic patterns. Performance geography was then theorized to account for how those who do not intend to acquire dominant cultural capital, instead those who intend to gain nondominant cultural capital.

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<sup>38</sup> Hunter Marcus Anthony and Zandria F Robinson. 2018. *Chocolate Cities : The Black Map of American Life*, 176. Oakland California: University of California Press.

By identifying the performance geographies within Black spaces, we are able to trace how the exchange of nondominant and dominant cultural capital is facilitated or interrupted within cultural spaces that have been commodified through diversity capital. In the example of the Howard Gilman Opera Theater in the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a space where within my study, Black women, through their performance geographies, were able to attain nondominant cultural capital, the programs given out within the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater include the names of sponsors such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, Jerome L. Greene Foundation, The SHS Foundation, and Harkness Foundation of Dance. Even after the conclusion of the Eldorado Ballroom, VanCleef and Arpels still expressed on their website the support they provided to Saint Heron's Eldorado Ballroom performances within the Brooklyn Academy of Music. These cultural events listed were all created to celebrate and center Black cultural production but could not be realized without the ethnic community support of corporations. Banks explain that the corporations are the primary beneficiaries because they are able to acquire diversity capital; in exchange for financial support from corporations, these institutions receiving support are expected to recognize these corporations within their spaces to ensure Black attendees can associate these corporations with diversity and therefore guarantee Black support for corporations. Diversity capital guarantees increased socioeconomic mobility for corporations. My findings show that although these cultural institutions aim to acquire diversity capital for corporations to guarantee further financial support, Black women were still able to carve out spaces through their own performance geography not to acquire a dominant cultural capital which also centers socioeconomic mobility but instead nondominant cultural capital which centers communal building and identity.

*Performance as a Collective: Audience and Dancers as Performers*

The last dance shared by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was one of their most known dances, *Revelations*. One of the songs danced to within this was *Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham*. The music begins, and the female dancers start fanning themselves with their fans, then the men kneeling beside them raise their arms upwards to the sky. The audience begins clapping along to the beat of the song. At the same time, the performers continue their performance, which includes the men slowly getting up from their kneeling position and lending their arms for the women to get up with them as they all take steps to the side together. The audience claps in unison, and to maintain this, an older black woman dressed in a satin button-down shirt and jeans grabs her daughter's hands, who was matching with her mother in a satin button-down shirt, to clap together with her. Throughout the whole performance, the claps of the audience do not falter; instead, they grow stronger as more people decide to join. Not all people wanted to disrupt the conventions of performance and audience response, such as the three white women next to me whose hands were all clasped together on their laps, which remained that way throughout the whole performance. As the performers concluded their dancing, they stood together hand in hand and took their bows. The audience interrupted their own rhythmic clapping to applaud the performers. Still, it was quickly led back to their rhythmic clapping to the beat of "Rocka My Soul In the Bosom of Abraham" by the performers themselves, who were clapping along to the beat. Audience members stood up, and the Black folks around the theater clapped to the beat and moved to the beat. The three women next to me remained frozen in their seats. A Black woman who rocked a buzzcut covered by gray hair and wearing a floral short-sleeve button down and black slacks standing in front of me turned around to address the other black women next to her and myself to exclaim, "I've been to Alvin Ailey

shows before but nothing has topped this performance today” and all of us while still clapping and moving to the beat agreed with her.

The clapping within the audience was not a cacophony of applause but instead a rhythmically timed clapping, similar to what is shared in the Black church. A clapping that a Black woman felt the need to entice her (what I assume is her) daughter to join the collective clapping. The Black woman felt the need to communicate with other Black women audience members around her about how special the clapping was. Within *Revelations*, Alvin Ailey dancers usually guide the rhythmic clapping during the performance. However, this particular time, the audience decided to begin clapping on their own without the guidance of the performers and guided each other. The clapping and movement created a collective spiritual energy similar to that of a church service. Cheers, smiles, and collective joy were shared as audience members collectively clapped and moved side to side together. Jacqui Alexander reminds us how Spiritual practitioners of traditional African religions utilize performance geographies, specifically dance, to connect with spiritual energy within rituals.<sup>39</sup> What took place at Alvin Ailey was not a ritual but a space-centering Black cultural production that encouraged audience performance geographies. More significantly, it was led by audience performances utilizing traditional spiritual practices to engage with their community of audience members. The spiritual connection made with the use of collective audience clapping and movement carved a space for the community to be built. The audience’s collective clapping and movement should also be viewed as performance geography that gained audience members who joined the collective spiritual connection nondominant cultural capital, which quickly became dominant in the majority Black space of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The dominant spread of nondominant

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander M. Jacqui. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing : Meditations on Feminism Sexual Politics Memory and the Sacred*. Durham N.C: Duke University Press.

cultural capital increased as all audience members were encouraged to perform alongside the performers, creating a collective spiritual connection fostered within the theater. The communal performance within the theater, although begun by audience members, was initially planned by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Nondominant cultural capital is able to foster a collective identity through experience, which occurred within the Howard Gilman Opera Theater as it became dominant. There was a collective experience and connection between all audience members who became performers and the traditional performers. The premiere Black dance company choreographed their infamous dance *Revelations* so that audience members could interact with the space, their neighbors (within the theater), and the dancers. Alvin Ailey's most remembered quote, "Dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people " explains why he believed it was important for that communal performance to be planned within their dances.<sup>40</sup> The shared spiritual reaction of Black cultural production becomes a form of community-building and place-making. Many audience members came in groups at the show's beginning, and their conversations were limited to the people they arrived with. After audience members initiated the communal performance alongside the performers of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, conversations erupted everywhere. They expanded beyond the groups they initially walked in with, including me. A Black woman turned towards me and the other Black women who surrounded her to exclaim how she had been to Alvin Ailey's shows, but nothing topped the performance we witnessed that day. Engaging in a collective performance such as the one orchestrated by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater created the space for people to connect and build community.

