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Turner, David Charles

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# Mobilizing Blackness: Analyzing 21st-Century Black Student Collective Agency in the University

David C. Turner III<sup>1</sup>  
University of California, Berkeley

## Abstract

*Black student activism in the 21st century has gained international notoriety with popular movements such as #StudentBlackOut, #FeesMustFall, and #ConcernedStudent1950 (Alfonzo & Foust, 2019; Turner, 2016). Between 2014 and 2017, Black students manipulated the momentum of a larger social movement—the Movement for Black Lives—in order to secure organizing victories for racial justice, both on and off their college campuses (Ransby, 2018; Williams, 2016). In this article, I explore the meaning-making processes of Black student activists who participated in on-campus or off-campus activism between 2014 and 2017. Themes from the interviews demonstrated that Black student activists were both politicized and entered movement organizing because of catalytic events, and that they saw themselves as resource brokers who funnel university resources, labor, and energy into dispossessed communities. In addition to arguing that participants used their racialized subjectivities to leverage resources and make changes for racial justice, I also assert that Black students were highly aware of their positionality; they raised critiques of their class-fluid positions as college students and the protections that their student identity provided them.*

**Keywords:** Black Lives Matter, Black students, higher education, social movements, agency

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David C. Turner III, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, 2121 Berkeley Way, Fourth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94720. Email: [dturner23@berkeley.edu](mailto:dturner23@berkeley.edu)

In the United States, colleges and universities often find themselves and their students deeply entrenched in the political arena of the times. Whether the social issue of the day is free speech, sexual violence, or racial justice, college students are central to American politics (Cohen & Snyder, 2013; Joseph, 2003; Turner, 2013). For student activists, especially Black and Brown student activists, this has historical precedence (Biondi, 2012; Pulido, 2008; Rogers, 2012). For example, the fight for Black studies happened during a time in Black communities that was marked by ideas about Black self-determination and Black power, which deeply informed the epistemological foundations of Black studies and, subsequently, Black politics (Biondi, 2012; Claybrook, 2016). The political environment of a time—or the political field (Paschel, 2016)—plays a direct role in the development of political subjectivity, meaning that students are deeply moved by their environments to make social change happen, especially in racialized ways. In the second decade of the 21st century, the mass mobilization of Black students at over 86 colleges and universities represents the Movement for Black Lives impacting higher education (Black Liberation Collective, 2020). The current political climate in higher education also presents a unique political moment for student organizing. As universities experience increased privatization, market-based values work to govern university politics through understandings of race and diversity, hiring practices, and engagement with the larger marketplace that turns the student-institution relationship into a customer one (Grant, 2016; Khoury, 2015; Simon et al., 2011). As a recent visible rendition of Black student social movement activism, the organizing of Black students in response to police violence presents a unique laboratory for scholars across disciplines to investigate.

In this study, I investigate the meaning-making processes of 18 Black student organizers who participated in both on- and off-campus organizing and campaigns over a three-year period (2014–2017) using semi-structured interviews. Grounded in racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2014), I investigate how Black students produced meaning of social movement organizing while attending the neoliberal university. I argue that students used their racialized subjectivities in the neoliberal university space—which I define as a political project to have the university bend to the rules of market-based values (Giroux, 2002)—to leverage resources. I seek to examine whether students who use their Black student identities to leverage resources and exploit neoliberal frames of diversity and civic engagement create material change in their schooling context. Student activists in this study also critiqued their own temporal social location as college students—meaning that students were aware of both the protections that being university students granted them and some of the limitations that college student organizing could present in changing material conditions in Black communities. This research contributes to the social movement and higher education scholarly literature by showing how Black youth use their collective identities and political environments to achieve

racialized demands and outcomes. In addition, this study works to bridge the gap in critical higher education studies and social movement studies by connecting themes across student identity, Black racial identity, and agency.

### **Review of Literature**

Black student organizing, as a category with its own historical trajectory and significance, is deeply connected to the transformation of higher education (Rogers, 2012). More specifically, Black student organizing has pushed universities to collectively reimagine what is considered education and knowledge (Rojas, 2006), who is worthy of education (Glasker, 2002), and how universities exist in community spaces (Bradley, 2009). However, as universities continue to adopt a market-based logic in addressing social problems and engaging student populations (Giroux, 2002)—and as they continue to build their “civically engaged” missions—more scholarship is needed to understand how Black student organizing has shifted to manipulate the neoliberal university to enact racial justice on campus. In what follows, I provide an overview of the various types of Black student organizing and what they have meant for Black students, both in more contemporary movements and movements of the mid-20th century. I then address higher education and neoliberalism more broadly as they relate to race. Finally, I highlight literature on social movements and collective identity.

### **Black Student Organizing and Educational Justice**

Understanding student-based organizing is critical to any analysis of Black student organizing, especially among college students. In on-campus organizing, students work to transform their institution of education (Rojas, 2006), and extra-campus organizing is typically done with the educational institutions in mind but is beyond the scope of one educational site. Extra-campus organizing often comes in the form of coalitions, with students and youth who are either loosely or formally connected through some sort of organization (see Davis, 2015; Franklin, 2014; Scorza, 2013). Finally, off-campus organizing is done with student and youth coalitions, organizations, or individuals who address some sort of identity-related issue that has a material impact on students’ lives but is indirectly related to their education (see Cohen, 2010; Ginwright, 2010; Kwon, 2006). These categories are not rigid; in fact, they are quite fluid, and they have areas of overlap. In some cases, as Bradley (2009) demonstrated, Black students engage their campus directly to challenge how their campus interacts with the local community; this example connects on- and off-campus organizing. In this case and others (see Davis, 2015; Stokes & Miller, 2019), Black students directly engaged in both on- and off-campus organizing. However, it is necessary to understand each one of these types of organizing before unpacking the literature on Black student and youth activism.

### **Black Student Organizing and Social Movements: A Historical Perspective**

Off-campus and extra-campus organizing were the two most prominent types of social movement organizing pre-1966 for Black students in the United States (Rogers, 2012). With national attention paid to the Greensboro Four, who used sit-ins as a non-violent tactic to desegregate lunch counters in 1960, Black student activists primarily concentrated their energies toward off-campus efforts (Hale, 2008). One of the most significant of these demonstrations happened in Nashville, Tennessee, where Turner (2013) highlighted the role of multiracial student networks and organizing in the movement for racial justice. Focusing on the coalitions developed by students from the area's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and historically white institutions, Turner highlighted how students used nonviolent demonstrations to racially desegregate their city. Although this can be seen as both extra- and off-campus organizing, the role of the Nashville sit-in movement had an enormous impact on the political climate of the city and its respective universities.

In the realm of higher education, two highly contested grounds for educational organizing and relevance were the fight for Black studies as an extension of the meaning of Black education and Black control over what education looks like for Black people. Documenting institutional transformation across different contexts, Biondi (2012) and Rogers (2012) highlighted critical shifts in the Black student movements in higher education. In her study on the institutionalization of Black studies and the agency of Black students, Biondi argued that even though Black students did not accomplish a complete overhaul of American education, Black students transformed intellectual thought in the humanities and social sciences and worked to democratize higher education through demands of shared governance, greater access, and investment in democratic principles (though the activists themselves may not have called it that). Rogers took a more comprehensive approach to the Black campus movement by unsettling the intellectual fixation on elite historically white colleges and universities. Rogers conducted a national investigation and suggested that some of the most radical campus movements happened at HBCUs and institutions in the rural plains and in the deep south. Both Biondi and Rogers highlighted the necessities of Black-controlled and relevant education. Black students saw education for cultural relevance and political contestation as necessary for survival at HBCUs and historically white institutions. Rogers, who focused on understudied HBCUs in the Black campus movement, suggested that attempts to transform what he called the Negro University to a Black University were rooted in a fundamental critique of education as a domestication strategy. Even though education may have been offered to Black students, a depoliticized education was not enough to transform relationships of power, which sat at the nexus of Black educational organizing in the 1960s.

