

Chapter 3

Unapologetically Black Creative Educational Experiences in Higher Education: A Critical Review

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Black creative educational experiences (BCEEs) are participatory, performative cultural experiences created by or for students, centering Black artistic expression, aesthetics, and engagement. Using African-centered frameworks, we provide a methodological guide for examining BCEEs in education research, which includes centering Black “ways of knowing,” validating creative expressions cultivated by and for Black people, acknowledging the influence of Black creative expression on research and practice, considering researcher positionalities as observers and cultivators of Black creative expression, and viewing Black creative expression as knowledge production. We found BCEEs are democratizing educational experiences rooted in intellectual and expressive freedom (freedom of movement/voice/tongue), and community building. BCEEs should be centered in education research, particularly postsecondary education, and prioritized in institutional programming, curricula, and high-impact practices.

In 2018, Beyoncé Knowles became the first Black woman to ever headline Coachella in a spectacular performance affectionately known as “Beychella” (Carty-Williams, 2019). Her dynamic vocals and dance moves were amazing but, more significant, was

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a clear display of Black expression and creativity grounded in educational experiences cultivated at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The culture of HBCU marching bands, dance teams, and Black Greek Life were in full view allowing Beyoncé's performance to translate Black creative educational experiences (BCEE) to a transnational audience, and exposing those unfamiliar to what Black people have always known (Beyoncé's, 2019; Chambers, 2019; Drayton, 2019). Black creativity is transcendent across platforms, entertaining, thought-provoking, and, for the purposes of this analysis, educational in nature.

Knowles's entire Coachella production reflected a particular kind of Black creative expression situated in HBCU environments, distinguishable from predominantly White campuses. The movement, rhythm, and sound exhibited by the HBCU student performers represented an educational experience incredibly absent from scholarly research. It is challenging to name or even explain "ways of knowing" fundamentally connected to the creativity, emotion, expression, and psychic preservation reflected in Black life (Brown, 2013; Collins, 2002; Fouch 2006; Gates, 1994; Player, 2019; Price 1999). More perplexing is our attempt to connect BCEEs to researchers and research processes that consistently deny Black "ways of knowing" as worthy of scholarly inquiry and that typically "other" Black people through deficit and debilitating research processes (Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994a; 2006; Williams et al., 2020). We explored literature on BCEEs using the following research questions: (1) How do BCEEs expand the epistemological scope or "ways of knowing," experiencing, and understanding Black students' collegiate experiences? (2) How can current research inform the study of BCEEs in higher education toward democratizing educational experiences? We articulate how BCEEs serve as "ways of knowing" that draw attention to African-centered mattering through cultural engagement, intellectual and expressive freedom (freedom of movement, freedom of voice, and freedom of tongue), and community building, to name a few.

BLACK CREATIVE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES (BCEES) DEFINED

We define BCEEs as participatory and performative cultural experiences created either by or for students, centering Black artistic expression, aesthetics, and engagement. BCEEs include several forms such as gospel choirs, marching bands, dance teams, and spoken word poetry. Within films such as "School Daze" (Lee, 1988), "Drumline" (Stone, 2002), and "Stomp the Yard" (White, 2007), and television shows, such as *A Different World* (Carsey et al., 1987–1993), BCEEs are enacted and typically situated at HBCUs, although they exist throughout education (Carter, 2013; Howell, 2019; Jenkins 2011; Love, 2014; Moore & Paris 2021). These activities provide identity affirmation for Black students and represent Black artistic contributions. BCEEs have the capacity to drive recruitment, retention, and graduation of Black students when they engage in multiple forms (Chambers, 2014; Denson & Chang, 2009; Harper & Quayle, 2007; Kimbrough 2003; Morales, 2021; Person & Christensen, 1996; Sule 2016; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995).

BCEEs and Cultural Engagement Outcomes

BCEEs challenge traditional research paradigms that de-emphasize the value of investigating emotion, feeling, and pleasure as it emanates through artistic expression. BCEEs not only honor Black cultural aesthetics, but also translate into larger contributions to humanity when their value to Black peoples' freedom and liberation is at the center. Carter (2003) might reference BCEEs as Black cultural capital that allows Black people to "resist the despair and hopelessness brought about by a limited opportunity structure" (p. 139). Such capital operates as currency allowing Black people to navigate within home, community, and academic spaces with a "sense of self-worth through their own cultural production" (p. 150). Further, such capital is accumulated and cultivated through cultural engagement with other Black people.

There is no substantive body of research focusing specifically on BCEEs in higher education. However, there are strands of research exploring the impact of cultural engagement outcomes in higher education, including the ways: (1) cultural engagement serves as a critical learning experience; (2) cultural engagement offers racially and ethnically centered identity development opportunities; and (3) cultural engagement strengthens student commitment and sense of belonging (to the campus, themselves, and their cultural/racial communities; Patton, 2006a, 2006b; Museus, 2008; Jenkins, 2011; Jenkins & Walton, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Villalpando, 2003). While a broad literature base affirms the value and impact of culturally inclusive experiences in education, this scholarship is disconnected across areas of P-12 pedagogical practice (Johnson, Bryan & Boutte, 2019; King, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994b; Paris, & Alim; 2017; Stovall, 2006); diversity and inclusion in higher education (Densen & Chang, 2008; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2010; Quaye et al, 2019); and college student cultural identity development (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Jenkins, 2009, 2013).

Exploring BCEEs as a form of cultural engagement and as an act of freedom for Black students can contribute to democratizing ideas and perspectives concerning what types of experiences should be created, supported, and sustained by postsecondary institutions. Black mattering in education research requires scholars to write Black "ways of knowing," learning, expressing, developing, and doing, into the knowledge base of identified "high-impact" practices (HIPs) in higher education. HIPs refer to activities and opportunities having a positive impact on students and have been established by education research (Kuh, 2008). Such practices include first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, and service learning. BCEEs have not been specifically explored as HIPs, although some might argue diversity/global learning HIPs account for BCEEs. No significant body of research exists to specifically ascertain BCEEs' promise in terms of impact on Black (and all) students' college experiences. However, Quaye & Harper (2007, 2014) push for greater equity, accountability, and cultural inclusivity when considering student engagement.

Black Cultural Centers as Venues for BCEEs and Black Cultural Engagement

The landscape of BCEEs has largely been shaped by Black students themselves through forming Black student organizations and engaging in campus activism to establish Black cultural centers (BCCs; Hord, 2005; Patton, 2010). Harper and Quaye (2007) found Black undergraduate students considered their student organization membership as platforms for identity expression and development. Black students value group membership within specialized organizations including sororities and fraternities, academic honors groups, and political organizations because they help them “establish out-of-class connections with faculty, provide them opportunities to give back to other Black people, and allow them to feel comfortable by being around others perceived as like them” (Guiffrida, 2003, p. 307). These aspects of organizational involvement are necessary for retaining and graduating Black students. Since Black student organizations perform much of the labor, their contributions may not be included, counted, or evaluated as part of an institution’s educational practices.

BCCs developed because of students desiring that their culture be “recognized and integrated in the social, academic and administrative functions of universities” (Patton, 2006a, p. 628). Embracing “Black Power” as the guiding foundational principle, students wanted affirmation and validation of their cultural experiences (Patton, 2006a). BCCs served as venues for workshops, lectures, literary events, musical and theatrical performances, and other events hosted by Black students and faculty, in addition to headquarters for Black student organizations (Williamson, 1999). Hypolite’s (2020) ethnographic study exploring how staff and students believed their Black Cultural Center impacted racial identity development resulted in three central findings. She explained, “Ultimately, the BCC serves as a source of support in students’ understanding of (a) their personal racial identity, (b) the diversity that exists across Blackness as well as (c) common experiences that inform a shared racial identity (p. 239).”

The professional staff in BCCs (and cultural centers) have established a broad portfolio of BCEEs as institutional offerings. Jenkins (2008) organized the work of cultural centers into five areas of critical practice: cultural education, cultural student development, cultural engagement, cultural community building, and cultural environment enhancement. These five areas illustrate intentional and comprehensive cultural engagement associated with BCC programs including illuminating cultural histories, new cultural experiences, identity development, community, and aesthetic transformation of campus through art and performance (Jenkins, 2009; Patton, 2006a, 2006b).

BCCs are significant to historical and social change in higher education. BCCs create patterns of face-to-face interaction resulting in networks and collective action. They embody and secure cultural identities, norms, and memories otherwise intangible, manipulated, or forgotten (Whitaker, 1996). Situated on predominantly White campuses, BCCs are places where Black students can see, hear, feel, smell, and even taste aspects of their own culture and be certain every part of it matters (Howell, 2019). BCCs are critical in promoting cultural engagement, particularly at

historically White campuses, and serve as key spaces where BCEEs as “ways of knowing” are cultivated practices.