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<sup>40</sup> Fineberg, Gail. "Delivering Dance to the People Library Revels in Alvin Ailey Dance Acquisition." *Delivering Dance to the People* (April 2006) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin. Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0604/ailey.html#:~:text=Library%20Revels%20in%20Alvin%20Ailey%20Dance%20Acquisition&text=Alvin%20Ailey%2C%20a%20visionary%20creator,delivered%20back%20to%20the%20people.%22>.

### *From the Boogie Down Bronx to the Capital*

A few months later, celebrating the 50th year of hip hop, I headed to my neighborhood park, Crotona Park, to attend the Birth of A Culture, a commemorative event that features DJs such as Grandmaster Flash, Pete Rock, Tony Touch, and much more. The event was meaningful to the Bronx community because it was the awaited return of Grandmaster Flash, who started his DJ career at Crotona Park. SummerStage, a Capital One organization, organized the event that plans free and benefit concerts around New York City. All performers were to be on the Summerstage, which was surrounded by banners including Capital One's logo on top and on the left and right banners as well as Bloomberg Philanthropies, Subaru, and National Grid. The crowd was increasing by the minute, and DJs took their time performing for the crowd. During a transition into the next song, people collectively moved to the beat, including a Black woman in her 50s dressed in a sleeveless striped top and white skinny jeans with red and black braids. She danced in the middle of the crowd while also maintaining a conversation with her friend, who sat on the grass. She twisted her hips slowly to the beat until she reached the level of her friend, who was also a Black woman in her 50s, and she slowly rose up again, still following the beat. She kept this pattern up the whole song until the next transition, where she jumped up from hitting the ground level, interrupting her conversation with her friend to yell out the lyrics of the next song. She continued to jump up and down to the rhythm until she looked back and grabbed her friend's hand, guiding her to the rhythm as well. Her dancing inspired me to get up from my seat and dance to the DJ's performance. After dancing, I moved to another side of the stage for a better view. On this side of the park, I noticed a group of older Black women in their 50s-60s dancing together and continuing conversation with each other. Within that group, one woman in red braids and dressed in a white shirt and white skinny jeans stood on the outskirts of her group,

smiling at the people outside her group. Her smile was enough to get people to step closer to her. She took the opportunity to grab their hand, pulling them closer to her group. The group of Black women dancing was getting bigger by the minute as she recruited more folks to dance with her. The different Black women across the park were able to utilize their performance geography to participate in a collective performance unique to their group of dancers.

The Black women's performance geography is a custom within Black spiritual and cultural spaces: the movement of bodies. Black women in the hip hop celebration used their performance geographies to build community around them, inviting folks into their ritual and leading to a collective effervescence. The collective effervescence was the basis of their community building as they found a community within a community. Tricia Rose argues how Black women have long contributed to the development and maintenance of the hip-hop community.<sup>41</sup> The Black women in Crotona Park who danced with their friends in unison were acquiring nondominant cultural capital, which is not commonly granted to women within the hip-hop community. Their movements and voices took up space within the park and led the space. Their movements were multiplied and infectious around the park which they led. Leading those within the space through their bodily movements and performance created a community with those who joined in taking up space. Because of their performance geography, they gave the space Crotona Park meaning/identity through their embodied movements and voices.<sup>42</sup> By collectively dancing and therefore embodying performance geography that created Black places, they are also gaining a nondominant cultural capital that earns them cultural status within the community of audience members. Their performances show they recognize and celebrate the Black cultural products shared within the space, which makes them leaders in further building

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<sup>41</sup> Rose Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover NH: University Press of New England.

<sup>42</sup> Niaah, Sonjah S. "Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto".

community. Their actions are multiplied as other Black women bring on other Black women to dance to mark the space with their performance. They were all partaking in the furtherance of building community within the hip-hop community and a community of Black women who enjoy hip-hop. The cultural capital exchange they sought was not the traditional one; exchanging their nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital and, ultimately, skills and advantages toward socioeconomic mobility. They did not seek out capital that was individually-serving but instead communally serving. The nondominant cultural capital earned and spread aimed to create a community that took up space. Black women were able to create a much smaller carved space within this cultural space to ensure inclusion and opportunity to build community within the hip-hop community where Black women aren't often granted nondominant cultural capital to acquire cultural status and opportunity in leading hip-hop places. Although the space funded by corporations was supported in order to increase the number of Black consumers and diversity capital, the space became a place for Black women to lead a communal performance, acquiring them nondominant cultural capital and an opportunity to lead the place.

### *Can You Kick It? Yes, You Can: Performers in Museum*

Performance geographies were not just shared within traditional performance spaces; they were also utilized in museums and other cultural institutions. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, located in Washington D.C., a space that required interaction with the Black cultural product and interaction with fellow museumgoers, had performers taking up space through movement in every exhibit. The museum is the only national museum dedicated to documenting and preserving African-American history and culture. It was opened to the public in 2016 and continues to introduce innovative exhibitions.



While on the museum's top floor, visiting the Musical Crossroads exhibition, I noticed a Black family headed toward the hip-hop genre. *Can I Kick It* by a Tribe Called Quest was playing from a music video montage. The Black women walked a bit faster to the source of the sound and began dancing. Her partner and son immediately averted their eyes and headed to the other section of the museum close by that replicated a record store. She was left alone dancing, but not for long. She yelled out, looking around her, "They don't make music like this no more!". This was when another Black woman joined her in dancing to the song even while the montage transitioned. They danced together and laughed with each other up until the Black woman's family finished their time in the record store to collect her. She gave the woman who joined her a hug, and they both continued on with their experience. The joining of another Black woman's dancing was an enactment of performance geography, one which the two had experienced intimately together. Their effervescence may not have been acquired by the collective of museumgoers, but it was a collective, even if small.

Performing in a museum as a museumgoer is not initially welcomed with unspoken museum etiquette, yet Black women were able to find space to perform within a museum. This performance geography is one that is unique to the National Museum of African American History and Culture because of how interactive the space is designed. It is also because Black folks, before the women I described, were marking *their* performance geography, paving the path for other Black folks to interact similarly. "Movement of bodies, music, and performers within these multiple, informal, organic spaces (juke joints, streets, cities) was an imperative produced by the condition of oppression. Even as the spaces were policed, performers defied the legal restrictions and continually produced new ways of maintaining black cultural identity.<sup>43</sup> The movement of bodies within these spaces is important because it points to the effort to maintain

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<sup>43</sup> McKittrick, Katherine., and Clyde Adrian Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, 201.