On-campus organizing radically transformed over time. With the rise of Black nationalism and Black Power, students took the tools and the imagery that they witnessed off campus to on-campus organizing. In the development of the first Black studies program in the country, students at San Francisco State University (then San Francisco State College) demanded the creation of the first Black studies department in a coalition with other students in 1966 (Biondi, 2012; Rogers, 2009; Rooks, 2006). With a shrinking percentage of Black students and the rise of the Black Panther Party in their own area, students used the framing of Black power and a larger movement outside of the campus to develop the first Black studies department and the country's only College of Ethnic Studies. San Francisco State University was not alone as students from hundreds of colleges and universities across the country concurrently made similar demands (Rogers, 2011, 2012; Rojas, 2006; Williamson-Lott, 2018). This connection between off-campus political events and on-campus activism continued with the divestment from South Africa movement, in which students pushed their universities to pull financial resources and capital out of South Africa (Noguera et al., 2013); the multicultural student center movement in which students pushed universities to intentionally embrace racial identity (Rhoads, 1998); and now the larger Movement for Black Lives, in which students have been activated by public displays of anti-Black racism to transform their colleges and communities (Davis, 2015; Turner, 2016).

### **Contemporary Perspectives on Black Student Organizing**

Throughout the country, Black students are engaged in social movement organizing on campus, off campus, and through extra-campus efforts, and their political engagement with each site of political contestation has implications for how students collectively make meaning of their social movement work. Students from St. Louis University marched a community of protestors from a protest about the killing of Michael Brown Jr. to the campus, and then staged a campus occupation to address a racially hostile campus climate (Taylor, 2016). Students at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), took over the university's admitted-students day in pursuit of 10 demands cultivated from frustrations with the campus climate and in connection to a larger Movement for Black Lives outside campus (Ross, 2015). In addition to off-campus organizing happening in response to state-sanctioned violence against Black communities, Black students have been deeply engaged in both the movements off campus and on campus.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Black youth political engagement—through civic engagement and campus-based activism—began to shift with a significant increase in political activity. What makes contemporary Black student and youth organizing so fundamentally different than that of the Civil Rights Movement is that narratives about a post-racial society, rooted in American individualism and neoliberal ideologies, have taken over popular understandings of

race. As Franklin (2014) noted, Black youth remain central to American racial political discourse in spite of often being scapegoated in neoliberal arguments about the moral failings of Black youth and communities (Cohen, 2010; Dumas, 2016; Spence, 2015). As a counter to the constant demonization of Black youth, young people continue to be politically active. Documenting some of these political strategies, Cohen (2010) highlighted political shifts in the ways that young Black people organize and participate in the broader public sphere. With an increased focus on the market, Cohen suggested that “buycotting” (p. 176), or financially supporting social causes, is one particular way that young Black people have been politically engaged. Cohen also pointed out that there were low levels of traditional political involvement in 2005 (e.g., contacting government agencies, attending community meetings and protests, etc.), yet these conditions have since changed with the prevalence of social media and the election of former President Barack Obama, whose campaign mobilized a younger, more progressive Black voter base in 2008 (Cohen, 2010; Harris, 2012).

As the 2010s started, the rise of digital social movements began to play a role in student organizing, specifically for young people of color and Black students in particular (Davis, 2015; Jenkins, 2016). Davis (2015) focused on the role of the Dream Defenders—a network of Black, Latinx, and Arab students and young people—in social movement organizing for college students in Florida. Examining social movement repertoires, or the ways that social movement actors politically engaged and recruited members into movement organizations, Davis found that the pedagogical and political significance of social media influenced the degree and extent of one’s participation in social movement work. For other Black youth, their connection to social movement work and organizing was rooted in emotional growth and healing. Returning to a more localized version of activism and social change, Ginwright (2010) highlighted the role of activism as healing for young Black people. Coining a term called *radical healing*, Ginwright argued that students who recognize their oppressive context and actively fight against it actually heal from racialized trauma in the process, which should incentivize adult allies to allow youth to fight for change. For the students in Ginwright’s study, organizing—primarily an off-campus mode of engagement—worked to change material conditions that impacted their own educational outcomes, which they deemed as important in creating change in educational spaces (Scorza, 2013).

### **Social Movements and Collective Identity**

Social movement organizing is often determined by the *we* that claimants (i.e., organizers, activists, movement workers, etc.) define in order to develop what scholars call a *collective identity* (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In her study of Latinx youth organizers engaging in civic engagement work to stop Prop 187 from passing in California, Garcia Bedolla (2005) defined identity as “an individual’s self-

conceptualization that places the individual either within or in opposition to a social grouping” (p. 4). Identity is essential to social movement organizing because individuals align themselves based on how they define themselves. Melucci (1995) defined collective identity as “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place” (p. 44). Given the idea of shared definition, collective identity helps organizers and other collective actors come to terms with who they are and why they make various claims. Corrigan-Brown (2012)—focusing on a Catholic women’s organization and the United Farm Workers—highlighted the ways that collective identity was defined through social movement organization participation. Corrigan-Brown discussed the ways that activist activities (e.g., petitioning, protesting, letter writing, etc.) did not result in sustained social movement participation, but rather that the organizers working together to cultivate identity did. Corrigan-Brown asserted that social movement participants, such as the members of the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MeChA), who developed deep identities that connected to their cause, were much more likely to continue with social movement activism. MeChA members who organized in college and went on to organize for the United Farm Workers when they graduated demonstrated the connection between identity development and long-term social movement participation.

With race as a central organizing category, it has been clear that identity plays a large role in young people’s reasons for joining social movements and their sustained engagement in social movements. Most social movement scholars in some sense agree with the significance of collective identity to social movements. However, they differ regarding the ways that collective identity plays a role in deciding outcomes for social movements and long-term participation. Although some scholars argue that emotions and personal ties lead to collective identity (Hunt & Benford, 2004), others argue that the meaning-making processes between social movement actors are critical in the development of collective identity (Holland et al., 2008). Collective identity is complex, and, as Fominaya (2010) pointed out, debates about collective identity often do not examine the role of multiple collective identities. Black student activists have to navigate their permanent racialized identities, their new identities as social movement actors, and their temporal identities as college students with varying levels of engagement (Claybrook, 2016). College student identity, especially for off-campus activities, is often characterized as civic engagement and, although civic engagement is important, it does not necessarily touch on Black students’ motivations for activism or social change work.

### **Student and Civic Community Engagement**



### ***Civic Mission and the Opportunity for Civic Engagement***

For many students in higher education, civic engagement is a critical component of the development of the *whole student* in higher education (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). The civic mission of a university provides context for the various types of civic opportunities available to students, the level of institutional investment in its civic mission, and the university's relationship with the local community. Though many colleges and universities may have civic missions that center a desire to alleviate some form of institutional harm in a community, without a critique of systemic oppression and building the power to change it, institutions risk further perpetuating harm in their local communities. The explicit critique of systemic oppression is what makes student activism and organizing distinct from community-based projects or other forms of local civic engagement.

Although some colleges may have missed the connection to social justice, others have not and have made commitments to using civic engagement and social justice to inspire and retain students of color. In her article about the retention of students of color in higher education, Gray (2013) argued that universities that attract students of color, especially students of color from low-income backgrounds, should "be committed to students who come from the central city and surrounding communities who invested in remaining in the State and who desire to become contributing members of their communities" (p. 1,249). If a university helps students develop their personal identity alongside their academic identity, college students will be better able to serve their communities (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Other scholars have found that students who pursue civic engagement opportunities in leadership or academics have a stronger chance of being civically engaged in the future (Matthews, 2012; Soria et al., 2013).