Locating BCEEs in Education Research

Black creative experiences, broadly speaking, are not valued within the larger mainstream unless and until they can be commodified, co-opted, stolen, or literally erased. For example, the TikTok platform often features choreography by Black creators who go uncredited as their choreography is copied by and credited to White dancers (Johnson, 2021; Steele, 2021; Vats, 2019; Yasharoff, 2021). Such erasure results in a sanitized version designed for cultural tourism and consumption and completely devoid of *soul*. Hurston (1934) explained,

Speaking of the use of Negro material by white performers, it is astonishing that so many are trying it, and I have never seen one yet entirely realistic. They often have all the elements of the song, dance, or expression, but they are misplaced or distorted by the accent falling on the wrong element. (p. 92)

Locating research that names and centers BCEEs is difficult because they challenge White supremacist notions of what merits worthiness in research. To explore BCEEs as “ways of knowing” provided by the arts and humanities as King (2005) explained, researchers and educators must identify and expand how they can be translated for research purposes. For example, when researchers examine gospel choirs, they must understand what gospel music is and what features (e.g. sound, movement, instrumentation) contribute to gospel choirs as an experience uniquely situated in African culture. Similarly, dance is a broad cultural form, but nuances exist that make some dances distinctly “Black” due to the style, performance, and movement. Hurston (1934) referenced this phenomenon as “Negro expression.”

Boutte et al.’s (2017) *Legacies and Dimensions of African Culture* (LDAC) offers a summary of African centered characteristics and features that capture the expression to which Hurston refers. Drawing from a broader body of education research focused on the cultural strengths and legacies among people of the African Diaspora (Boykin, 1994; Hale, 2001; King, 2005), Boutte et al. argue African epistemologies have always been subjected to invisibility and erasure. Yet, naming and acknowledging them is “essential to the survival of our souls” (p. 66). The LDAC names and acknowledges various components of African centered features that emerge in Black cultural expression and, for the purposes of this study, BCEEs:

1. **Spirituality**—an approach to life as being essentially vitalistic rather than mechanistic, with the conviction that nonmaterial forces influence people’s everyday lives
2. **Harmony**—the notion that one’s fare is interrelated with other elements in the scheme of things, so that humankind and nature are harmonically conjoined

3. **Movement**—an emphasis on the interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussiveness, music, and dance, all of which are taken as central to psychological health
4. **Verve**—a propensity for relatively high levels of stimulation and for action that is energetic and lively
5. **Affect**—an emphasis on emotions and feelings, together with a specific sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency to be emotionally expressive
6. **Communalism/collectively**—a commitment to social connectedness, which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privilege
7. **Expressive individualism**—the cultivation of a distinctive personality and proclivity for spontaneous and genuine personal expression
8. **Oral tradition**—strengths in oral/aural modes of communication, in which both speaking and listening are treated as performances and cultivation of oral virtuosity—the ability to use alliterative, metaphorically colorful, graphic forms of spoken language. This does not mean that strengths do not exist in written and other literacy traditions as well.
9. **Social time perspective**—an orientation in which time is treated as passing through a social space rather than a material one, and in which time can be recurring, personal, and phenomenological
10. **Perseverance**—ability to maintain a sense of agency and strength in the face of adversities
11. **Improvisation**—substitution of alternatives that are more sensitive to Black culture. (Boutte et al. 2017, pp. 70–71¹)

Collectively, these features are relevant for characterizing the uniqueness of Black expression broadly, and particularly as translated through BCEEs.

In sum, BCEEs (1) represent participatory and performative cultural experiences; (2) center Black artistic expression and “ways of knowing”; (3) are created by or for students; (4) promote cultural engagement and critical learning experiences in spaces such as Black culture centers; and (5) foster identity affirmation, belonging, and self-worth as students navigate educational spaces. Despite their promise, BCEEs have not been substantively studied in higher education research or subjected to a systematic review of research findings.

AN AFRICAN-CENTERED FRAMEWORK FOR THEORIZING BCEES

We identified a body of scholarship focused on African-centered education to center BCEEs in research and ground our analysis of literature. We argue BCEEs might be best understood through a lens acknowledging Black lives matter broadly and in education research. Black cultural production and expression within postsecondary contexts cannot be fully understood without framing them through both Black experiences and human experiences. In this section of the manuscript, we

summarize the work of the 1997 AERA Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE) as described by King's (2005) chapter "A Transformative Vision for Black Education for Human Freedom" (p. 3). Throughout the chapter, King made clear that Black people's "ways of knowing" have been consistently devalued in education and education research. She called for a new paradigm not only committed to Black education, but also one expansive enough to foster human freedom. In articulating CORIBE's work, she stated:

This is precisely why the work for the Commission is not a narrow, self-interested, racialized project that ignores the diversity among people of African descent or "essentializes" matters of race. The Commission's examination of Black education globally, historically, and systemically underscores that planetary interests of humankind are at stake." (p. 5)

Guided by the idea that education research could serve as one "form of struggle for black education," CORIBE asked vital questions pertaining to knowledge production, such as: Whose knowledge holds value? Which knowledges matter? Who can be holders and producers of knowledge? Who gets to determine these various dimensions of knowledge? The Commission's questions remain relevant as we consider improving and advancing the lives of Black people in higher education through BCEEs.

CORIBE's discussions and gatherings yielded *A Declaration of Intellectual Independence for Human Freedom* comprising 10 principles. Among the 10 principles, the commission highlighted the centrality of African people in knowledge production and maintained Black survival was contingent upon placing community and familial connections over individuals (Principles 1 and 2). The principles addressed the diverse ways African people resolve issues in response to oppression (e.g., adaptation, improvisation, and resistance; Principle 3) and focused on diverse epistemologies, stating:

The "ways of knowing" provided by the arts and humanities are often more useful in informing our understanding of our lives and experiences and those of other oppressed people than the knowledge and methodologies of the sciences that have been privileged by the research establishment despite the often distorted or circumscribed knowledge and understanding this way of knowing produces. (Principle 4; p. 20).

These principles resonated with our current analysis as we excavated BCEEs through a Black culture and creativity lens, despite difficulties locating them in education research.

As explained in the Commission's report, education research is limited by its "search for facts and (universal) truth," while simultaneously prioritizing "research validity" rather than more inclusive and expansive ways of approaching research (Principle 5; King, 2005, p. 20). They posited that validity, in the context of African people, should emphasize the study of African tradition, hegemony, equity, and beneficial practice (Principle 6). The principles reveal the cyclical nature of research and practice and mutually informing processes in knowledge production and the context

of these processes (e.g., cultural/historical, political/economic, and professional; Principle 7). The commission asserted African people have a central role and ownership in their future, requiring access to resources and “education that services our collective interests” (Principle 8; p. 21). They also contended education is a human right and students’ educational experiences should be reflective of excellence (Principle 9). Their last principle acknowledges “African people are not empty vessels,” but instead are fully capable of learning, knowledge production, and facilitating the conditions necessary for our liberation (Principle 10; p. 21).

Almost 20 years before the CORIBE report on Black education principles, Boykin (as cited in Neal, et al., 2003) identified nine dimensions of African American culture that were essential components of the African American experience. Boykin’s work alongside the CORIBE principles ultimately influenced the creation of the LDAC. Boykin had long situated Black cultural engagement as not being a separate, add-on, or special occasion type of experience. Rather, Black people engage these cultural legacies constantly, daily, and in multi-faceted ways. We do so not simply because it is enjoyable, but because it is psychologically necessary.

Collectively, CORIBE’s 10 principles represent the central framing of this article and our meaning-making of BCEEs as African centered and grounded in cultural engagement. The commission focused a great deal of their perspectives on K–12 schooling, yet the principles have implications for postsecondary education. The principles provide an epistemological lens that names and validates Black “ways of knowing,” particularly those emerging from Black creativity and culture. Further, these African-centered principles have implications for Black student success in higher education and for democratizing educational experiences and research for all students.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING

We translated the CORIBE Principles and LDAC Components into a methodological guide for our exploration of BCEEs, which involved (1) centering Black “ways of knowing” and being (aligns with the focus of this study and frameworks); (2) validating inclusive and expansive creative expressions and experiences cultivated by and for Black people (aligns with the LDAC and key search terms used in our methods); (3) acknowledging how Black creative expression influences and is informed by research and practice (aligns with CORIBE principles as a guiding framework, the literature review, and literature selected for analysis); (4) considering our own positionalities as researchers, observers, and cultivators of Black creative expression (aligns with our discussion of our own positionality in conducting this study); and (5) viewing Black creative expression as synonymous with knowledge production and Black excellence (aligns with data analysis, findings, discussion, and recommendations).