Black cultural identity and community and spaces. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is an institution that welcomes the use of nondominant cultural capital, cultural knowledge, or, as I argue, performance used to garner community, which the Black girls and Black women utilized within the museum. The museum is completely free to the public, and many of its exhibitions are interactive, such as the “Explore More!” exhibition, which includes an instructional stepping (traditional African American dance) video. The “Musical Crossroads” exhibition includes cultural artifacts such as costumes, music videos from all genres of Black artists, and the Oral History initiatives, which archive stories and experiences of Black elders. These community spaces may no longer be considered informal and, as Banks argues, are also used for corporations to gain diversity capital, placing Black folks as the secondary beneficiaries of Black institutionalized place-making. Performance geographies within the space give the institution an identity as the performances of Black museumgoers mark it. While these performances can ultimately benefit the corporations who financially support these institutions, it does not mean that the performance geographies can no longer be traced or that the community is no longer built. Black folks create community everywhere, and my research shows Black women often lead this within cultural spaces.

## **CHAPTER 5: To Pimp a Capital /Home**

### *Charlas in a Historically White Educational Institution*

My study did not solely focus on cultural institutions; it also highlighted educational institutions that garner diversity capital. My engagement of student experience at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, which I will refer to as Habitus College, differs from ethnography because ethnography focuses on institutions that solely center on cultural production. Similar to how Lincoln Center and Brooklyn Academy of Music abruptly/gradually displaced Black and brown communities, Habitus contributed to the forced removal of the Stockbridge Munsee community, an indigenous community displaced to Northeast Wisconsin. Habitus, primarily an educational institution, does still see itself as a cultural institution. There is a conservatory, a museum within the main college campus, and a performing arts center, all of which students have access to. Over the summer, the college hosts an annual summer arts festival where students are given the opportunity to work while visitors to the campus can enjoy the performances. The campus becomes a hotspot of cultural production for the Hudson Valley during summer intersession. There are only a few occasions when students can perform on the grand stage of the performing arts center, and students are not allowed to host their own exhibitions within its museum. For the purpose of this study, we will highlight the educational aspect of Habitus College.

The diversity capital garnered by Habitus College is slightly different from that of the cultural institutions discussed in the previous chapter. Higher educational institutions seek to earn diversity capital by presenting themselves as prestigious institutions that best prepare the next generation of students, encouraging donors to continue supporting the educational institution. The American Council on Education's letter on diversity reads, "This collective

diversity among institutions is one of the great strengths of America's higher education system and has helped make it the best in the world. Preserving that diversity is essential if we hope to serve the needs of our democratic society and the increasingly global scope of the economy."<sup>44</sup> Diversity, in the words of the American Council on Education, has a direct impact on the economy. The Council goes on to further explain that higher education aims to prepare students for the work environment where the skills of diverse bodies will be extracted for the profit and benefit of the nation. The American Council on Education recognizes an epistemic advantage: skills garnered based on the experiences (or nondominant cultural capital) of diverse bodies.<sup>45</sup> The epistemic advantage then becomes commodified when it is not only the diverse bodies that benefit from these skills but also the global economy. The commodification is then diversity capital, and the American Council on Education recognizes the way in which the inclusion of students of color can ultimately be commodified.

This letter was written in 2012, eight years after the Black Lives Matter Movement exposed how many institutions had not really made any substantial or sustainable efforts towards diversity. "Time series enrollment data show a continuing increase in the representation of Black students at elite universities following Black Lives Matter protests. Medical school enrollment saw a similar trend of increased representation of Black students."<sup>46</sup> Increased enrollment of Black students was not the only diversity-based change implemented within universities. After the Black Lives Matter movement, multiple educational institutions agreed to include "antiracism training for administrators and senior leaders, including boards of trustees; creation of offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and review of recruitment processes for faculty,

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<sup>44</sup> "On the Importance of Diversity in Higher Education." American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/BoardDiversityStatement-June2012.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Nash, Jennifer C. "re-Thinking Intersectionality." *Feminist Review*, no. 89 (2008): 1–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663957>.

<sup>46</sup> Ebbinghaus, M., & Huang, S. (2023). Institutional Consequences of the Black Lives Matter Movement: Towards Diversity in Elite Education. *Political Studies Review*, 21(4), 847-856. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299221132428>

staff, and students. Other institutions directed financial resources directly related to the murder of George Floyd, including sponsoring scholarships in his name.”<sup>47</sup> There was a shift between those eight years; 2012 to 2020. Higher educational institutions went from having to explain *why* they are even considering diverse admissions to diversity being the expected “solution” to institutions' role in systemic racism. Diversity capital within higher educational institutions is then not only about the economic gain, as explained by the American Council on Education, but also about the social prestige the institution receives for choosing the “right” answer during political turmoil. By choosing the “right” answer, higher educational institutions presented themselves to be most equipped to form the next generation of diverse students; hence increasing their enrollment of Black students after Black Lives Matter. After the sociopolitical movement, diversity efforts accelerated, and the value of diversity capital increased.

During the Black Lives Matter movement, the messages sent across the Habitus campus aligned with many messages sent around historically white institutions during that time: a commitment to diversity through more diversity training, staff specialized in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and much more promises.<sup>48</sup> Habitus had already made efforts to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture around their name. The institution has multiple campuses nationally and internationally, a prison education and adult education program to enable people to finish their degrees, and many more programs. Updates on these initiatives and projects are shared with donors. Still, there isn't much work done to ensure that the students of color within all these initiatives created by Habitus College felt included within the campus community. The

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<sup>47</sup>Belay, (2020). *What has higher education promised on anti-racism in 2020 and is it enough?* Education Advisory Board. <https://eab.com/research/expert-insight/strategy/higher-education-promise-anti-racism>

<sup>48</sup>Chamberlain, Alexa W, Jill Dunlap, and Paulette G Russell. “Moving from Words to Action: The Influence of Racial Justice Statements on Campus Equity Efforts.” Home. Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://www.naspa.org/report/moving-from-words-to-action-the-influence-of-racial-justice-statements-on-campus-equity-efforts>.

admission of students of color to the institution is enough for Habitus College and its donors to be satisfied with their work in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Focusing on students' engagement with Black cultural production in an institution that does not center on Black cultural production or a Black equitable experience shows how institutions, whether educational or cultural, can still aim to limit resources to those who reject or interrupt the exchange of nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital.