### ***Students of Color and the Cultural Dynamics of Service***

With activism to further diversify colleges and universities through admissions policies and expand programs for students of color, more programs for civic engagement have worked to consider students of color. Given the increasing diversity at historically white institutions, service learning and civic engagement opportunities have adapted to changing demographics. Novick et al. (2011) found that students of color felt more comfortable at service placements than at the university they attended, but that they avoided conversations about race with their white counterparts. In a follow-up study, Seider et al. (2013) found that courses that created service opportunities for university students often times reified white privilege—meaning that those courses often simplified the role of race in understanding systemic oppression, and students of color in the course would carry the burden of having to educate their peers and rectify harm caused by their peers. Harden (2009) highlighted how students of color from low-income or working-class backgrounds had to make an exerted effort to ensure that they were connected

to the local community near their campuses. Harden also made the point that, regardless of the university's demographic make-up, there is always tension between the community and the university, especially if the university is in a particularly high-needs area. With this reality, it is important to understand what brings students of color to do service and why they engage in their work.

### **Neoliberalism, Race, and Education**

More broadly defined, neoliberalism is a set of policies, practices, and cultural ideologies governed by the rule of the free market, meaning that an individual's free will to engage in entrepreneurship, business, trade, and economic self-determination is central to society's functioning (Harvey, 2005). Furthermore, Giroux (2010) asserted that under neoliberalism, "democracy becomes synonymous with free markets while issues of equality, social justice, and freedom are stripped of any substantive meaning and used to disparage those who suffer systemic deprivation and chronic punishment" (p. 56). In this sense, neoliberalism as a guiding political, cultural, and economic philosophy generates a new *commonsense*, which creates conditions that simultaneously connect market-driven values to public institutions (e.g., higher education) and becomes the primary driver for punishing those who do not adopt neoliberal frames to achieve socioeconomic mobility (see Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009).

Neoliberalism in the United States is intimately tied to racial politics, especially in Black communities. For example, Spence (2015) demonstrated how neoliberalism creates contradictions best explained by anti-Black motivations. For example, responsibility to oneself is central to the functioning of civil society; the government should not play a large role in providing social services to support a person's poor decisions, which are viewed as the "real" reasons for why they are poor. In this case, poor people are typically imagined as Black, drawing the link between race and social class. This type of logic, according to Soss et al. (2011) and Wacquant (2009), undergirds public policies like President Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996), which cut federal funding for public welfare in response to racialized narratives of Black communities—namely, Black women not taking responsibility and working for an income. Under these "workfare" programs, neoliberalism flourishes as a tool to develop new markets in any arena and punish those who do not take advantage of the market. However, the contradiction lies in the ways in which government spending has increased dramatically to punish those who are disproportionately impacted by neoliberalism although spending on policing, prisons, and other forms of punitive and carceral measures has created crises in many poor communities, particularly poor and working-class Black communities (see Camp, 2016; Gilmore, 2007).

### **Neoliberalism in (Black) Education**

One of the ways that neoliberalism takes a stronghold on the political economy is through schooling and its attempt to act as the commonsense for how youth should be governed. Take Dumas' (2013, 2016) examples of how neoliberal representations and political discourse have played a role in how Black youth are represented as lazy and in need of intervention. He highlighted how, most importantly, Black youth have been represented as in need of bending to market rules, for example by embracing school choice in the debates for educational justice, learning soft skills (e.g., how to interview properly for a job), and becoming more palatable to whiteness in order to not be gunned down by police.

In addition, Baldrige (2014, 2019) asserted that through the language of efficiency, performance, and inherent deficit, neoliberal logic undergirds political ideologies that further stratify resources and visibility to those who fit the market logic. Clay (2019) referred to this idea as Black resilience neoliberalism, which, put plainly, is the neoliberal logic that rewards Black youth for their "resilience" and the "normalization and the valorization of exercising human capital in relation to 'overcoming' or enduring structural racism" (p. 82). In this sense, for Black communities, one's ability to pull oneself out of poverty and use personal agency to beat structural racism are valued and sought after more than addressing structural racism itself.

Dumas (2010), Ginwright (2004), and Rickford (2016) each highlighted how even cultural-intellectual interventions are susceptible to neoliberal logic. Afrocentricity for example—broadly defined as an epistemological project of seeing the world from the histories, traditions, and perspectives of African people—has been used by the Black middle class as a behavioral corrective to assert that students who do not know their identity cannot achieve (i.e., use their human capital to overcome structural racism) and are thus in need of correction in the form of education. Working in tandem with other neoliberal discourses, such as urban renewal, school performance, and the distribution of economic resources, neoliberalism plays a particular role in race and education—specifically Black education by its acknowledgement and awareness of race and racial difference—without structural analysis of, and intervention into, racial inequities (Baldrige, 2014; Clay, 2019; Spence, 2015).

### **Neoliberalism, Diversity, and Higher Education**

Neoliberalism has served two primary functions in relation to higher education—the first has been to make the university more of a privatized corporate space that conforms to market rules, and the second has been to use those same market-based principles and management strategies to absorb student dissent and privatize civic and community engagement (see Ferguson, 2017; Giroux, 2002, 2010). For example, Giroux (2002) demonstrated how the exchange value of a

college degree (specifically one's major) is a key function in the importance of that major and, thus, the number of classes and professors it can house (see Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Turner, 2016). As universities increasingly professionalize and more closely mirror the structure of corporations, so too do the investments made by universities reflect the desire for profit, including investments in companies that have been morally condemned, such as South African apartheid or private prisons (see Noguera et al., 2013; Williams, 2016). Indeed, as universities have continued to move closer to a model bound by market-based logic, so have their principles.

As neoliberalism has worked to change the public sphere, it has also transformed the meaning of words, such as freedom, equality, justice, and diversity (Giroux, 2010). For example, Giroux (2002, 2010) asserted that citizenship and justice have been removed from struggles over resources to now being more firmly rooted to one's ability to enact free will to engage in the market and be private citizens. By disassociating material, structural analyses from conversations on race, power, freedom, and justice, it becomes easier to disconnect university-based discourse on race from the ways that universities are complicit in the production of racial inequities and perpetuations of anti-Black racism.

Take, for example, Berrey's (2011) assessment of the ways that the University of Michigan evolved over time to embrace diversity but not racial justice. Berrey asserted that due to the rising discourses of multiculturalism, identity, and growing market pressures, the University of Michigan adopted diversity-based discourses to market itself while simultaneously ignoring the structural racial inequities it perpetuated on campus. Though it has been well documented that students of color (for the purposes of this paper, Black students) have forced universities to address race and identity in a meaningful way (see Claybrook, 2013; Patterson, 2020; Rhoads, 1998), universities and allies committed to neoliberal logic have worked to use these same management strategies to deter dissent and counteract student insurgency (Ferguson, 2017).

Even with an acknowledgement of students of color, notions of service learning and community engagement are presented in a decontextualized, apolitical tone that fails to engage community organizing or activism at all (Biddix et al., 2009; Oakes et al., 2006; Rogers et al., 2012; Rogers & Morrell, 2011). As a central function of higher education, universities normalize poverty and preserve the current sociopolitical order through meritocracy, stratification, service, and charity projects (Grant, 2016; Liu, 2011). This logic primarily rests on the bedrocks of whiteness and neoliberalism, which position the university as a merchant in providing services to communities in need (Bocci, 2015; Grant, 2016; Harvey, 2005). Black college student organizers must navigate a neoliberal university through both private notions of service and benevolent understandings of whiteness. Indeed, the university as a political field and target is a challenging one to navigate, given the nexus of racial identity, student identity, and social movements.

Although historians have done their due diligence to theorize the meaning of Black student activism, they have often overlooked the ways that Black students produce meaning in real time. Recent studies of Black student activism and organizing, though more current, have seldom investigated how students navigate their educational identities along with their movement identities (Givens, 2016). Higher education scholars often overlook both the role that race plays in community engagement (Bortolin, 2011; Mitchell, 2008) and the specific ways that Black students move beyond typical notions of community service in order to contribute to local communities (Harden, 2009). This study is an attempt to fill the gap regarding student activist educational identity by examining the intersection of student organizing, meaning, and Black identity as Black students work to define their organizing and agency, especially as data were collected in real time at the height of social movement activity.