Positionality and Methods

To build our literature database, we met and discussed our positionality and connection to BCEEs as Black scholars, performers, cultural workers, and so forth, within and beyond higher education and our experiences as former students engaged

TABLE 1
Keyword Search Terms

Black
African American
Dance Team
Gospel Choir
HBCU
Black students
Stepshow
Spoken Word
Music Ensemble
Hip-Hop Dance
Praise Dance
Higher Education
College
Music
University

in BCEEs during college and graduate school. We discussed participating in gospel choirs, step shows, poetry slams, listening to Hip-Hop, and so forth, as well as how those experiences were represented in the LDAC. Our discussion concluded with a set of keyword search terms (see Table 1). Using the search terms, we each did separate literature searches via Google Scholar and institutional library databases. We kept each search broad across academic databases using combination keywords (e.g., Gospel Choir + Black students; HBCU + band; HBCU + dance team; spoken word + Black students). We did not limit the search to educational journals, anticipating that literature from other fields (e.g., dance studies, ethnic studies) would emerge. We created a project folder in Google Drive to house the literature we found.

Although our original goal was to identify research focusing on Black students in higher education related to our keywords, we ultimately found the literature on BCEEs in higher education to be sparse and disjointed. We collected 82 pieces of literature, including articles, book chapters, academic commentaries, dissertations, and theses. Following our literature search, the team reconvened to discuss and organize the data. We initially sorted the literature into eight categories that were ultimately condensed into four categories (see Table 2) and examined each item for inclusion in our analysis. Upon sorting and reviewing the items, only 27 met our criteria: (1) focused on a specific BCEE, meaning it highlighted an actual initiative or effort; (2) highlighted the value of BCEEs for Black students, or college students broadly; (3) situated within a higher education context. Items failing to meet these criteria were incorporated alongside other relevant literature to contextualize and make sense of the data for each BCEE. For example, Boyer (1979) was not included in our database because it focuses on gospel choirs, but not on

TABLE 2
Literature Categories

Folder	# of Works	# Included in Database	Database Citations
Art/theatre	3	0	
Dance teams/ marching bands/ stepping	20	10	Bowie & Siriano, 2011; Carter, 2013; Clark, 2019; Cragun, 2020; Fine, 1991; Hatcher Puzzo, 2014; Kerr-Berry, 2012; Malone, 1990; McGreggor, 2020; Walker 2019
Music/gospel choir	20	12	Dilling, 1995; Harrison, 2014; Howell, 2019; McCrary, 2001; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Schuff, 2014; Snorten, 2010; Strayhorn. 2011; Walker & Hamann, 1995; Walker & Young, 2003; Young, 2005
Spoken word/ poetry	40	5	Desai, 2016; Endsley, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2017; Muehl & Muehl, 1976; Williams & Stover, 2019
TOTAL	82	27	27

students and is not situated in a higher education context. However, Boyer provides an overview of historical and contemporary gospel music and provides context for one section of our findings on gospel music. In another example, we originally found 40 items related to spoken word poetry but, upon further examination, only five matched our criteria of being situated in higher education. The remaining were K–12 related. Rather than completely dismiss the articles related to K–12, we instead used them to offer a broader literature base for the items we included in the database. For our analysis, we focused on identifying how the authors of each piece discussed the BCEE form and its role in higher education. We organized our analysis into three BCEE areas: Movement and Dance (Freedom of Movement), Music and Black Aesthetics (Freedom of Voice), and Spoken Word Poetry (Freedom of Tongue).

Limitations

Our data is not without limitations. It was challenging at points to sort the data because our search was broadened to include expansive and inclusive scholarship on BCEEs. Allowing flexibility in the search was necessary to ensure we had sufficient data for analyses. For example, although we would not typically include theses and dissertations in our database, it was necessary to do so given the limited literature on BCEEs. Further, we had planned to focus on research articles, but found it necessary to also include a book and/or book chapters given the information available. Also, the

literature we ultimately included in the database was not robust enough to constitute a finite dataset; hence our decision to use additional literature to help frame our analyses. We also agreed that knowledge production and information about BCEE does not exist solely in journals, resulting in our decision to broaden which publication sources counted (e.g., journals, book chapters, dissertations). Further, we agreed that BCEE goes well beyond what we found for our analyses, but we focused on what was available because of our data search.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, we describe each form of BCEE represented in the literature. Our analyses focus on the form itself and is framed by the literature in our database. Additional relevant literature is introduced to offer more context. We attempted a more integrative approach, allowing us to frame the discussion of the BCEE through an African-centered lens as noted in the CORIBE framework. We situated each BCEE as a “way of knowing” for Black people and note its connection to LDAC, higher education, and Black students. We begin our findings with a focus on Movement and Dance (Freedom of Movement; 10) and Music and Black Aesthetics (Freedom of Voice; 12), which had the most articles. We conclude with Spoken Word Poetry (Freedom of Tongue; 5).

Movement and Dance as Black Creative Educational Experiences (Freedom of Movement)

Boykin (as cited in Neal et al., 2003) defined “movement” by stressing its importance within daily cultural interactions. Movement is “an emphasis on the interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussiveness, music, and dance, all of which are taken as central to psychological health” (p. 50). Within contemporary Black American culture, there is an explicit focus on movement through artistic performances like dance and everyday performativity of body language (Jenkins, 2021). The way individuals walk, stand, and project through their bodies communicates strong messages and alternatives to erasure. Where verbal confrontation of stereotypes, microaggressions, and anti-Blackness might be met with dangerous consequences, body posture, movement, and creative expression can present a meaningful counter-narrative for Black people.

Historical Perspectives on Movement in Black Culture

Movement has historically served a critical role in African American culture. In African societies, dance was used as a form of communal celebration (for births or marriages) or as part of daily work. It was a tool to communicate, bring people together, and affirm an optimistic outlook for both the present and future of the community (African American Registry, n.d.; Eze, 2006; Kuwor, 2017).

During enslavement, many cultural practices were adapted to resist the increasingly oppressive laws and mandates created to restrict movement because of its close

association with organizing, community building and, ultimately, escape (Gates, 2013). Yet, Black people strategized to use allowed forms of movement to resist cultural oppression. For example, with “stepping,” Black people used their bodies to replicate drumbeats in response to the outlaw of African instruments (Clark, 2019). In our present context, “stepping is a community dance form, in that it showcases various aspects of not only Black Greek life, but also Black life” (Branch, 2005, p. 316). Referenced as a “vernacular dance,” Branch added that stepping is done within groups, and promotes unity. She explained:

Stepping is a marriage between the visual and the oral, characterized by precise, synchronized body movements that are stylized and percussive. Frequently coupled with songs, chants, and verbal calls, stepping is a vibrant performance practice that has been shaped by the experiences of blacks, yet it continues to evolve. It is a mixture of Old World and New—the product of a variety of African, African American, and American influences that have been melded over the course of decades. (pp. 316–317)

Freedom of Movement on College Campuses

On college campuses, stepping, as just one example of movement, can be entertaining and affirm group identity at the intersection of “cultural performances” and “social drama” (Fine, 1991, p. 55). College students engage in various forms of movement-based learning experiences in the co-curricular. These experiences include (but are not limited to) sports dance teams, Hip-Hop dance crews, fraternity and sorority step teams, marching bands, spiritual praise dance groups, African dance troupes, and Caribbean dance troupes. According to Neal et al. (2003) such learning experiences promote leadership development, reconnect students to important forms of African cultural ethos, cultivate resistance, offer avenues for psychological health, and establish a platform to freely speak, tell stories, and emote using the body as a communication tool.

Referencing Foster’s 2009 book, *Worlding Dance: Studies in International Performance*, Kerr-Berry (2012) pointed out the divide between the traditional “concert-dance” paradigm within most postsecondary academic dance programs and the more social dance experiences happening within the co-curricular. The disassociation of many formal academic dance programs from popular dance forms like Hip-Hop (rooted in Black and Latinx culture) also disconnect them from historical African American dance forms.

Cultural forms of dance directly connect to a community’s way of life. In a study chronicling the development of an academic dance program on a rural HBCU campus, Hatcher Puzzo (2014) shared the intentional ways the college approached marrying dance education and performance with a deep contextual understanding of the social and historical meaning movement conveys within the African American experience. As part of their efforts, the college invited Judith Jameson to give a distinguished lecture establishing the pursuit of artistic dance as a mix of personal passion, social engagement, and historical struggle for African Americans (Hatcher Puzzo, 2014). For some students, regardless of their passion for dance or their natural talents, the Western concert-dance based academic program is purely aesthetic, void of

cultural statement and expressive flexibility and may not seem attractive. Therefore, “social” dance spaces may be more attractive, even if these spaces have largely been ignored and unacknowledged as legitimate spaces of learning by the institution (Kerr-Berry, 2012). Commenting on the tendency for higher education institutions to ignore “social dance” experiences on campus, Kerr-Berry (2012) asserted, “Such practices reflect an inattention to the ‘social body’ of our students. Social and popular forms have always been a barometer of currency and predictors of change and built on the bedrock of African American dance and musical traditions” (p. 50). In many traditional dance programs, arts departments, and performing arts centers, dance is approached from a Eurocentric world view (Kerr-Berry, 2012).