Sadia Grundy's study on Morehouse, a historically Black College serving only men, also speaks to the tension existing between cultural capitals. She explains how students who attended Morehouse were trained to accept dominant cultural capital, conducting a small talk about classical composers such as Bach and knowing which utensils to use for the corresponding dish. All those skills are proving not to have much use as higher education institutions lean towards prioritizing diversity capital, a shallow and commodified presentation of students' nondominant cultural capital. Alumni within the study expressed wanting to listen to artists who weren't included in the canon of dominant cultural capital but instead nondominant cultural capital, such as Herbie Hancock or Stevie Wonder.<sup>49</sup> While Black students were being taught to prioritize dominant cultural capital for survival within a capitalistic society, whiteness got to control and manipulate the value of the exchange rate between capitals. Whiteness's control of the exchange rate of cultural capital motivated the curation of the cultural products consumed within charlas which was advertised as a potential space to build community with other students of color based on Black cultural production.

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<sup>49</sup> Grundy Saida. 2022. *Respectable : Politics and Paradox in Making the Morehouse Man*. Oakland California: University of California Press.

*No Space For Me Here: Students at Habitus College*

Within the first, Charla students watched *When I Get Home*, a short film by Solange Knowles, and “Alright” music video by Kendrick Lamar. When asked about their initial thoughts after consuming the videos, Marcus shared:

The video, for both Solange and Kendrick, I also found interesting. There was this use of cars, circles, and the city. I really connected to the idea of using the city to be your space of affinity, you know, like finding as much universes you can, even though you're very confined. I was gonna say even like Solange, you could see with the choreography, it's focused on being expressive, but in a space, a very confined space sometimes. I think there was a scene with the saddle and she's on the saddle, doing choreography. I like how she utilizes such minimal space, but she expresses herself in it.

Marcus found a connection to both videos through Knowles’s and Lamar’s use of circular imagery and urban landscapes. They then describe these urban landscapes as confining but yet the same space they’ve found affinity within a community. Marcus then expands upon this to highlight Solange’s performance within the confined space of a saddle. Within that confined space, she has still found space to perform, to create a place in the “minimal space” through her performance, where she “expresses herself.”

Marcus’s consumption of both Knowles’s and Lamar’s videos points to an understanding of performance geography. Their artistic analysis of both videos revealed a shared theme of urban landscapes positioned as circular; Marcus indicates the circular enclosure of the city to be limiting, but still, a potential space for the community to be built. They also highlight how, even within a confined space, Solange Knowles, a Black woman, has been able to perform and express herself, enacting a performance geography. The connections Marcus made through the videos speak to how when performance geography enacted by Black folks is consumed by students of color even within a historically white educational institution, Black cultural products

communicate a resistance or, as JT Roane describes, a Black spatial insurgency against confined spaces allotted to Black folks.<sup>50</sup>

Marcus pointing out the confined spaces and symbolism within the music videos pushed other participants to discuss their own experiences within confined spaces, more specifically, their experiences within the historically white educational institution, Habitus College. Leila, for instance, shared her experience of feeling like an outsider upon her arrival at Habitus College a few years ago.

I immediately hated it. And I don't know if it's just because the cultural difference. I went to school in Spanish, Harlem all my schools had black and Hispanic people. Like, I never sat in the same class and a white person next to me, maybe a teacher. So like that cultural shift to being the only black woman in the class, it's like, whoa. Like, like what is this? I was struggling my first two years here, especially my sophomore year. That was the most terrible down bad year ever. Cause I'm just like, I don't like these spaces that I'm, that I'm constantly seeing. I just feel like —I feel like an outsider in college. I don't need to feel like that. So my plan was if I was to return back here to create my own kind of community, which I think Solange and Kendrick was creating in their videos.

Leila attributes her experience of feeling like an outsider to the cultural shift from a school in Spanish Harlem to Annandale-on-Hudson, a shift significant enough to make her feel that she does not belong within the institution she was accepted to. Carter explains this cultural shift to be from nondominant cultural capital to dominant cultural capital, a shift the educational institution orchestrates in order to grant a representation of success to students of color who accept dominant cultural capital.<sup>51</sup> Leila rejects the need to garner dominant cultural capital; she instead aims to create a community similar to what Knowles's and Lamar's videos communicate, one that may center on performance geography. Leila acknowledges that the college positions

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<sup>50</sup> Roane, J.T.. *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place*.

<sup>51</sup> Carter, Prudence L. 2005. *Keepin' It Real : School Success Beyond Black and White*.



her in a confined space separate from the dominant space and resources granted to those who garner dominant cultural capital. To facilitate a space for a nondominant cultural capital, Leila acknowledges that it may require Black spatial insurgency.

If I'm in class and I want to say something and I, and I feel like it's gonna be a direct response to a white person, I'm gonna say it. If I'm in the CC (Campus Center) and I feel like someone's being disrespectful to me, I'm gonna say that. And I don't care if it's like, if I'm seen as a stereotype or trope that they wanna force onto me.