### **The Rearticulation of Black Student Collective Agency**

I employ racial formation theory as my primary lens for analysis, specifically racialized rearticulation. Omi and Winant (2014) argued that racialized rearticulation “produces new subjectivity by making use of information and knowledge already present in the subject’s mind. They take elements and themes of her/his culture and traditions and infuse them with new meaning” (p. 99). Black student activists are constantly negotiating their Black identity along with their meaning and purpose for organizing, and, in doing so, they use their temporal positionality as Black students to collectively define what organizing means. For Black students this meaning is constantly negotiated by past and contemporary understandings of Black student organizing, creating a memory of racialized resistance that is both unique to and indicative of their racial identity. As Black student activists have produced meaning for both education and Black organizing, they have argued for the primacy of community (Dawson, 2001) in their Black educational struggles, an aspect of the Black counterpublic (Dawson, 2001). For Black students, this means that “the community” whether real or imagined, is always an important aspect of their organizing and campaigns, and its centrality to Black student organizers is a key piece of their collective identity and decision-making. The production of racial meaning to these student activists adds a dimension to civic engagement literature (Biddix et al., 2009; Harden, 2009; Novick et al., 2011) by suggesting that racialized understandings of freedom, justice, community, and social change are central to Black student organizing in a social movement context. To be clear, racial meaning for Black student activists confirms Harden’s (2009) findings that asserted students from certain communities want to engage in the work necessary to support their communities and also add an explicit commitment to social justice and critique of social oppression; this informs

orientations to activism as opposed to only engaging in service-based community projects (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Employing the language of Omi and Winant (2014), I argue that Black students negotiate their reasons and motivations for organizing through a *rearticulation of Black student collective agency*. By this, I am referring to the ways that Black students mobilize their identities and agencies in the same vein as the legacy of Black student organizing to leverage their university-student status (Garcia Bedolla, 2005). The rearticulation of Black student agency is not a static, linear process; rather, it is a consistent negotiation process that students navigate as they manipulate their temporal identities as college students and their identities as organizers or change agents to make significant change in their colleges and communities. In this way, the rearticulation of Black student collective agency allows Black students to impact in some way—be it small or large—the sociopolitical conditions and everyday realities of Black people. Student organizers are highly aware of the ways that neoliberal racial discourses on their campuses shape their experiences, and students make explicit use of these discourses for the political and material benefit of local communities. What makes this newest iteration of Black student activism distinct from the Black student activism of the 1960s is the public discourse on race itself. Many universities and local governments now position themselves as either colorblind or champions of diversity (Berrey, 2011; Patterson, 2020), and because of this Black students face different challenges and opportunities than their predecessors who integrated the south and demanded Black power (Biondi, 2012; Claybrook, 2016; Rogers, 2012).

Given the context of 21st-century liberal discourse around race and anti-racism, Black student organizers have made sense of their positionality and framed their campaign issues to best manipulate the university to meet both student and community needs. Black students have accomplished this by borrowing from historic movement frames, adopting new movement frames from the Movement for Black Lives, and using those frames to leverage resources. With the rearticulation of Black student collective agency, Black students are effectively able to: (a) see themselves joining larger struggles for Black liberation through catalytic events, (b) leverage university resources and access to address material conditions, and (c) negotiate the realities and limitations of college student access for larger struggles for Black liberation.

### **Method**

In this study, I adopted semi-structured interviewing as my primary method of data gathering and analysis. For social movements, semi-structured interviews help to illuminate the human agency of movement actors and the ways that they collectively make sense of social movement processes (Blee & Taylor, 2002). I made sense of these phenomena based on both my academic training as a social

scientist and as an active participant in Black social movement spaces (Lichterman, 2002; Turner, 2018). As a member of the Black Student Union at UC Berkeley from Fall 2014 to Fall 2016, a coordinating committee member of the Black Lives Matter network in the Bay Area from March 2015 to July 2016, and a founding national organizer of the Black Liberation Collective—a collective of students who organize to transform higher education (July 2015 to January 2018)—I make two claims about my positionality as both a researcher and an organizer. First, as an active participant in protests, demands meetings, Black student organization meetings, and communication with Black student organizers from across the country, I was in a unique position to illuminate nuances that go unnoticed in academic discourse, such as power dynamics, views of administration and university allies, and the politics of risk in protests. I do not make claims of neutrality or objectivity in this scholarship. I used an interpretive approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), and activists awarded trust and insight to me that typical researchers may not have been able to cultivate.

Second, political goals that are intellectual and deeply personal drove my participation in these spaces. My involvement as a Black student organizer is driven by my experiences of anti-Black racism both on and off campus as a six-foot-five, dark-skinned, cisgender Black man. Through the daily anti-Blackness that I have experienced in schools, I am interested and actively working toward the transformation of educational institutions and the collective struggle for Black freedom in material ways with other Black students (Dumas, 2014; Givens, 2016). Although this positionality has its limits, it has advantages as well. With limitations to this approach, I understand that I may have missed key insights from those who were not as engulfed in social movement spaces as myself or my interviewees. As an active participant, I may have missed critical insights that a researcher who was more removed from the everyday spaces of social movement organizing would have seen—particularly as they related to tensions and movement factions (Blee & Taylor, 2002). However, this research's ultimate goal was to find meaning from organizers interested in social transformation, which requires a level of proximity that my unique positionality as an organizer and a scholar was able to provide.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Participants were recruited directly from chapters of the Black Lives Matter National Network, the Black Liberation Collective Black Student Organizer Network, and various campuses in the Afrikan Black Coalition (ABC) in California using purposeful sampling. To qualify for the study, participants met the following criteria: (a) engagement in student or community organizing between 2014 and 2017, (b) enrollment in an institution of post-secondary education as an undergraduate or graduate student, and (c) participation in a campaign connected to achieving racial justice for Black students or communities.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted 18 interviews with a diverse group of Black student leaders from around the country. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes with some interviews lasting as long as three hours. Given that each of my interviewees was publicly visible in their critiques of their institutions and leaders in helping to frame a movement, I share their real names and institutions in this work with participant and institutional review board approval. I do this to elevate their leadership and the very real narratives that they shared about social change and personal battles. In addition to interviews, I also collected social media posts, blog posts, journal articles written by the interviewees or articles that mentioned them, and news articles that highlighted their campaigns to corroborate their stories and triangulate my own findings.

### **Data Analysis**

I audio-recorded and transcribed the interview data. The data sources were analyzed using Dedoose (Version 8.3.43), a mixed methods software used for coding and analysis. Data were coded in an inductive nature, rooted in a constant comparative method (Babbie, 2011). Using this coding method allowed me to derive patterns from very specific parts of the data to more generalizable themes. Parent codes for this study included “role of organizing,” “movement catalysts,” “college student identity,” and a code for using lessons from one field of organizing for another, such as “using college organizing for the community” and vice versa. These parent codes represent some of the general themes presented here today.