In some ways, the intentional exaggeration of body movement among dance teams, marching bands, and step teams represents an academic juxtaposition of Black ways of being, doing, and expressing (Clark, 2019; Malone, 1990) against the White-centered standards for performance often required within other campus spaces (classrooms, meeting rooms, faculty offices, and across all disciplines, not just the arts). Within the field of dance, some dance education scholars are pushing for the field to question “how bodies dance, what they dance, and who gets to dance” in these programs (Kerr-Berry, 2012, p. 51). Bowie and Soriano (2011) found this learning and engagement can be fostered in the classroom and in combination with other BCEEs. They engaged students from a dance course and an African American poetry course in a 3-week immersive experience “where they bridged the intrinsic power of verse with the fluidity of a choreographic movement study” (p. 45). The project was beneficial in exposing students to dance, poetry, and the history of cultural arts in protesting oppression and injustice. Walker (2019) examined dance curricula in postsecondary institutions, arguing “black dance aesthetics and knowledges” were typically situated on the margins of dance department curricula. She proposed an “intercultural engaged pedagogy” as one way to decolonize dance in higher education (p. 36).

For example, when popular forms of dance like Hip-Hop are offered as courses, it is often for the purpose of building enrollment numbers and not to fully integrate the cultural, artistic, and historical contributions of African American dance into the course of study (Kerr-Berry, 2012). In other words, Hip-Hop within the academy is used as a commodity—to make money and sell a product (courses)—rather than being respected as a rich educational experience. Kerr-Berry (2012) goes on to reference dance scholar and professor, Susan Leigh Foster, and her challenge of the divide between university academic dance programs that are rooted in the concert dance paradigm and the socio-cultural and socio-political nature of more popular forms of dance. According to Foster, many academic dance programs do not associate with dance clubs on campus or experiences that are centered in popular dance or the “diasporic identity” of the student body like swing or Hip-Hop. This creates a literal divide between dance as an artistic study and dance as a cultural way of life—as a reflection of a cultural history and contemporary experience. Quoting Foster, “Art’ dance or ‘concert’ dance dwells in the unmarked realm of aesthetics, removed from

both the social and political, whereas ‘culture’ nights use dance as a marker of, and integral to, a way of life” (Kerr-Berry, 2012, p. 50). This “way of life” might mean that dance becomes an important venue through which people embody ethics of personal agency, activism, advocacy, leadership, and political expression.

Movement in Co-Curricular Spaces

Within co-curricular dance spaces, students and their professional advocates can respectfully develop educational experiences rooted in Black artistic movement and integrative of excellence and hard work. An example of this in practice can be found in the HBCU Marching Band. Malone’s (1990) historical narrative of the FAMU Marching 100 suggests the critical element that makes audiences and even other competing bands respond so favorably to the band at FAMU is not just its embrace of dance (for which it is famous). Rather, it is the tradition and legacy of the band, communicated through its motto: “Perfection in music, highest quality of character, and precision in marching” (p. 59). The band is used for recruitment purposes and represents institutional values. Malone (1990) noted, “Many students attend the university just to play in the band. Those admitted to the band often cite that part of their experience at FAMU as ‘the most significant aspect of their college years’” (p. 73).

The marching band is valued as a critical institutional resource at HBCUs (Clark, 2019). Dating back to the early 1900s, the marching band was used as a recruiting tool because of its organic ability to blend Black cultural forms of expression (expressive body movement, bold dances, vivacious artistic expression) with the idea of college participation. The marching band gave an energetic, culturally authentic introduction to college. Over 100 years later, this legacy continues. In his examination of the experiences of gay undergraduates participating in HBCU marching bands, Carter (2013) shared the insights and comments of several band alumni who noted the marching band experience as most central during college. The marching band was a space of comfort and shelter from the “othering” they experienced daily. The marching band was a unique performance space allowing students to simultaneously “stand out” and “blend in.” Furthermore, HBCU marching band culture enhances sport consumption, promotes community and family, and provides a safe space cultivating loyalty and pride among students (McGregor, 2020). While there is currently ongoing debate about issues of exploitation and equity within revenue-generating sports that make a benefit like promoting “sport consumption” potentially problematic (Beamon, 2008; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Harper, 2016; Harper et al., 2013), there is also a deeper history of the ways that the integration of college football depleted most HBCUs of the elite Black athletes. This flow of talent into wealthier predominantly White institutions (PWIs) helped to build their programs and conferences into multi-million dollar operations and served to exclude HBCUs from this national setting (ESPN, 2019). The ways that the marching bands now contribute to game attendance helps to sustain and support student athletes and athletic programs at many HBCUs.

Student Development Outcomes of Movement and Dance

Leadership and Student Agency

Carter (2013) suggested music-based educational initiatives like college marching bands and dance teams offer an important anti-oppression opportunity where educators “can compellingly move toward social justice by addressing student agency, crisis, curriculum, uncertainty, suffering, successes, artistic expression, and so forth” (p. 40). These co-curricular, dance experiences serve as critical spaces of student development and leadership identity formation within what has typically been considered leisure space. Cragun (2020) asserted that leisure spaces generally help participants form both individual and group identity. Cragun (2020) explains that moments of individual self-expression (showing off, improvisation, cypher performance) are a key aspect of Black identity expression within dance leisure spaces. Individuation intermixes Africanisms like “communalism/collectivity” and “expressive individualism,” and allows the dancer to both participate in a group or communal dance experience and simultaneously express their individual or unique approach to the craft. This positions dance leisure spaces as having expressive flexibility, but as also promoting leadership and agency (because students and staff largely work collaboratively to organize the team, choreograph the routines, and promote the organization’s events on campus). Students are active agents as both individual dancers and as leaders within the larger group experience. The presence of student voice democratizes the space in important ways because students are allowed to bring their existing cultural knowledge (from their home communities and past experiences) to help shape a college learning experience.

Within the college marching band, student leaders often work with the band director to help organize, mentor, and train junior band members (Clark, 2019). Referencing the FAMU Marching 100, Malone (1990) noted:

As a builder of character, pride, self-respect, leadership-and as the record shows, academic excellence-the Marching 100 is unparalleled on FAMU’s campus. The organizational structure of the band is designed to give band leaders an extremely active role in the preparation perfection of half-time shows. (p. 74)

Students also assume leadership roles within other dance-based co-curricular experiences. Cragun (2020) highlighted a university dance team and their work in planning an annual dance showcase at Brigham Young University. Students organize and plan the event, choreograph the performances, and lead the dance teams. Staff of the Multicultural Student Services office (MSS) serve as advisors by providing funding, venue space, and institutional oversight of the program. While the article points out the involvement of MSS helps to ensure annual sustained programming, there is also a political reality present. The university’s control over the MSS department results in “symbolic power of the white majority and continued symbolic violence by ‘dehistoricizing’ participation in multicultural events and normalizing white control of multicultural events” (p. 17). In these co-curricular, cultural, leisure spaces, the institution can exercise power, control, and restraint while still refusing to affirm and

acknowledge the student development and education occurring within these spaces. In other words, the institution can own and control the program, but not affirm and document its impact.

Physical and Mental Health

Dance and movement also promote psychological health. Black students experience racial battle fatigue while navigating the school. The dancehall, juke joint, or nightclub has long been an important space for cultural healing and the release of stress (Admin, 2016; Meszaros, 2019). Dance also serves as a source of mental power and strength. In discussing the value of Hip-Hop dance within academic environments, Lori Teague, director of the Emory Dance Program noted, “This form is about improvisation and individuality—an expression of power and creativity” (Yarbrough, 2020, para. 8). Engaging dance and creative movement allows a self-directed form of learning. While there is undoubtedly an aspect of creative movement that values freeing the body—allowing it to move openly and privileging improvisation—there is also a heightened value for skill development that is not imposed by an instructor, but, rather, is organically embraced by the dancer. Dancers decide what moves they want to learn, what aspects of the dance require more practice, and what components they will freestyle and improvise. Even among more organized dance teams with a lead choreographer, the act of learning the routine is often instructional, self-directed, and communal. Everyone contributes to the development of the routine. This act of “taking back” power and control of one’s life is critical to psychological health (Boykin, et al., 1997). Further, Sulé (2016) references the healing nature of Hip-Hop and its capacity to promote college student belongingness.

Community Building

Experiencing a cultural community is another critical impact of Black cultural dance experiences. Banks (2009) found that participation in the arts among college educated and middle-class African Americans strongly contributed to their sense of racial unity and the continued formation of their cultural identity. Many forms of African American dance are inherently community or group-based. African dance is typically a group performance; Hip-Hop dance usually involves competitive crews or individuals performing within a group cypher; fraternity or sorority stepping, and strolling is a group experience. Community is formed both among the dance crew and within the audience during the performance.