Leila argues that it does not matter the space, whether in the classroom or the campus center; if an interruption is necessary, she will facilitate one, even if that puts her at risk of not being able to garner dominant cultural capital by being associated with a stereotype or trope that demonizes Black spatial insurgency, such as being loud or angry. Interruption then becomes a method of engaging with nondominant cultural capital. Leila's refusal to garner dominant cultural capital is an interruption of assimilation, an acceptance of the exchange of cultural capital. She interrupts the exchange of cultural capital by refusing to give in her nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital. Similar to the interruption of exchange I witnessed over at the Lincoln Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and Crotona Park. Leila refused to adhere to the dominant cultural expectations by disregarding spatial regulations such as avoiding quarrels, especially when the provocateur is white. Her refusal and interruption are different from those within cultural institutions but similar in the fact that within both sites, there is a refusal to exchange nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital and instead an embrace of the interruption. The vocal interruption of Black women within BAM and the bodily interruption of the Black women who danced next to the cultural products displayed in the museum all interrupted the spatial regulations of cultural capital exchange within the institution, similar to

how Leila interrupted the spatial rules of cultural capital exchange by embracing the potential of a quarrel.

Olivia communicated a similar ordeal of being positioned in a confined space within the educational institution but different in that her experience was intentionally socially covert. She shared with the group her experience of being on financial hold, which, based on the sounds made of agreement, seemed like a common experience for those within the Charlas, including myself. Being on financial hold on campus means not having access to meal swipes, your dorm room, your own transcripts, the printer on campus, and the gym.

And it's just like they aren't beating me, you know, I'm not getting whipped, but like, they'll cut off my access to things, you know, like, oh, you can't eat, you can't go to your bed no more. You can't access your property. You can't print, you can't be a student. You are dead to the institution. You know? And like, we are the N word again. And I think it's important to always remember what we are to these people and to this place. No matter how many offices with OEI, HPI, whichever, it'll always be this way. I feel socially dead here. You know, like that we can never be a part of the society. And I have no interest in being part of the society. I plan to never donate. They won't see me again.

Olivia and Leila explain that they are constantly reminded that they are positioned as outsiders and allotted confined spaces. Instead of both trying to be included, they express having no interest in the total inclusion of the institution. Olivia's covert exclusion was not immediately based on cultural capital but instead on lack of financial capital. Yet, Olivia aims to respond back to the institution's exclusion through her own financial gain [donation] and through social and cultural capital ["won't see me again"]. She recognizes that her presence is, in fact, needed by the institution because of her Blackness. The institution benefits and garners more donations, as Banks explains, as long as they appear diverse.<sup>52</sup> Through the inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and bodies of color on campus, the historically white educational institution garners diversity

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<sup>52</sup> Banks, Patricia A. 2022. *Black Culture Inc. : How Ethnic Community Support Pays for Corporate America.*

capital. When Olivia claims, “always remember what we are” she is prompting her peers to remind themselves of their presence solely as diversity capital to the institution.

Students' critical perspective on the institution's need for diversity and their presence is important to consider because it humanizes the experiences students of color have beyond the photos taken of them for the school's website and brochures. Their perspectives are also adamant about exposing and pushing back on the covert racism within the institutions. Towards the beginning of the discussion, Courtney speaks to how spaces and events hosted by affinity clubs such as the Black Student Organization and Caribbean Student Association facilitate creative and fun spaces for students to express themselves. She describes these spaces as a retreat for students who struggle to deal with the cultural shifts that Habitus necessitates.

But I feel like it creates a more creative and fun space to be in when you have a large group of black people in a setting like BSO [Black Student Organization] and CSA [Caribbean Student Organization], like all those like majorly African American or like just black and people of color, gatherings and makes it your experience in this space very different. Especially with a bunch of like black people in this space it is definitely helpful as a place to retreat.

Marcus complicates Courtney's discussion of affinity spaces by framing these spaces to be a result of diversity capital ultimately:

I agree. Because even this idea of, like you said, that this campus needs black people. You look at the student activities office, black people are the ones carrying the school. Yeah. And then it will be white people who invade space. And that can be BSO, CSA, and LASO [Latin American Student Organization]. But again, like this is where even LASO comes at a fault where LASO looks a certain way. You know? The idea of diversity and scholarships. If you came here under scholarship, then white people look at your presence as, oh, well, affirmative action. But then the idea again, this campus needs black people, it needs Latino people, it needs indigenous people, it needs queer people, queer people color, especially you know what I mean?

Marcus's communication of the college's “need” for Black, Indigenous, and students of color speaks to the capital the college gains as more students of color are admitted to the college.

These same students who often feel excluded and like outsiders are the ones who become leaders to create spaces for their peers to enjoy based on shared experience and sometimes shared knowledge of nondominant cultural capital. “Antar A. Tichavakunda, an assistant professor of race and education at the University of California at Santa Barbara, says the pressures on students will only intensify if lawmakers succeed in restricting the work of DEI offices. “Students are going to create these spaces for themselves,” he says. “They’ll stay up late to put on a good event for the community.” Sometimes, he says, they end up as “basically unpaid diversity workers.”<sup>53</sup> Tichavakunda also speaks to how Black and students of color who become leaders exist on different temporalities compared to their white peers. Because of students having to stay up late planning events, students actively needing to ensure their events are safe for their community (Marcus’s comment on how white students often invade these spaces), and dealing with racist encounters on campus usually leaves students of color feeling as if their time is compressed and beginning from a delayed starting points as compares to their white counterparts.<sup>54</sup>

### ***POLICED OR SUPPORTED SPACES***

Although students of color recognize that the educational institution often places them as outsiders *if* they decide not to exchange their nondominant cultural capital for the dominant cultural capital gate kept by the institution, students often become leaders or, as Tichavakunda argues, “unpaid diversity workers.” The institution then exploits students of color through their unpaid labor and uneven distribution of time to create diverse cultural events that the institution needs in order to appear diverse. As students of color have to be the ones to “fix” the

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<sup>53</sup> Mangan , Katherine. “Segregation or Student Support? - The Chronicle of Higher Education.” The Chronicle of Higher Education . Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/segregation-or-student-support>.

<sup>54</sup> Mahadeo Rahsaan. 2019. “Why Is the Time Always Right for White and Wrong for Us? How Racialized Youth Make Sense of Whiteness and Temporal Inequality.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 186–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218770469>.

exclusionary culture on campus, their time is spent on coping with discrimination, as well as finding community, and coming up with solutions that will ultimately benefit the students as well as the institution. Students come up with solutions, and then the institution becomes recognized as diverse and accepting, which gains them more students of color/unpaid diversity workers and ultimately more donations; this is how Habitus College earns diversity capital. Habitus has many programs that support its efforts to gain diversity capital, and these students admitted to the school in the name of diversity will ultimately become unpaid or underpaid diversity workers. The marginalized students of color aim to build community in response to the marginalization they face on campus, and their efforts are ultimately commodified by the institution that advertises their positive efforts but not their struggles and marginalization.