### **Methodological Integrity**

To guard against validity threats, I used member-checking as a mode of data validation. For qualitative research, member-checking is important because “participants are given transcripts or particles from the narratives they contributed during interview sessions and are asked to verify their accuracy. Participants may be asked to edit, clarify, elaborate, and at times, delete their own words from the narratives” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1105). With member-checking, I wanted to be sure that the information portrayed in this article was an accurate interpretation of the events that occurred on participants’ campuses and the analyses that the student organizers provided. Furthermore, this study was rooted in an activist scholarship epistemological frame. First, activist scholarship is interested in, “intentionally interven[ing] in current sociopolitical realities being experienced on campus and within the broader world” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 99). I am not just interested in the work of organizing for its own sake; I am deeply invested in the practice of transforming institutions of education with and for Black people. Second, having explicit political and personal commitments can grant one access to spaces that an objective researcher would not (Hale, 2008; Vargas, 2008). Black-led organizing



spaces are actively guarded, as organizations may be dealing with state infiltration, conflicts between movement factions, and other realities that can destabilize movement work (Bloom & Martin, 2016; Vargas, 2008). By maintaining an explicit commitment to the political goals of the movement under study, one has a better chance of engaging in social movement work. These personal and political commitments come with accountability and reciprocity (Gilmore, 2008; Pulido, 2008). For an activist scholar, accountability means that one is in a reciprocal relationship with communities and their struggles for freedom. It is not enough to merely “study” them—you and your particular skill set have to be of value to the community at hand. As both an organizer and scholar, I was granted an enormous amount of trust that must not be taken lightly.

Next, I present the results of this activist-scholar engagement, rooted in the rearticulation of Black student agency framework. Themes from the interviews demonstrated that Black student activists were both politicized and entered movement organizing because of catalytic events, and that they saw themselves as resource brokers who funneled university resources, labor, and energy into dispossessed communities. I review the various movement catalysts that served as an onramp to social movement organizing. Then, I overview the ways that college student identity played a key role in Black student movement work in on-campus organizing, with access to a different set of opportunity structures, and in off-campus organizing, with the ability to use college student access to produce results for Black communities.

## **Results**

### **Movement Catalysts, Racial Identity, and Social Movement Participation**

Although Black college students have always played a role in larger Black movement politics (Claybrook, 2013; Franklin, 2014), in cases of mass mobilization, some sort of catalyst or large event where racialized violence and resource asymmetry are most evident often sparks political action (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; McAdam & Kloos, 2014). In the cases of the students who I interviewed from the three different Black organizing networks, the high-profile deaths of Black people at the hands of police presented a time to act and, more specifically, join the struggle for Black liberation. Take, for example, Alisha Sonnier, who at the time was an incoming freshman at St. Louis University and on the ground in Ferguson during the Michael Brown shooting:

I think it was August 9th and August 10th after Michael Brown was shot at that time. Nobody knew his name, but, I mean, any of that information, I just knew that a shooting had happened, and what really got my attention was [while] I was at work . . . I was seeing dogs. And it really looked like something from the 60s. That was the thing that really got my attention. That was before the details about the

case came out or any perceivable [detail] got out for real. It was just the images that I was seeing, they clearly look racist, like you could just see dogs, you can see police and you can see them attacking us. [In a sarcastic tone] I was like, “Wow, *this is 2014.*”

As Alisha stated, the imagery of the police using brute force to punish the community highlighted the most violent aspects of the anti-Black police state (Soss et al., 2011; Taylor, 2016; Wacquant, 2009). Given the nature of the political climate of the time, particularly the ways that the killing of unarmed Black people remained in the national news cycle, Black people across the country were activated after the Michael Brown story came out. His body laid in the street for 4 hours and 28 minutes, and as his community came out to mourn, they were met with a violent police force. This moment pushed other Black community members and students to action. Storm Ervin, an original member of Concerned Student 1950—the Black student group that led the demands process to end the tenure of university president Tim Wolfe at the University of Missouri (Mizzou or MU)—recalled what that moment felt like:

So, the first day, August 9th, I was two hours or an hour and a half away in Columbia, Missouri. I watched it on Twitter, and I saw his body on the ground. You know, I’m in my apartment with a few people who [wanted to go] . . . And then we see that night that people were coming down in flocks, are right now coming down, but showing up and showing out. So that being our city, me and few of my line sisters, we went down there [on] August 10th, and it was chaotic, but I was happy. I was surprised, I was shocked . . . I was just glad that my city, a place where I’m actually from, was finally fighting back.

Storm highlighted not only the conditions but how Black students were moved to action. As the general St. Louis area was her home, Storm felt deeply connected to the resistance that ensued in Ferguson. By traveling from Columbia, Missouri, to the greater St. Louis area on a consistent basis, Storm and her peers were deeply politicized through their participation in the social movement action. The community’s resistance inspired them and another group of organizers from Mizzou to form MU for Mike Brown, an organizing body on their campus that responded to the growing movement by bringing the movement energy of Ferguson to their campus.

Both Storm and Alisha being moved to action based on the events that took place is not uncommon. More specifically, anger and frustration with the blatant anti-Black racism that was displayed by Ferguson police drove them to action. Based on the findings from two studies, Stürmer and Simon (2009) argued that anger and group-based feelings toward social phenomena help drive social movement participation. Stürmer and Simon found that when students were politicized about the rising cost of student fees, the increased cost drove them to

protest participation. Anger also had a positive correlation with participation and group identification. In the case of interviewed Black student organizers, anger—particularly racialized anger around the visibility of state violence—played a significant role in mobilizing college students. For example, Jason Ajiake, a student organizer at Howard University, articulated the connections between identity and motivations to act:

Yeah, the first thing about Mike Brown is that I resonated with that story [since] we were sort of the same age, and then second [we have] similar like body structures . . . the way that people describe him as like an animal or beast or whatever because of the way he was built, it was especially resonating, really put things into perspective for me about how the world sees me.

Jason described the various ways that personal identity plays a role in political participation. Jason was a former athlete who was over six feet tall with a large, strong build. Given that his body type was similar to Mike Brown's, he deeply connected to his story, and it motivated him to engage in social movement organizing when he transitioned to college.

Identity plays an enormous role in social movement participation, particularly when it comes to empathy. Hooker (2009) articulated the role of political obligation, stating:

Indeed, race, more than almost any other factor, delineates the boundaries of political obligation and empathy. Thus, while much has been said in recent years about growing residential segregation in the United States, the fact that this spatial distance reflects a kind of moral distance is less often noted. The fact of the matter is that whites in the United States are not often called upon to directly confront the pain and suffering of Blacks. The physical distance between Black and white bodies thus mirrors the ethical and affective gap in solidarity. (p.7)

In summation, Hooker (2009) highlighted a critical tension with some forms of movement participation as it relates to race. If people are not connected to it, then they will not engage in acts of solidarity, allyship, or personal identification. The critical juncture here is empathy, and when students like Jason directly empathize with victims of police violence, it can push them to political action.

In 15 of the 18 interviews, participants referred to Ferguson as the catalyst for Black social movement participation, with the other three referring to the deaths of Keith Lamont Scott and Trayvon Martin and the non-indictment for the murder of Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Though the Ferguson moment presented a large catalyst for movement participation, it also created opportunities for students to launch campaigns on their campuses. For the Black students interviewed in this study, the murders of the aforementioned individuals played a key role in the cultivation of their identities as organizers with the political will to change conditions for Black

communities and students. This is connected to the rearticulation of Black student agency, namely the fact that student organizers were deeply impacted by a racialized cause that they saw as connected to their own experiences, which others have called linked fate (Dawson, 2001). Though all 18 of the interviewees reported having childhood or earlier experiences that made them aware of race and racism—and, in other instances, gender, sexuality, class, and other social identities experiencing marginalization—these moments of police violence against Black people presented opportunities for the students to act and, thus, assert their own agency.

### **Negotiating Student Identity in Social Movement Work**

The students in the interviews articulated the importance of campus-based organizing and how the work both takes advantage of and is implicated in neoliberal racial projects at the university. By neoliberal racial project, I am referring to the various ways that market-based principles and logics are used as the primary governing tool to manage racial identity and dissent on college campuses (Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005). As Black students worked to navigate attempts of the university to manage their dissent and consistently negotiate their own identities as college students, the students were highly aware—and critical—of the ways that universities attempted to use racialized neoliberal discourse to placate student demands, market diversity, and even quell student resistance (Cole & Heinecke, 2018; Ferguson, 2017; Kelley, 2016). In spite of this dynamic, Black student activists and organizers brought social change to campuses during the Movement for Black Lives, and the methods they used represent the various ways that Black students creatively adopted new strategies to build campaigns and movements on their campuses.