Dance crews often generate cultures of support, challenge, and comfort, the foundation of what it means to be in community. Members of many HBCU dance teams stress how much they value the “sisterhood” formed or how they learned to challenge and support teammates. Pritay Washington (2021) compared the elements of a good dance to the elements of a good relationship, suggesting both include “mutual caring and respect, trust, listening, being present, and a

willingness to be vulnerable and open to possibility” (Washington, 2021, para. 5). But dance communities also develop mindsets and self-beliefs critical to academic and professional success. Several years ago, Strife TV filmed a segment on Hip-Hop and higher education at the College of William & Mary (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCumLjJj2qgU3KrBLApI7DVQ>). The focus was on the culture of breakdancing and the values it embodies. The students interviewed were b-boys and b-girls (break dancers) of all races and academic disciplines. They were not art students; many were majoring in the sciences. These students perfectly articulated how the culture and community of Hip-Hop cultivated life and professional skills they felt would propel them beyond the dance floor:

Breaking gives you that extra free style creativity. You can think freely and come up with your own method of doing things (Tigist, biology and mathematics major).

B-boying embodied three main traits that I'd really, really like to live my life by: hard work, determination, and just plain having guts. When you're out in the cypher you express all of these things in one dance. (Matthew, physics major; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC-D8b2cbSo>)

These comments show how the campus Hip-Hop dance scene pushed them to demonstrate hard work, determination, and courage. In her study of community building and feminism in Hip-Hop, Gupta-Carlson (2010) asserts many young adults who participate in socially conscious Hip-Hop spaces, believe participation can “nurture one’s personal growth and bring together individuals who are dedicated to spreading peace, love, and equality in all sectors of society” (p. 525). In this way, BCEEs can serve as launchpads for other types of engagement in college. Gupta-Carlson (2010) cites the various forms of community-based organizing that takes place within Hip-Hop spaces (e.g., voter registration drives, anti-violence initiatives) as evidence of developing social and political capacity in young adults. The skill development often occurring when students self-promote their upcoming shows and events (social media networks, YouTube video teasers, postcards, and fliers) can be translated to political and community capital within future professional careers. Gupta-Carlson (2010) added,

How these hip-hop artists promote their work not only highlights the personal nature of hip-hop but also shows how hip-hop resembles daily democracy in which change comes about as a result of tireless citizen activity: the collection of signatures, the gathering and presenting of evidence, the holding of meetings, the rallying of people behind a particular cause. (p. 519)

Finally, Gupta-Carlson (2010) shares the comments of several b-girls who stress the traits, values, and qualities developed by participation in a dance crew: strength, resilience, confidence, attentiveness, vision, and the ability to push beyond initial capacity. The dedication these types of experiences build in students grows both courage and confidence while promoting community (Gupta-Carlson, 2010; Jenkins, 2021).

Politics of Expression and Communication

Dancers learn to speak through the body, relaying spiritual sermons through the praise dance or historical pride through the fraternity or sorority stroll (Rosenberg, 2006). Students' bodies are not just moving, they are speaking:

Black dance doesn't stand independently of black history, but rather wordlessly expresses the narrative of a people through movements, productions, and an individual's career. Their work raises social issues with their choreography, strengthens community through their programming, and uses history as a source of inspiration. (https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-story-of-black-history-and-culture-through-dance/YwVx_bMIOiR2eQ?hl=en)

Contemporary forms of cultural illiteracy (an inability to understand and decode the messages and meanings in creative movement) may influence why some faculty and staff in higher education institutions fail to affirm the intellectual, academic, and personal development merit of BCEEs. An inherent focus on White supremacist values and ideologies is a primary reason for cultural illiteracy. In any educational institution, what is deemed as important is taught and what is seen as unimportant is ignored. White supremacist values are often sustained as dominant culture within higher education by faculty and staff who maintain practices that place inherent value on Whiteness while degrading or ignoring Blackness. Mustafa (2017) asserts that while higher education institutions are led by people, White supremacy is upheld by people, embedded cultures, structures, and systems (Mustafa, 2017).

Scholars in and outside the field of higher education argue that college and universities are both a reflection and an engine of racial hierarchy wherein White supremacy is central (Harper et al., 2009; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013;). In the field of higher education, Harper et al. (2009) analyze historic anti-Black policymaking to destabilize assumed linear progress over racial injustice. Patton (2016) disrupts taken-for-granted narratives in higher education scholarship and argues college and universities are “deeply rooted in racism/white supremacy, linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts, and serve as venues through which formal knowledge production rooted in racism/white supremacy is generated . . .” (p. 3). Together, these critical works support what West (as cited in Mustafa, 2017) calls operationalized White supremacy, in that it works “by convincing [Black people] that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples” (p. 713). Further, colleges and universities manufacture these beliefs (Mustafa, 2017).

Mustafa (2017) refers to the creative spaces and practices where Black people engage in acts of self-care, self-definition, and resistance as “Black life-making,” or spaces of possibility and freedom. Undoubtedly, spaces of creative movement can be classified as spaces for “Black life-making.” In his overview of college students' Hip-Hop experiences and worldviews, Petchauer (2010a) noted college students engage in Hip-Hop in a variety of ways beyond simply listening to music (which he notes as a more passive form of engagement). He stresses that breakdancing speaks to the kinesthetic elements of the culture and results in significant personal development

outcomes such as building confidence, offering an avenue for creative expression, and establishing a strong sense of connectedness to a cultural community (Petchauer, 2010). His is one of a very few research studies (see also Guiffrida, 2003) examining the educational benefits of cultural student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Petchauer (2010b) “raises questions about how students can use such organizations and activities to formulate their perspectives of university education” (p. 784). This connects well with Gupta-Carlson’s (2010) idea of “clearing space” and how some feminist-minded women within Hip-Hop scenes often create women-centered Hip-Hop networks, such as women writing circles or girl-only concerts. They clear the space of sexist, misogynist, oppressive mindsets and center the experience on women’s ways of knowing, being, and performing. This concept of “clearing space” can also be applied to the cultural inclusion work Black college students are doing by moving their participation in student organizations beyond personal enjoyment and having fun, toward purposefully “clearing space” to showcase their culture, free of the constant micro-aggressions or explicit racism encountered elsewhere on campus.

Petchauer (2010b) stressed that college faculty and administrative leaders must assess the desirability for a critical mass of students to view university education as lacking important representations of their “ways of knowing” and realities. Too often, Black students must create their own culturally rich learning experiences. And because of who developed the experiences (students), where they are housed (student organizations or cultural centers), and what they involve (Black creative expression), educational leaders are often unaware they even exist or are unable to adequately understand, interpret, and evaluate their educational impact.

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AS BLACK CREATIVE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE (FREEDOM OF VOICE)

Boykin (1994) noted African Americans portrayed certain cultural behaviors only understood within context. These behaviors stem from “ways of knowing” Black people have developed and utilized to navigate the world. These “ways of knowing” have produced some of the most revered and celebrated cultural phenomena including distinct musical artforms that span generations. In this section, we examine characteristics of Black musical performance tradition broadly, in addition to key historical and contemporary examples of musical entities that have developed and evolved on college campuses which we identify as BCEEs.

The Black Aesthetic in Music

It is impossible to discuss Black music participation and performance as BCEEs on college campuses without acknowledging the characteristics of the music itself. This starts with examining the aesthetic by which it is governed. Hall (1993) described the Black aesthetic as “the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which cultural representations were made” (p. 110). The Black aesthetic was critical to the

development of an African American identity during a revolutionary time in American politics, calling for artists to remain connected to Black communities (Neal, 1968). The Black aesthetic reveals that Black culture is nuanced, multifaceted, and dynamic, as reflected by the Black experience.

The cultural and artistic ideals of West African traditions are the primary sources from which the Black aesthetic derived (Williams-Jones, 1975). Black gospel music, for example, has remained in close proximity with these origins by honoring key components such as dancing and shouting, falsetto, repetition, improvisation, communal participation, hand clapping, foot stomping, call-and-response, and oral tradition (Williams-Jones, 1975). These styles reflect historical, educational, economical, socio-cultural, and religious influences on African American experiences (Jackson, 2014). They also challenge White-centric views and norms regarding the transmission of culture, for example, the belief that a viable culture must be written (Gordon, 2004). Black people possess a vibrant culture passed down from one generation to another. This oral tradition has sustained some of the most valuable and sacred parts of Black culture, including music by way of spirituals, blues, and gospel.