Often, the events that students of color organize center performances or the consumption of Black cultural production. The affinity groups and leaders often have to interact with many different offices and an extensive process to ensure the formal events are executed. On campus, as long as these formal events are registered under the student's activities office, they are often not policed by security officers. However, if students of color decide to organize informal gatherings on campus not registered under the student's activities office, they are often heavily policed by their peers and security officers. For example, Leila shared an experience with Charla about how, when having a small gathering within her dorm room, including her other friends of color, security arrived to disband the gathering. She was suspicious that her white dorm mates next door were the ones to make the call to security. Security claimed their gathering needed to stop because it included more than four people in a dorm room, a "rule" that Marcus argued only applied to certain people. Marcus, expanding upon Leila, discusses how they have been to loud informal gatherings with a majority of white folks that included way more than four people in a

dorm room, and when security arrived, because of the volume levels, they never mentioned that gathering maximum occupation “rule.”

Within Habitus College, a historically white educational institution, there exists a tension between formal events planned by students of color, which often have cameras everywhere to capture the performance geography of these students and the informal events planned by students of color that also include performance geographies but are heavily policed by security and white peers. The presence of cameras within the formal gatherings ensures that these photos, including diverse bodies, can later be used within the college’s website, social media, and brochures, prompting incoming students of color to believe this is a diverse campus or at least a campus that celebrates diversity. But as we deeply listen to the discussion held amongst students of color at Habitus, it reveals that the “celebration” of diversity is solely surface-level because it is not the institution that plans these events but the students of color who are unpaid diversity workers. The campus’s celebration is also solely surface-level because the informal gatherings planned by students of color are policed and demonized by security officers and white peers. The security officers and white peers then become the informal actors who remind these students of color that they do not belong within the institution and that in order not to be policed, one needs to align oneself with dominant cultural capital. The informal gatherings attended by students of color on campus are then perceived as disruptive to the dominant culture on campus. Within educational institutions, it requires much more effort for Black performance geography not to be seen as an interruption or disruption; the events need to be formalized through the unpaid labor of students of color/diversity workers.

### *INTERRUPTION OF SPACE AND CAPITAL EXCHANGE*

Similar to the Black attendees of the cultural institutions within the ethnography, students of color within a historically white educational institution communicated a connection with their community through art. Both the Black attendees within cultural institutions and students of color within the historically white educational institution were seeking space to consume Black cultural products as a collective. The spaces they were seeking were specifically centered on Black cultural products. Black attendees paid for or took the trip out to enjoy these cultural events even if the spaces were ones that historically had not welcomed their money. Students of color agreed to attend the historically white institution even if the space did not historically welcome them. Their enacted agency upon which spaces they attend also extends to their choice of cultural capital to exchange, if exchanged at all. The spaces where cultural capital exchange takes place are just as crucial to the discussion. Within the Charlas, students grappled with the tension of Black cultural production losing its meaning as other communities besides the intended audience consume the cultural product within the historically white institution.

Olivia discussed how she enjoyed that Knowles's short film solely included Black people.

I like that Solange put just black people in it. Let's talk about black people specifically. Because it's a very specific experience. I mean, I'm not even from here, I'm from Africa. I really appreciated that she did that because it could have become like a, I don't know, this unit, this like a diversity unity moment. And I'm like, no. Yeah. Can this just be about black people? And that's okay.

Leila expands upon Olivia's discussion point by following up:

"She didn't cater. She didn't cater. She made it specifically black art and, I noticed that with these two songs, a lot of it's played on TikTok and it is done through. And you could kind of see the audience. Like there's white people using the sound that have no or any idea what these, the music and the, the visuals and art represents. It's just a song to them, you know? But it's much more than that."

Olivia and Leila express frustration with those who do not critically consume these cultural products with the intention it was created with. There seems to be an understanding that Black folks are able to understand these cultural products because they were made for Black folks. Both highlight Solange's art, who claims that the intended audience for the album *When I Get Home* were Black girls. There is knowledge produced by these forms of Black cultural production that both Olivia and Leila claim is understood explicitly by Black folks.

Olivia and Leila speak as authentic members of the Black collective identity, actively tracing out boundaries of what constitutes authenticity within their peer groups. They were able to develop and communicate this to each other through Solange's cultural product. Both are able to recognize each other's access to the Black collective identity through the shared cultural product.

Their argument is supported by Toni Morrison's explanation of African American art as restorative balms to rashes of racism; she argues that the art usually includes race-inflected language as a tool to make race-specific culture.<sup>55</sup> Olivia and Leila's argument about race-specific culture stands because they highlight that white folks who are not recipients of the "rashes of racism" are not going to immediately understand the art as a restorative balm to respond to the rashes of racism. There is an expression of frustration for the ways in which nondominant cultural capital could potentially be commodified by their white peers, who do not understand the intention nor the language used to communicate to Black audiences. Leila emphasizes this by describing an experience she had when walking back from class.

I was coming from class and, um, with another black woman, we were walking to our dorms and these two white guys started throwing up gang signs at us in their car. And I just felt like, same with the audience towards Kendrick Lamar's audience. It's just like, like I feel like being in a PWI I as a black woman, like these white people, they're

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<sup>55</sup> Morrison Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press



watching and then they're, they're purposely doing stuff to antagonize you. God forbid I was to throw up a gang sign like that, it wouldn't, I wouldn't have done the same reaction. They were blasting like rap music, like Chief Keith and like King Von and all this stuff. And it's just like, it's like they're putting up this persona and they walk into an establishment and walk into this classroom.