Focusing on 21st-century Black student movements, Davis (2015) argued that the Dream Defenders—a social movement organization in Florida that was born in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin—played a unique role in combating the deficit-oriented narrative that Black millennials are apolitical. For many college student activists, the choice to participate in on-campus and/or off-campus organizing is deeply personal and is oftentimes motivated by a social movement catalyst and personal experience. Take Yamiesha Bell, a founding member of Black Lives Matter at Rutgers University and of the Black Liberation Collective, who argued:

So, my focus was on college students because we have a very unique experience. Like I said before, we come from a lot of neighborhoods that are facing these different oppressions. Like I remember growing up and seeing my dad harassed by the police, being harassed by the police. So, these experiences, it's sad to say, become like a rite of passage in the Black experience. Um, so they're close to home. But when you're on a college campus, it's kind of hard to find your position

### *Turner III*

because you understand that you have a privilege, you know, being a college student, and that you have a different access than certain people from your community, but at the same time you are also your experiences. So how do I do something? Because it's just frustrating. So, I want to do something but I'm not home, I can't go home. I, I, I, I need to be here. But these things [state violence, racism, etc.] are still affecting me directly. And I think a lot of college students struggle with this idea.

Here, Yamiesha highlighted a key struggle for Black student activists: the tension between needing to do something and deciding where to direct their political agency. Yamiesha pointed out how seeing her father harassed by police—and earlier in the interview she discussed being targeted for harsh school discipline by teachers and school administrators in the K-12 educational system—helped her develop the political consciousness necessary to begin social movement organizing. For Yamiesha, college student organizing was a means to address the racially hostile climate of various types on her college campus, and it is a means for Black students to seek collective empowerment.

However, organizing in college is not without its contradictions or tensions. Some student organizers argued that it was easier to organize on college campuses given that the institution considers students as legitimate stakeholders. Jamelia Harris, former Black Student Union (BSU) co-chair at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), asserted that:

I felt like such a hypocrite for a very long time. Reflecting on my experiences organizing in college, just because I feel as though I was organizing a lot of times in spaces because I knew that I had the agency to change things within the college campus, but I didn't feel that way within the context of my own community. You asked me how I can get some legislation changed within Lancaster, California, where like, n\*ggas are actually dying, and I wouldn't be able to tell you. But you ask me how I can get \$250,000 to hire a new psychologist, and I can tell you step by step what we can do here. And so, in that sense, I've definitely, I definitely feel as though I use college organizing as a way to empower myself because I knew that a lot of things within the context of my household and my own community that I couldn't change.

As a Black woman from Lancaster, California, her family had been deeply impacted by incarceration and dispossession. Her lived experiences experiencing the violence of the state fueled her activism. On campus, she was a part of a demands team that brought resources to both Black students and Black community members in nearby Oxnard after a police shooting. However, Jamelia highlighted how the ability to change an institution of higher education is different from organizing change in the communities from which you come. Jamelia asserted that she could guide a student activist through the steps to acquire funding from a college or university to hire a Black psychologist, but that she would have a much

harder time telling students how to organize in their communities where addressing grievances with state entities was much more rigid and inaccessible (Oakes et al., 2006). In this way, Jamelia argued that the political opportunity structures for college students are much different and even more accessible on college campuses than they are off college campuses. When thinking about the rearticulation of Black student collective agency, this presents a critical juncture: Student empowerment through campus organizing is critical to the development of Black student identity, but Black students are highly aware of the limitations in shifting to the anti-Black political sphere off campus.

### **Influence in Off-Campus Politics**

However, in some situations student organizers collectively impacted the material conditions or the larger political sphere off campus in their local cities or states. This organizing power was largely due to their temporary college student identities and the varying levels of privilege and access that the college student identity presented to student organizers. Nikolas Knight, a member of Black University, a coalition of Black college student organizers who attend HBCUs, and a student at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, for example, explained:

I wish it was just me being a Black person, but now it was definitely me being a college student because, because it's 11,000 of us on each campus and . . . and that's 11,000 taxpayers. And . . . as far as elections go, we held a lot of voice in that that . . . I know that I figured that out when I saw them come onto the campus a lot, like politicians or a new product, a new product was common around [campus]. They always want our campus like this on [an] everyday basis, like people giving us free stuff to put on our social medias and whatnot, by college students and they don't know what it is about us. If you can get it on a college campus you can get it anywhere. You can get it in any way as far as pushing a product, an idea, being political, whatever. So, I think me being a college student in the cause is how I've affected change. I affected the legislation more [as a college student] than me just being a Black person, which sucks.

In this excerpt, Nikolas provided a rich analysis of both the access that college student networks have to the political sphere, the limitations of being Black, and the various ways colleges are sites of marketing tactics, with various corporations using local college students as free advertising for new products. Giroux (2002) highlighted a narrative of two college students, Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe, who offered to sport the logos of any corporation who offered to give them tuition money. Giroux argued that the actions of these young men represented the crisis of neoliberalism, in which students have to turn to the market in order to address their material needs. In a sense, students and young people are also targets for this type of marketing. With awareness of the positionality of students and the role of the

neoliberal university, Nikolas described how colleges and universities are targets for engaging political discourse and entryways into the marketplace, which represents one of the ways that college students impact a city's political economy.

According to Nikolas, college students play a big role in the local economy, which gives them access to local political decision-making as a unified block. Nikolas went on to describe how college students had a unique level of access to political power that was attributed to their temporal location as students, compared to the everyday Black citizens of Greensboro, North Carolina. Nikolas outlined how members of a six-college coalition in the Greensboro area put pressure on the city government regarding police violence:

There was a kid, 15-year-old kid, who got [attacked by the police], who I didn't hear about it until like end of the semester, the fall semester, about a kid who got beat up by the local police department and then was being charged with assaulting the officer because he bled on the officer's uniform. I focused all my efforts toward that after I met him, and I just saw like desperation on his face that he was like a little sad, because I know [he's] talking to all these old people and then they're like, you'd probably be better to talk to somebody close to his age. So, I sat down, and he even said, "sorry." . . . So, we got students from six different college campuses, because Greensboro has six different college campuses, and we made sure that we showed up in numbers because, Greensboro is actually really scared of the student population as far as if they ever decided to fight, they can go against Greensboro. Greensboro thrives off of the students. So, when we show with numbers and say, "we want something," and they're [the city council] indifferent. You showed up enough at the city council, and then we told the council, "I don't care what you have to do but drop this boy's charges."

Here Nikolas described a specific instance when student organizing had a material impact on city-level politics. Given the unique make-up of Greensboro, with six college campuses in a smaller city, the students had the ability to influence local politics. In this specific case, Nikolas was not only able to mobilize his student peers with the support of other students on campus, but he was able to intervene in an instance of the carceral state influencing the lived outcomes of its primary targets: Black communities. However, students on other campuses have had to find other means to influence local political spheres and the lives of Black folks in their local communities. In this sense, Nikolas and his peers were able to leverage their college student identities to build a campaign that impacted material conditions beyond the institution. For the six colleges in Greensboro, student identity was crucial in impacting the political sphere; as college students played such a large role in the local economy, Nikolas acknowledged that this campaign would have been a much greater challenge if not for his student identity status.