Gospel Music Performance

As one of the most vital musical traditions, gospel music honors the contemporary Black religious experience and is deeply engrained in Black life (Jackson-Brown, 1990). Burnim (1980) argued that gospel music is much more than a genre, but it represents a “complex of ideology, aesthetic, and behavior” (p. 69). Gospel and other forms of sacred music are inextricably linked to the Black church, where initial encounters with spirituality and religion take place. These encounters are layered with transformative experiences connected to healing, peace, forgiveness, salvation, understanding of purpose, and other forms of spiritual awakening. Some of these experiences are facilitated by a gospel song from the choir, praise team, or soloist, and considered liberating for attendees who witness the performance. Burke (2015) noted the relationship between gospel music and freedom in this way, “Gospel music is always about freedom: freedom to dance, freedom to express, freedom to move, freedom to be. It is the hope of freedom that drove its humble beginnings and . . . the love of freedom that keeps it alive today” (p. 17).

Improvisation

One way this freedom is exemplified in gospel music performance is through improvisation. While improvisation is not unique to gospel music, it brings a particular earthiness and emotional sensation drastically different from what is conveyed in western European music (Boyer, 1979), something often imitated in other musical genres. Burke (2015) defined improvisation as “interpreting the melody and words in your own way” (p. 18). Boutte et al (2017) also named improvisation as a dimension of African culture, describing it as “substitution of alternatives that are more sensitive to Black culture” (p. 71). Both conceptualizations of improvisation call for an enactment of freedom. This is best conveyed in live gospel music performances. For example, in 1990, Reverend James Moore performed the song *Joy* in a

live recording with the Mississippi Mass Choir. Throughout the performance, the audience stood, clapped, rocked, and sang along. Halfway through the song, the choir director motioned for the musicians to lower the music and for the choir to stop singing. This was followed by Moore talking directly to the audience: “If you got joy tonight, I just want you to help us sing it out in the audience. If you got joy, let me hear you say yeah!” The audience responded affirmatively: “YEAH!” Moore took it a step further, inserting somewhat of a rehearsal into the actual performance connecting the choir to the audience. Turning his attention to the tenor section, he directed them to “give the audience their part” to which they sang the vamp. When the tenors in the choir finished, he then turned to the tenors in the audience and directed them to do the same. Moore repeated this with the sopranos and altos in the choir and audience, ending with everyone singing the vamp together. The audience grew even more enthused with the performance; “the spirit got high,” a phrase commonly used to describe the atmosphere of a high-energy, uplifting praise and worship experience in the Black church. As the song leader, Reverend Moore initiated the improvisation and extended an open invitation for the audience to join. This live performance reflected improvisation integrated with participatory group activity, another salient feature of Black performance (Maultsby, 2000).

The Black Church

As we consider sacred music and performance centered in Black culture within the postsecondary environment, it is also critical to note the role of the Black church in educating Black people. Legal education of African Americans in this country started with the development of schools to educate freed Black people who were once enslaved; many of these schools were housed in Black churches, making them centers of worship, learning, and culture (Young, 2005). The spirituality and religiosity of Black people in the church setting were not only associated with a closer relationship with the Divine or the potential to be “slain in the Spirit;” they were also cultural and very much connected to collective experiences of Black people throughout history. This was seen, heard, and felt in the sacred music they created and performed. The songs and style of singing become “doors to a culture,” narrating the Black experience (Dilling, 1995, p. 64). For example, spirituals like *Ride on King Jesus* and *Wade in the Water* tell the story of Black people’s pursuit of freedom, encompassing for them a belief that glory was on the other side of struggle. In the 1960s, the Queen of Gospel, Mahalia Jackson, recorded and performed *How I Got Over* and *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*, which embodied the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. These and other sacred songs have inspired generations and made their way into the repertoire of contemporary choruses and choirs, including those situated on college campuses.

Fisk Jubilee and the University Singing Movement

HBCUs have nurtured an appreciation for music within students in various ways since their inception. At the forefront of what would become the university singing

movement was Fisk University, founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee. Fisk experienced financial hardship at the time of its founding. As a result, university treasurer and music teacher George White called upon his very talented students to perform, which generated revenue for the institution (Jackson, 2014). The students, known as the Fisk Jubilee, not only saved Fisk but propelled the university singing movement and established the spiritual as a unique genre of Black music.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers embraced a diverse repertoire, but it heavily consisted of spirituals (Jackson, 2014). These arrangements derived from three distinctive musical sources: call-and-response of African American folk singing, African American barbershop quartet, and harmonized singing of jubilee choirs with Western influence (Jackson, 2014). The harmonization was an essential element as each singer's part was distinctly articulated without one voice overpowering another (Abbott & Seroff, 2013). With recordings like *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* in 1909, the Jubilee gained much commercial success which, in turn, broadened their influence in higher education. An Illinois music instructor expressed his sentiments regarding the group to the *Nashville Globe*, a local Black newspaper:

The talent, especially musical and vocal, possessed by the young men and women of Nashville, is sought after by some of the best educational institutions in the country. It is known that the majority of the young people who pursue and finish their musical training are immediately employed . . . and they are pursuing their chosen profession in some distant state. (Abbott & Seroff, 2013)

The success of the Fisk University Jubilee singers is indicative of a legacy that impacted the development of quartets on other college campuses including Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia; Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Straight (now Dillard) University in New Orleans Louisiana; Utica Institute in Mississippi; Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia; Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama; and Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio (Jackson, 2014). The Fisk Jubilee Singers represented the integration of spiritual and religious artistry with Black education and introduced gospel music to the collegiate environment.

University Gospel Choirs

The first collegiate gospel choir was founded in 1968 at Howard University in Washington D.C. The "campus gospel" movement has become so pervasive on college campuses that music departments and Black Studies programs are called into question when gospel choirs are not credit-bearing courses or sponsored by the university (Jackson-Brown, 1990). Present on both HBCU and PWI campuses today, gospel choirs provide a space for Black students to connect and reconnect with spirituality and religion, which have been sources of comfort and refuge for Black people for centuries (Pope & Moore, 2004). Additionally, spirituality and development of a spiritual identity are core tenets of liberal arts education as determined by the Higher Education Research Institute (Strayhorn, 2011). When students are exposed to activities aiding in spiritual development, they can engage in meaning-making as it

connects to their own lived experiences (Parks, 2000). Gospel choirs are sites of exploration to understand the condition by which spiritual involvement supports Black student success (Strayhorn, 2011).

At PWIs, Black students often navigate an unwelcoming campus climate which, in turn, negatively affects their academic and social experiences on campus. One consistent finding among studies conducted on gospel choir participation centers on the reasons why students join and remain in the choir. Black students often stated they joined to meet new people (McCrary, 2001; Pope & Moore, 2004). In fact, Walker and Hamann (1995) argued that the opportunity to interact with others should be a part of the recruitment narrative for students. Thus, the gospel choir is just as much a social space as it is a musical community (Schuff, 2014). The gospel choir environment helps Black students combat the challenges associated with being “the only” or “one of a few” by cultivating a sense of belonging. In the choir, students can engage with their same-race peers which fosters adjustment to college and academic success (Harper & Quayle, 2007). These interactions lead to the establishment of support networks, stability, and ultimately persistence at the institution (see also, Harrison, 2014; Palmer et al., 2011–2012; Sablo, 2008; Snorten, 2010; Walker & Young, 2003).

Gospel choir participation can be situated in the larger discourse around democratizing educational experiences, specifically through the lens of accessibility and freedom of expression. For individuals who desire to sing gospel, the music is extremely accessible and does not initially require a skillset or expensive investments (Chambers, 2016). Black students who participate in gospel choirs have the agency to “go back to their roots” by celebrating and honoring Black tradition through gospel music. They can give voice to what Strayhorn (2011) referred to as the “sounds of Blackness” (p. 147), interpreting their lived experiences and making meaning of them in the ways they see fit. For some students, the freedom of expression they enjoy within the gospel choir setting may not have been something they chose and acted upon otherwise (Dilling, 1995). This means of empowerment makes the gospel choir much more important in Black students’ experiences in education and beyond.

African American Arts Institute

In addition to gospel choirs, performance ensembles on college campuses can facilitate BCEEs. At Indiana University, these experiences are embedded in Black Studies through the African American Arts Institute (AAAI). The founder of the Institute, Herman Hudson, recognized that Black performance was not just for entertainment but could “formally reside in an academic body of knowledge that was Black Studies curriculum” (Howell, 2019, p. 5). Prior to the development of the first ensemble in 1971, only one entity showcasing Black music on campus existed, but it was limited in genre, only focusing on classical music (Howell, 2019). Featuring three ensembles (IU Soul Revue, African American Dance Company, and African American Choral Ensemble), the AAAI has a close to 50-year history of providing a space for students to study and perform several diverse Black music and dance styles.

Ensemble members represent a variety of academic majors and can enroll in the ensembles for course credit.