Leila claims that her white peers who attempted to antagonize her were commodifying nondominant cultural capital. The white peers' access to dominant cultural capital is not revoked even if they decide to participate in attaining nondominant cultural capital. Leila describes this as a persona because, as she emphasized before, "it's just a song to them." She highlights a tension between nondominant cultural capital and dominant cultural capital, as well as who is allowed to attain such capital. Leila claims that if she were to be the one throwing up gang signs and listening out loud to rap music, there wouldn't be the same response. When her peers dabbled into attaining some sense of nondominant cultural capital through a performance, there were no repercussions; in fact, she describes that these peers were allowed to walk into the classroom without any judgment or policing. This is different from Leila's experience of enacting a performance geography with her friends, where security officers and her white peers later policed her. Her analysis points to how tension exists between who is allowed to acquire which cultural capital.

I then asked the group of participants, if these Black cultural products are just a song to their white peers, what do these cultural products mean to them, students of color attending a historically white educational institution? Courtney responded to my question by saying:

The African American experience is presented in the song. I feel like when I hear a song and I hear stuff that I can relate to, like, that's *my* song. It is, it's about me. Like, this is my groove. Somebody is understanding me, but as a white person listening in, this is just, it has a catchy beat.

Courtney, expanding upon what was said earlier by her peers within the Charla, explains that there is an experience expressed within these cultural products, an experience that she feels

represented by. She emphasizes once again that to her white peers, it is “just a song.” Leila adds to this by explaining that these cultural products are a reflection of the “souls of Black Americans”. She gets to this conclusion by discussing how music can often be an escape for her, an escape where she can still grapple with the experiences both she and the artist relate to. There is an expression that the nondominant cultural capital, when appropriated by their white peers, is an attempt to gain a commodified proximity to Blackness. For their white peers, it is not about the expression or experiences to which they cannot relate but instead, a symbol that white peers *can* recognize Black culture. The participants expressed that this recognition is not out of respect but an attempt to antagonize their Black peers. White peers recognize that they will not be policed for their participation within nondominant cultural capital within the historically white educational institution, but their Black peers will and have been. For the students of color, Black cultural production holds much significance, enough that they feel the need to defend and protect its consumption. As Courtney stated earlier, the Black and students of color gatherings are essential considering the space they are in, a historically and predominantly white space. The space in which they occupy policies their consumption of these cultural products. They then work to create a place within the hostile white environment where it is safe to consume the cultural product that brings them joy. The place-making enacted by these students is often one that includes interruption, a performance geographically. Their efforts are then commodified by the institution and used as diversity capital, where the institution then becomes a primary beneficiary of students of color’s place-making/diversity labor. This places students in a paradoxical position, where their efforts to address their exclusion are ultimately commodified and utilized by the institution, which does nothing to support these students.

Marcus, a latine student, complicates this argument by discussing how Latinos can also consciously participate within nondominant cultural capital. First, they establish a critical perspective that locationality (which neighborhoods you live in) grants one proximity to Blackness. Instead, Marcus argues that one must respect the sacredness of Black art if one wants to participate in a performance geography.

Bard doesn't respect sacredness. Like I think you can be an active listener who's Latino. Like you can listen to hip hop and rap and black music, but there's a difference between like respecting and again, like people don't look for the intention behind it. Or I was gonna say even like Solange, we didn't hear talking, but like this idea of like silence, like silence holds so much power, but like also how do we reverse silence? Because even this book right here, like is crazy [points to Keywords and Sound ]. Um, I just read a chapter called like Silence and it just talks about how silence was used in like colonial projects and slavery, um, um, genocide of indigenous people. Like white people know how to use silence to their best ability to prohibit us, to make us feel like we're less human because white people have, they can like, they have the voice, but we have the silence, so we need to be silent. So how do we flip silence and then like, make noise or, you know, whatever, or we use silence to our benefit.

Marcus's analysis of who is allowed to participate within nondominant cultural capital is critical to understanding how students of color interpret and navigate Black cultural production. These students are not seeking "ownership" of music but instead asking those who aim to attain nondominant cultural capital to respect the sacredness of Black art. To appreciate the intention behind the development and production of Black art. Marcus also brings in an exciting tension between silence and colonialism. They claim silence to be a tool of white colonialism; this emphasizes the importance of performance geography for Black communities, for Black communities to be able to express themselves in response to the cultural products they consume. When the Howard Gilman Opera Theater was silent after the Black woman's performance, the Black women within the audience felt a need to lead their community away from silence, a colonial tool, and towards performance geography, a tool used for Black place-making.

The survival strategies of Black place-making are commodified by institutions such as Habitus College, who refuse to respect the sacredness of Black places surrounding Black cultural production and instead view it as an opportunity to garner more donations. The efforts of these students are recognized by the institution's social media and website. Their social media and website are where diversity and representation genuinely matter, as they never fail to post the annual cultural performance show thrown by students of color or highlight the students of color who are able to address the disparities ignored by the institution. These students are often offered no support directly from the institution. Instead, they are faced with bureaucratic barriers facilitated by the institution. Yet, the institution is the first to recognize students' achievements as a testament to how well it prepares students of color for success. Many of these students are awarded scholarships during the college's annual scholarship reception. They are only recognized during their junior/ senior fall semester when the financial aid packages have already been decided. The students awarded at the scholarship reception are not offered additional financial support. Instead, they are told part of their financial aid was made possible by the donor for whom their scholarship is named. During the annual scholarship reception, the students are highly encouraged to write letters of gratitude to these donors, including personal details and their activities on campus. The donors who receive these letters are made to feel appreciated and encouraged to continue to donate to Habitus College.

I now redirect you to the title of this chapter, *To Pimp A Capital or Home: Charlas in a Historically White Educational Institution*. The title takes inspiration from the albums the students listened to within the Charlas: Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp A Butterfly" and Solange's "When I Get Home." The metaphor nods to the literal pimping of something as beautiful and

free as a butterfly.<sup>56</sup> Solange acknowledges that her intention for creating the album was to sonically and visually create a universe, a home for Black girls. The *chapter* title nods to the literal pimping of students who are beautiful and free and their search for a home on campus. The way the institution pimps out the students' of color interruption of cultural capital exchange and their search for a home away from their home. But students are not complacent with the institution's pimping; there is much agency enacted, which this paper explored.