Black college students have been creative in using their student identities to impact the material conditions of Black people by forcing the hand of the neoliberal

university. Both historically and in this contemporary moment, students have done this through divestment campaigns, which force institutions to divest financial assets from countries or institutions that do not align with campaign leaders' values. Students have accomplished this by juxtaposing the rhetoric of diversity used by universities with the actions of institutional harm that they make, whether it is through admissions policies, university investments, or even their policing practices. Students from the ABC in California pushed the University of California system to divest 25 million dollars in direct assets from the private prison industry, as well as 425 million dollars in direct assets from Wells Fargo Bank, one of the largest creditors to the private prison industry (Williams, 2016). Discussing why prison divestment was an important issue, Star Bacon, the former director of operations for the ABC, said:

So, first thing is the fact that you would have an institution of higher education investing in private prisons, with student money? It's just outlandish. So basically, prison divestment was something that ABC had been wanting to do for a long time just because it's really like targeting Black folks, targeting Latino folks, using them as free labor, it's like another form of slavery, right? They're exploiting the fuck out of our people while funneling us into the system. And then in using us, university students, for their gain, I suppose it's the worst form of capitalism, right at the intersection of exploitation and oppression. It's just crazy that in this capitalistic system someone can legit be paying tuition to an institution that preaches diversity and, like, racial justice and at the same time exploits their family members in another institution.

Star highlighted the contradictions of capitalism, American higher education, and race. Invoking the symbolism of the continued unfree labor system of slavery, Star articulated the ways that university systems, especially the University of California, contribute directly and indirectly to carceral control in Black and Brown communities.

Anthony Williams, another interviewee and the former editor-in-chief of the ABC website, argued that political pressure on the university was a direct result of the coalition taking on a political campaign at the university level that impacted the lived experiences of Black people affected by the criminal justice system. Anthony (Williams, 2016) argued that:

We made it clear that to invest in private prisons is to invest in the enslavement and dehumanization of Black, brown, and migrant lives. Our Black existence is not disposable, our university degrees do not make us any better than incarcerated individuals, and we are making it plain that all Black Lives Matter. (p. 103)

Student organizers had a clear sense of the ways that institutions of higher education were implicated in the perpetuation of anti-Black racism, and their campaigns to use their university student status made that racism both apparent and



egregious for the world to see. To the Black students in this study, they made clear critiques about how universities marketed “diversity and inclusion” as a way to address race relations while at the same time critiquing the university’s participation in the carceral state. As students, they were in a direct position to challenge perceptions of diversity and the entrenched nature of the carceral regime. In this sense, Black students’ organizing work was deeply rooted in using organizers’ university student status to critique university investments and improve conditions for local community members.

Speaking about responding to police violence, Jamelia from UCSB had this to say about the connections between the campus and local community:

I became involved with organizing around Meagan Hockaday’s murder. She was killed by Oxnard police during a domestic violence dispute. In front of her kids. So, I was involved with helping her family fundraise to pay for funeral fees. And I think my early stages of organizing were around just like visibility. And I don’t think that I had understood it at that point. I was the main one organizing a lot of the protests that were happening in Santa Barbara, and then we went to Ferguson [after Darren Wilson’s non-indictment for the murder of Mike Brown], and we worked with organizers out there who were at the grassroots in terms of working to make sure people had legal resources out there. And I think that the main thing that I gathered was that all of the noise we were making in California wasn’t being heard by the people who needed to know that we were out there supporting them, and what they needed the most was like concrete, material resources.

Jamelia highlighted the way that college students can directly affect the lives of those most impacted by state violence: provision of material resources. By putting pressure on her university to give the BSU funds for a Ferguson trip and to help raise money for funeral fees, Jamelia was explicitly aware of how being a university student gave her access to resources. In addition, using the language of community-service learning and civic engagement, Jamelia was able to borrow from the language of civic engagement discourse in higher education to support Black communities and meet their material needs. When prompted about what made her proud of her work as a student organizer, Jamelia stated:

Thinking about college organizing, the moments that I’m most proud of are the moments in which I was able to [redirect] university funding to actually do something for the community. Like once I think using Associated Students funds to pay for our trip to Ferguson and being able to pay the organization in Ferguson that was hosting us money that went back into organizing the Baltimore lunch that they were doing this summer. They were basically providing students lunch boxes each day because their schools were closed down during the summer. And also we were able to help them, we were able to donate a few thousand dollars toward their organizations after Ferguson and we were able to do actual community beautification projects where we walked through the streets that had been

destroyed during the uprisings, and we were able to clean up. And stuff like that. When we were able to organize to get money for Meagan Hockaday's funeral expenses. Those were the moments that I really felt the most powerful.

Jamelia highlighted a critical point here: Black students felt powerful when using their direct resources to impact the material conditions of Black people in their local community context. A recurring theme, and perhaps the major theme, was this notion of fighting for education and resources. More specifically, the fight for education and providing direct access to the university was considered a part of the fight for Black lives and the larger Black liberation struggle. Speaking about the collective consciousness of on-campus organizing, Yoel Haile, the political director of the ABC and a member of both the UC Berkeley and UC Santa Barbara BSU stated:

The common thread is that we are Black, and we organize because we are Black. We organize because we are Black people under systematic attack, and we are concerned with getting our freedom. The difference between on-campus and off-campus organizing is that we happen to be students. So, we know that the students are here, the Black students are here, so we can organize them here. When we're out in the streets, we organize in the streets and participate in what's happening in the streets. I think there are serious limitations to student organizing, but, at the end of the day, most of the people are not on the campuses. So, we want to make sure that whatever organizing we do on the campuses, we do it so that we can give our people direct and clear access and material resources to the university.

Yoel made explicit connections between resource allocation, Black organizing, and the temporal designation of "student" in his analysis. Yoel argued that a student-based collective consciousness, which Rhoads (1998) defined as an identity group's understanding of their collective condition, was key in educational organizing. By emphasizing the "Black" piece, Yoel argued that on-campus organizing should mainly consist of the redistribution of resources in order to change the conditions of Black people.

### **(Re)Articulating Black Student Agency**

As the students in the interviews highlighted the significance of Black student organizing and connecting that organizing to community-led goals and initiatives, many student organizers saw their struggle as deeply connected to the long-term project of Black liberation. Put another way—Black students (re)articulated their agency through a linked-fate type of analysis that connected their current organizing to the organizing of past student-led movements. Speaking of the role of educational organizing and the simultaneous positions of privilege (i.e., having access to university spaces) and positionality that it comes with, Gabby stated:

Even our adviser, who went here 30 years ago, said that they were trying to get some of the same things. I mean, even if you look back to when BSUs were started and kind of see all that [the Black] student movement arose, it's never been just about students. And I feel like I don't like when people are trying to make it seem that way because it's never been just about campus. I don't know, it may even be hypocritical for me saying that because I haven't really been as involved off campus or being involved in local community, so I guess I'm contradicting myself, but honestly the work that's been done on campus to get this space is always done to, like, so we can use those things to build up outside communities, like to help make students here more stable so we can work in the outside community.

Gabby articulated “primacy of community.” Dumas (2007), citing Dawson (2001), asserted that the primacy of community

has also dictated, at least historically, that individual Black people take political positions viewed as in the interest of the entire community. This tradition persists today, Dawson (2001) points out, even though it is no longer as easy to identify “a Black position” on any given issue, given the increasing social and economic stratification within Black communities. (p. 41)

Dumas outlined the role of the Black counterpublic and its role in developing a Black political imaginary.

Consistent across the interviews, Black participants saw their educational fight as a fight for “the Black community.” So, if we imagine the BSU as a counterpublic space, where resistance is cultivated and built upon through political education and political opportunities, then the impact that the BSU can have on the campus can radically shift the ways that Black students experience organizing. However, this is not without contradictions. It is oftentimes difficult for Black student organizers to sustain their work in local communities beyond typical service projects because of student identities. As Givens (2016) asserted, Black students who juggle more common college extracurriculars (e.g., Greek life or service) do not often feel the same pressures of students who take up organizing. Givens referred to the burden of organizing and addressing anti-Black racism on campus as the invisible tax—a process using extra time and energy to address racism with which other students do not have to contend. The invisible tax makes organizing more difficult to sustain long-term as students transition to graduation and other institutions, full-time work, or away from college altogether. This is critical because without sustainability, the impact of a political project can be erased with the exit of one graduating class. Once students graduate or leave the university, they are no longer able to maintain their ties. Jameelah Jones, a student organizer from the University of Kansas, stated that:

Sisters With a Purpose—a Black women's organization in Kansas—specifically was a lot more community oriented. Um, and I'm actually really thankful that we

had members of the campus movement who are also a part of the community who are calling us out on how we were siloed, and how we weren't addressing the needs of the community.