Along with exposing students to the diversity of Black music and dance, the AAAI ensembles fill another void, similar to gospel choirs. They foster communalism within an academic environment. As a dimension of African culture, communalism is a commitment to social connectedness, including an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privilege (Boykin, 1994). The communalism within the ensembles reflected the fictive kinship among students who participate. Fictive kinship denotes familial-like relationships (e.g., sisters or brothers) among unrelated individuals with shared identities (Fordham, 1996). Fictive kin groups are often defined by race, indicating shared identity. Race, however, is not the only way to identify fictive kinship; individuals who claim membership in the group must have a common objective (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). In educational settings, this is usually related to academic achievement, college access, social interaction, and personal success. In her research on the AAAI, Howell (2019) noted that Black students in the music and dance ensembles referenced the sense of mattering they felt from being connected to their “brothers and sisters” in the course. This meant holding each other accountable to knowing lyrics, notes, and choreography, and assisting one another when needed. For some of the participants, the fictive kinship extended beyond the classroom as they spent time together socially, which strengthened their ability to be in sync and perform well together on stage (Howell, 2019). Ensemble members understood the importance of connecting with each other and their professors, interactions critical in helping them not only perform well but build community.

SPOKEN WORD POETRY (FREEDOM OF TONGUE)

According to Endsley (2016) spoken word poetry can be defined as a public poetry performance through which meaning is negotiated, contextualized historically, and undergoes intermediate social reconstruction and reproduction during each performance of a struggle for power that often results in the expression of a desire for agency. There is no evidence of published peer-reviewed work that explicitly discusses spoken word poetry as a BCEE. However, when examined through the LDAC framework, there is a thread of scholarly literature that draws clear connections between Afrocentric epistemologies, American history, Black cultural languages and literacies, Hip-Hop pedagogy, and the racial opportunity gap.

“Spoken Word” as Black Language and Oral Tradition

Deprived use of their native tongues and access to the “written word” (books, paper, etc.), enslaved Africans relied on the “spoken word” to translate and decode the language of their oppressors (Keith, 2019; in press). Bacon (2010) suggests, bounded by violently oppressive literacy laws, the threat of death, and strict religious doctrine, that learning to read, write, and speak in American standard English was

no easy feat. Literacy had practical implications for enslaved people; Black people wanted access to reading and writing to attain the very information and power White people strove to withhold from them (Williams, 2005). Yet, according to Dalton (1991), Black people made literacy possible by developing “invisible institutions,” called “hush harbors,” “pit schools,” and “root cellars,” that created new acts of written and spoken expressions of words. The main text, however, was the “Slave Bible” from which, according to Bly (2008, 2013), many slave-owners intentionally omitted most of the Old Testament, which talked about liberating people from bondage. There were some literate enslaved Black people who learned to write religious poetry, like Jupiter Hammon, whose 1760 poem, *An Essay on Slavery, With Justification to Divine Providence, That God Rules Over All Things*, quite literally defined slavery as sin (May, 2013).

Prior to enslavement, many Africans believed in “Nommo,” the generative power of the spoken word necessary to actualize life and give people mastery; therefore, language became not only a means of communication, but also a desire for personal presentation, verbal artistry, and commentary on life’s circumstances (Hamlet, 2011; Jackson, 2014). Like their influence in gospel music, Black preachers practiced “call-and-response” as an organic spoken word pedagogy that Rickford and Rickford (2000) suggest evoked emotionality and spiritual transcendence for their fellow enslaved Black congregations. The enslaved began the formation of the Black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that Black English began to form (Baldwin, 1997). Understandably, for many of the enslaved, the ability to read and write represented a form of power and liberty; those who “passed” as literate could convince others they were their own property (Bly, 2008, 2013).

According to peer-reviewed literature about socio-linguistics and Black education, the resulting language, African American Vernacular English (AAVE; also referred to as “Ebonics” or “Black English”) is a legitimate linguistic system with West African origins spoken with variation amongst many Black youth and adults around the world (Labov, 1969; Muehl & Muehl, 1976; Ndemanu, 2015; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010). However, there is empirical evidence of Black students erroneously placed in special education classes because of teacher bias against AAVE, which sparked the Ebonics debate of the mid-1990s (DeBose, 2006; Hall, 1997; Martin et al., 2014; Wheeler et al., 2012; Yancy, 2011). Arguably, Black students who are native speakers of AAVE should receive federal funding to develop language arts education programs tailored to their special circumstances as slave descendants (Baugh, 2015; Smitherman, 2017).

Spoken Word: From Popular Culture to Education

For clarity, examples of spoken word poetry can be found in Donovan Livingston’s performance of “Lift Off” at Harvard University (Livingston, 2019), Brandon Leake’s million dollar award winning performance of *Pookie* on *America’s Got Talent* (Henderson, 2020), and youth poet laureate, Amanda Gorman’s performance of *The*

Hill We Climb at the Inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris (Parsons, 2021). Notably, President Barack Obama hosted the inaugural White House's Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word in 2009, which featured casts from the Hip-Hop inspired musical *Hamilton* (Lundenberg, 2009). Also, according to research by Weinstein (2018) there are over 150 community and school-based organizations globally that serve more than 250,000 youth and young adults through spoken word poetry programs. Many of these entities are non-profit organizations like Youth Speaks; DC Scores; Words, Beats, & Life; Split This Rock; and Urban Wordz NYC, that host youth poetry slam competitions such as Louder Than a Bomb (LTAB), Brave New Voices (BNV), and Hyper Bole, which are designed to replicate adult poetry programs like Beltway Slam, Nuyorican Café, Southern Fried Poetry, and HBO's Def Poetry Jam (Kaya, 2015).

Spoken word poetry programs are also growing largely at PWIs as an expansion of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to support Black and Brown students' college development and engagement with long-standing open mic events such as Juke Joint (University of Maryland College Park), Speak Easy (Hamilton College), Can I Poet (Wake Forest University), and The Stoop (Penn State University; Jenkins et al., 2017). In addition, between 2001 and 2019, the Association of College Unions International (ACUI) hosted well over 700 college and university student teams for their international poetry slam competition, College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational, better known as CUSPI (<https://www.acui.org/poetryslam>). For many HBCUs, however, spoken word poetry is no particular anomaly given the history of legendary Black poets and writers from the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power, and Black Arts movements in America with educational foundations at Black institutions like Sonia Sanchez (Howard University); Amiri Baraka (Howard University); Nikki Giovanni (Fisk University); Gil Scott-Heron (Lincoln University of Pennsylvania); and Langston Hughes (Lincoln University of Pennsylvania; see Experience the Legacy, 2021).

Spoken Word Poetry as Hip-Hop Pedagogy in K–12

Rickford (2016) suggested that by the time rap music in Hip-Hop took off in the 1970s and 1980s, it was clear that Black eloquence, poetics, and improvisational style were as rich as they had been in jazz, preaching, and older Black oral traditions. With songs like *Rock Dis Funky Joint* by Das EFX, *Sound of da Police* by KRS-One, and *Bring tha Flava* by Queen Latifah, rappers and emcees introduced AAVE as mainstream Black language through Hip-Hop music. Hip-Hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement soon to run its course; it must be taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon (Alridge & Stewart, 2005). To be clear, Keith and Endsley (2020) noted that the relationship between rap music in Hip-Hop culture and spoken word poetry is “emceeing”; to “emcee” means to “move a crowd” with rhythmic spoken words, (usually) with a microphone. Thus, rap is simply poetry spoken rhythmically over a timed beat with

bars that must rhyme. Not only are youth localizing Hip-Hop literacy practices in accordance with the varying local configurations of languages, ideologies, and politics, but these complex literacy practices are pushing scholars to critique and expand our very notions of language (Alim et al., 2011).

Given their thematic nature, Hip-Hop texts can be valuable springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing youth, which, according to Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002), may lead to thoughtful analyses translated into expository writing, the production of poetic texts, or a commitment to social action. As a “Hip-Hop literacy,” spoken word poets can manipulate language, gestures, and images to position themselves against or within discourse to advance and protect themselves (Richardson, 2013). According to Belle (2016), Hip-Hop literacies stem from New Literacy Studies (NLS), which emphasizes literacy as an embodied experience with a multimodal underpinning understood as a social practice. Therefore, incorporating slam poetry and Hip-Hop pedagogies in classrooms could help improve racially tense learning environments (Bruce & Davis, 2000).

Spoken word can make learning and engagement conditions possible for Black students to develop a strong sense of cultural pride which, Hall (2007) suggests, facilitates acts of agency and resistance against negative psychological forces (e.g., low academic performance, substance abuse, delinquent activities). In addition, Kinloch (2005) posits spoken word poetry functions as a “democratic engagement” (e.g., code switching, group performances, and peer feedback) facilitating student development of critical intelligences such as (1) agreeing to be listeners; (2) respecting others’ thoughts and ideas; (3) drawing on prior knowledge and home practices to interrogate the usefulness of creative writing and standard academic writing; and (4) refusing to have their identities and writing styles defined in limited categories. Even in suburban environments, students’ academic literate identities are evident in their verbalized concepts of an audience, that somehow writing for their peers motivates them to improve both text and presentation (Smith, 2010).