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<sup>56</sup> Chinapen, Mark. "To Pimp a Butterfly by Kendrick Lamar: A Retrospective Look (Originally Published in 2018)." Medium, May 30, 2021. <https://medium.com/modern-music-analysis/to-pimp-a-butterfly-by-kendrick-lamar-a-retrospective-look-originally-published-in-2018-297793c31ebc>.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusion**

Habitus College, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Lincoln Center all share something in common: the displacement of Black, brown, and indigenous communities to ultimately create institutions that historically offered the option of cultural capital exchange to whites only. As these institutions entered into modernity, it was then they realized it would be shameful not to include diverse bodies. It was not enough to just include diverse bodies who had the potential to disrupt or interrupt their traditional cultural capital exchange; these institutions also needed to profit directly from a diverse, “equitable,” and inclusive shift in case there was an interruption. These institutions often profit and benefit from the interruption facilitated by Black social actors who may be seeking a place for collective identity and experience. Whether cultural or educational, institutions can maintain their prestige while welcoming and seeking particular interruptions by including Black cultural production. Prestige within diversity is vital to these institutions, which historically excluded the very same people they sought to take up space. The students in the study were aware of the ways the educational institution profits off of them, but creating a place within a space that can be hostile to them is vital to them. They, along with those who attend events within cultural institutions, are forced to navigate the commodification of their interruptive cultural capital exchange while intending to seek community in a space where they are the minority.

The response within this study has always been to continue to seek and create community, to continue the refusal of the exchange of their nondominant cultural capital for dominant cultural capital, and instead transform their capital to skill and method to create community. I found it interesting that the students within my study pointed toward “sacred space.” The term came up in conversation with Solange’s cultural production. Her cultural

production continues to be shared within higher cultural institutions that commodify the consumption and interaction of the cultural products she produces. Nevertheless, there is still a search for sacred spaces. These students were not referring to how her products were shared within institutionalized spaces but instead how they were shared within their space between 3-4 other students with no presence of whiteness. These students are able to imagine a sacred space, inspired by Solange's created universe for Black girls, within a space that commodifies their presence and place-making.

Within the cultural institutions and spaces, Black folks were able to reject the dominant cultural capital and create a space through their interruptive movement and performances, which speaks to again an imagined sacred space where their movements are not profited off but instead solely a way to create and carve a sacred place, where capital does not need to be exchanged and expression is supported.

In my last few years within a historically white educational institution, I was in search of a sacred space. A space where I was not pimped out but instead supported and celebrated. Support and celebration don't come by quickly as a queer Black femme in a historically white educational institution. I created a Black cultural consumption club where we center literature named after womanist thinker Alice Walker's work "In Search of Our Mother's Garden." I was dedicated to ensuring that my club could truly be a safe space for students of color to intentionally explore Black culture. My curation of the novels we read started with Toni Morrison and ended with Octavia E. Butler. "Tar Baby" by Toni Morrison was a novel introduced in a literature seminar I participated in; I thoroughly enjoyed the novel but despised the space. Although Toni Morrison states explicitly she does not write for the white gaze, I, one of two Black girls within the class, was consistently explaining my interpretation of the white

gaze.<sup>57</sup> I felt the pressure to exchange or translate my nonndominant cultural capital to dominant cultural capital for my white peers and Black professor. We ended with Octavia E. Butler because a semester later, I had the fantastic opportunity to participate in a class that was curated by a Black student and professor for Black students centering Black cultural production. We read “Dawn” by Octavia E. Butler, and I thoroughly enjoyed the literature as well as the place my class carved out. I was then on a mission to share this experience with my peers, but I was not prepared for the affective labor it required.

Nonetheless, it was essential that we interrupt a space to carve out a place to discuss Black cultural production with intention as we did within my class. I was nervous about throwing events for this club, knowing I wanted to create a safe space for students of color but knowing I had no power or legitimacy (within the institution’s policy) to redirect a white student who infiltrated the space. I was frustrated when I sought funds from the institution, but the institutional support was lacking. I was discouraged when it was just my partner and mentor who showed up to my first meeting. I was angered when an office on campus posted our event on their social media and recreated a lackluster version of our event. It then became my responsibility to convert those feelings into productivity and entitlement. I needed to demand financial support from these offices to alleviate the stress and labor it takes to execute these events they are so quick to repost. I wanted my club members to continue to disrupt the institutional spaces as the Black women had done within the Brooklyn Academy of Music but without the commodification of their interruption. Demanding support from the institution then became a way I could level out the playing field of my labor being pimped out.

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<sup>57</sup> *Toni Morrison On Writing for Black Readers Under the White Gaze. YouTube.* YouTube, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP\\_-m7V58\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP_-m7V58_I).



My experience is not an isolated one as students of color organize events that center performances, or as students of color are captured on Habitus's website, social media, or brochures, Habitus earns diversity capital. An image that they are diverse, equitable, and inclusive, but as we heard from the experiences of students of color, that is not always the case. Students feel like outsiders or even as far as socially dead here on campus. What can we do then, you may ask? Well, first, Africana Studies is not a department recognized or supported by the college. A requirement to moderate into the concentration of Africana studies is Africana Studies 101, but that is a class I have not seen taught here throughout my Habitus career. We need to shift gears that the educational institution can enact as a cultural gatekeeper through the social actors of white peers and white faculty members. Instead, there needs to be a shift where students of color can communicate what they would like to be taught within the Africana studies department when it becomes a program here at this college. Which I believe will ask for the inclusion of Black cultural production within their curriculum

The institution needs to be more than willing to listen and execute the demands of students of color if affective labor is expected of them. The labor needs to be legitimized and compensated monetarily as many of these students are also members of scholarship programs provided by Habitus College, providing additional labor for the campus. The institution cannot solely benefit from the donations it receives from diversity capital; it needs to support the students of color institutionally they bring on campus. We need to make sacred (free of commodification) Black places where students can continue to build community and not solely be the "diversity workers" who are unpaid.

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