Oftentimes, Black students who organize exclusively on college campuses romanticize their impact on local community members, who may not have access to the institution or may be affected by the ways that the institution has worked to push out local community members (Bradley, 2009). In this sense, Black student organizers were also aware of the contradictions that arose from both their social movement framing and their positionality.

Even though Black student organizers experience unique forms of marginalization as Black students, they still have unique access to political opportunities and citizenship that they do not readily have off campus. Consider university police, for example. In a conversation about planning direct actions, Eniola Abioye, former Director of Field Operations for the ABC and former UC Berkeley BSU member, stated:

On campus you have UCPD [University of California Police Department], and I think that it's easier to hold UCPD accountable being a UC student. So, when looking at an action on campus, we're rarely ever bothered by UCPD. And then as soon as we cross that line from on campus to outside of campus, that's when we're marching in the streets and stopping traffic and when we're occupying space that wasn't just the UC, you have other stuff to worry [about]. First you have to know if the people who you're rocking with feel comfortable. And it's not a question of if the police will show up, it's when, and making sure people feel comfortable with that. There's also more eyes on you.

Storm from Concerned Student 1950 had a similar response when discussing the differences in policing between Ferguson and Mizzou, stating:

I don't remember having a gun pointed at me while I was at Mizzou versus being there with Ferguson PD with multiple guns pointing at you, not knowing if they were going to shoot. Um, at Mizzou I think we were only threatened with arrest when we blocked the homecoming parade versus, in Ferguson, you were threatened with arrests each time we were there. Also, the over-policing, the tear gas, rubber bullets that didn't happen on campus that happened in Ferguson. The guns being totted in your face, the military riot gear. That didn't happen at Mizzou. That happened in Ferguson. Similarities. Black folks showed up. Right? The people in charge had a lot of bullshit. The chief of police in Ferguson had a lot of BS to say. Same thing happened with admin at Mizzou, a lot of BS. That one similarity, but for the most part you didn't see college students being overpoliced or threatened. . . . We were threatened with arrest once but that was it. So that's when we decided to block the homecoming parade, that's the only one I remember. There was some police, you know, police force on Mizzou's campus. But for the most part—no. Even when we went inside of City Hall and did a die-in in

Columbia, there were no police to threaten us. Now I don't know how that would have went inside at Ferguson.

In both of these excerpts, Eniola and Storm highlighted how students experienced a different level of access on their campuses than they did organizing outside of them. Even though Black students still experience police violence from campus police departments, the governing structures of the university give students more rights and, subsequently, more access to hold police accountable. This aspect of organizing is critical because it allows Black students more freedom to disrupt the everyday flow of things on their campuses, which can provide more political opportunities. Storm highlighted how university students were offered protection as they protested in city hall, as opposed to the militarized response that police enacted on community members in Ferguson. Indeed, there are specific protections and insulations that a college student identity provides for Black student organizers, and participants were highly aware of them.

Black students in this political moment entered social movement work through large event catalysts, and they used their specific identities as college students to transform the political conditions for Black people both on and off their campuses. As the interviews suggested, Black student organizers had to negotiate the complexity of college student identities as they temporally intersect with other identities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other markers of identity that can be a vehicle for power or vulnerability. What I did not initially expect in the interviews was the amount of candor that the students responded with when critiquing the university. Contrary to the discourse of political insulation (Omi & Winant, 2014), affirmative governmentality, and the domestication of activism (Kwon, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014), Black students were highly aware of their positionality and the ways that the institution sought to co-opt their activism.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The students interviewed came from a diverse array of gender, class, educational, regional, and immigrant backgrounds. One consistent finding throughout the study warrants further investigation regarding the biographical narratives of Black students and community organizers. Each interviewee, at some point, experienced some sort of racially motivated event as children or young teenagers that prompted their interest in or understanding of racial politics. This is consistent with Pulido's (2004) claim that politicization happens by making resource asymmetry and inequality evident. Furthermore, Black student organizers were constantly negotiating their privilege as university students in relationship to the larger movement for Black liberation. This personal reflection represents the ways that Black student organizers have to make sense of the temporal identity of being protected by the university while simultaneously doing everything in their

power to use university resources to alleviate state dispossession in Black communities.

Second, as Kelley (2016) pointed out, Black radicals—whether they were students or scholars—made use of university spaces by repurposing their functions to educate themselves and redistribute resources. Groups, such as the University of California, Los Angeles', Undercommons, inspired by Harney and Moten's (2013) *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, have also accomplished this. Through a process called fugitivity, Black students take resources from the university in order to create new spaces for radical social change rooted in political education.

Another critical finding was that students understood that they could use frames of civic and community engagement as university students to provide material resources for their communities. Though neoliberalism makes organizing for material forms of racial justice a challenge (Dumas, 2011; Kwon, 2013), Black students were able to manipulate neoliberal frames in order to stay committed to Black community engagement rooted in their collective identities as Black and students. For example, as Dumas (2011) asserted regarding school desegregation fights in Seattle, there were two primary modes for Black racial justice—one being the politics of representation and the other being the politics of redistribution. In the politics of representation, certain rights were won by community members without material resources being changed. In the politics of redistribution, material resources were redistributed in a way that improved conditions of Black communities in Seattle. As participants demonstrated—such as in Jamelia's story of securing resources for Ferguson or in Star and Anthony's narratives of securing divestment from private prisons—Black students used representation-based, racialized narratives to achieve a small but significant form of redistribution. In this sense, they took resources from the university, using their identities as Black students, and redistributed those resources among the community or took resources away from harmful institutions.

Garcia Bedolla (2005) highlighted the impact of social identity(ies). She defined mobilizing identity as:

an identity that includes a particular ideology plus a sense of personal agency. A mobilizing identity is different from an ideology in that it includes not only a particular outlook on the world but also a sense of having the ability to have an impact on that world. (p. 6)

The participants in this study came from a diverse array of backgrounds—cisgender men and women, transgender, some identified as queer or questioning, and others were first- or second-generation immigrants. However, a consistent theme among them was the way in which they mobilized their Black identities. Dumas and ross (2016) argued that Blackness is the least admissible to the

multicultural imagination—meaning that concepts of racial diversity, racial progress, and culture work to exclude Blackness at all costs if it does not fit a neoliberal agenda of cultural exchange and cultural competence (Rickford, 2016). However, given the political moment and height of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Black student participants mobilized their Blackness and exerted their personal agency to extract resources or “contextual capital” (Garcia Bedolla, 2005, p. 12) from the university to uplift communities.

Furthermore, more social movement research should be conducted on the ways that various opportunity structures and threats are experienced by different groups in different political fields. The students I interviewed suggested that social movement organizing, and subsequent social movement repression, was largely absent when they would organize on campus compared to off-campus settings. This runs counter to the findings from Gillion (2013), who argued that protests and movements grow when they are repressed and information about that repression spreads, which he called information continuum theory. Social movement scholars have a lot to gain by analyzing the unique nature of schools and universities.

In conclusion, Black student and youth organizers continue to walk in the tradition of Black social movement organizing (Franklin, 2014). Though Black youth in this era face heightened surveillance technologies through social media, neoliberal discourses that co-opt their activism and organizing, and political structures that continue to overlook their suffering, Black student agency still works to cultivate social change for Black people while navigating contradictions unique to this historical moment. The rearticulation of Black student collective agency is not only present in their ability to navigate this historical moment, but also in their ability to use university resources for the improvement of their communities. The temporal social movement positionality of student identity deserves further investigation by scholars who are interested in the intersection of social movement organizing and college student identity.

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