In terms of curriculum, Desai and Marsh (2005) referenced poetry and spoken word as a critical teaching tool employed in their study to foster critical consciousness, dialogue, and action on behalf of their students. Also, Desai’s (2016) case study details how he facilitated a spoken word class with Black and Latinx students in Los Angeles using popular culture artifacts (e.g., movies and music) that spoke to the realities of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and to engage students in developing a critical consciousness and a commitment to social justice. Watson (2013) posited that providing students space to write freely while denying them the opportunities to exercise their multiple literacies further stagnates academic achievement and can send a disrespectful, underlying message that one form of English is right, while their native language(s) are wrong. Thus, the maintenance of safe space to cultivate spoken word poetry requires practitioners to consider the varied ways in which writing and performance interact with and complicate identity development (Weinstein & West, 2012).

Spoken Word Poetry and Higher Education Research and Praxis

As mentioned earlier, spoken word poetry is expanding as cultural programming in higher education, and so the bulk of work on this topic is published in textbooks written for student affairs practitioners with very few empirical studies. Jenkins et al. (2017), however, provided evidence that spoken word programs on college campuses organically create environments where students are allowed to be different and that encourage simultaneous expression of vulnerability, humor, anger, and apathy. Within the peer-reviewed literature, Williams and Stover (2019) posited academic libraries as traditionally White-centric spaces for academic lectures and author readings that can create conditions antithetical to Hip-Hop and spoken word programs because the content may be perceived as having “profane lyrics” misaligned with the institutional mission. Notably, similar sentiments are shared by K–12 critical education scholars, who suggest that conflict between administrators, teachers, and students often involve processes of interpretation and misinterpretation around language, identity, and culture (Camangian, 2008; Low, 2010; Stovall, 2006). However, findings from Endsley’s (2009, 2016) research about a college student performance arts collective suggested there are possibilities for activism and social justice pedagogy through spoken word poetry that help students negotiate resistance to systemic injustice and navigate through the ups and downs of life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

We defined BCEEs as participatory and performative cultural experiences created either by or for students centering Black artistic expression and aesthetics. We also noted BCEEs manifest in various forms within higher education, including gospel choirs and other music ensembles, through movement in the form of stepshows, Hip-Hop dance, theatrical productions, poetry, and spoken word to name a few. At HBCUs, these art forms are expanded through marching bands and dance teams. Each form celebrates Black life and creativity and can be integral to Black students’ collegiate experiences. Further, these forms can contribute to the lives of all students who engage. Despite their value and promise for democratizing educational experiences, BCEEs have not been widely researched in terms of their benefit in postsecondary contexts.

Black students bring with them a set of unique lived experiences paramount for democratizing educational experiences in higher education. Although limited in breadth, the depth of the literature on BCEEs suggests promise in creating culturally inclusive spaces and instructional practices both valuing Black “ways of knowing,” while also benefiting the entire campus. Our findings indicate BCEEs are optimal for honoring Black students’ cultural backgrounds and affiliations in postsecondary education. Using Black students’ cultural strengths as integral parts of instruction and socialization is important for facilitating a necessary healing process because Black people have been (and are being) dispossessed from our past, connections to our culture, original homelands, languages, and each other (Dillard, 2006). Our

findings reveal that BCEEs can contribute to ensuring Black students “demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities” (Derman-Sparks, as cited in Boutte et al., 2017, p. 71). Further, Dillard (2012) noted the importance of re-membering for Black people “in order to be whole” (p. 4). As Boutte et al. (2017) explained, “The ongoing disrespect of Black bodies, minds, and souls in schools and society include treating Black people as if we are non-beings, virtual blank slates, sites of hate and abuse, and the ultimate ‘Other’ for inscription of White male dominance” (p. 71). One aspect of re-membering in this article was our effort to frame BCEEs in an African-centered framework offered by CORIBE and using the LDAC to understand and describe the BCEE forms we highlighted in our findings.

When institutional leaders, administrators or those charged with programming and curricular responsibilities fail to acknowledge and understand BCEEs, they also run the risk of misinterpreting, isolating, and neglecting Black students’ cultural assets and contributions to the collegiate environment. Further, they miss a key opportunity to critically engage Black students in campus life.

BCEEs are often developed by students via their organizations (e.g., Black Student Union) on college campuses and most likely located in cultural centers. Student organizations serve as grassroots alternative spaces where there is a true sense of intellectual and personal freedom and opportunities for student audiences to foster and control the environment. Through these organizations and spaces, art and creativity cease to be mere entertainment and can be used as tools of activism and vehicles for knowledge production. BCEEs are critical education spaces for social engagement for Black students. These types of outcomes are also necessary in educational spaces where vocal expression of resistance, rage, and opposition are often silenced or ignored.

Institutions have an obligation to support student agency and creativity in developing BCEEs and embracing a stronger commitment to sustain them. For example, gospel choirs are often student organizations operating without the financial stability and resources from the university. In many cases, recognition from the institution does not extend beyond the choir carrying the institution’s name and being on display in marketing materials in the name of diversity and inclusion. To move beyond the rhetoric, institutions can provide adequate and consistent funding for these organizations to ensure their longevity and support students’ academic journeys by way of organizational funding, scholarships, and awards. Such actions indicate an institution’s recognition of the significance of gospel choirs and willingness to sustain them for future generations of students.

Another way colleges and universities can prioritize BCEEs is by situating them in course curricula. Incorporating BCEEs into curricular design adds a level of legitimacy to them within academic disciplines. Giroux and McLaren (1989) suggested “curriculum practices must be developed that draw upon student experience as both a narrative for agency and a referent for critique” (p. 149). When developing BCEEs within curricula, faculty can engage in creative pedagogical approaches in

their classrooms. Creative pedagogy is comprised of three interconnected elements: creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and creative learning (Lin, 2011). Unlike more traditional pedagogical methods in which the teacher disseminates knowledge and the student consumes and accepts that knowledge, creative pedagogy centers continuous student involvement in the learning process (Lin, 2009). Thus, BCEEs present opportunities for students to co-create a learning experience, enacting the freedom so critical to democratizing education.

BCEEs can inform how institutions approach and facilitate Black students' success. BCEEs have not been substantively explored within the literature on high-impact practices. That BCEEs exist yet have not been more substantively investigated reveals the negligence of education researchers and institutional leaders. Harper and Quaye (2009) explained:

Negligence is synonymous with magical thinking; simply providing services for students is not sufficient enough to enrich their educational experiences. Rather, we defend a position of intentionality where faculty and student affairs educators are conscious of every action they undertake and are able to consider the long-range implications of decisions. (p. 6)

Our findings substantiated a need for greater intentionality in research and practice and suggested BCEEs foster engagement, recruitment, and retention of Black students. High-impact practices certainly have a positive effect on student success but Black and other minoritized students often have limited access to identified practices such as study abroad. However, expanding these practices to include BCEEs and designing more research to better understand BCEEs could shift the narrative of high-impact practices as inaccessible (Felten et al., 2013; Harper, 2009). Beyond the tendency to view experiences like dance and hip-hop as purely social, BCEEs have great educative value. However, there is also the issue of who is developing, leading, and sponsoring the experience: Black students and their advisors within multicultural services and university cultural centers. Can dance education in these spaces be seen as equal in intellectual, technical, cultural, and developmental potential as dance education within a college-based academic program? Whether curricular development or adequate support for student organizations, a commitment to prioritizing BCEEs in real and sustainable ways requires an investment in and expansion of opportunities for creative expression on campus. Higher education scholars and administrators must possess a more expansive understanding of creative expression as not simply social engagement and celebration, but also cultural education and remembering.

BCEE literature is limited and more research is needed to better understand and explore the impact of cultural educational opportunities, specifically BCEEs. This research should not only focus on how they retain Black students but also what they teach and develop in students. Education researchers might consider how students' involvement in BCEEs in K-12 settings translate to their involvement in college or college choice. Additionally, research should further explore how campus context affects the development of BCEEs in particular spaces. For example, our findings

indicated BCEEs are prevalent at HBCUs. Given their historical context and roots in Black culture and success, the presence of BCEEs is not surprising. However, that so little research has been done on the marching band and dance team culture and other creative activities at HBCUs illuminates an excellent opportunity to address this research void. At PWIs, research should explore the history of BCEEs, Black student engagement, broader student engagement, and how these forms contribute to the campus milieu, as well as to the creation of high-performing institutions' relative racially minoritized student success (Museus, 2011). Research could explore funding structures of BCEEs, the relationship between BCEEs and campus activism, and cross-cultural learning opportunities facilitated through BCEEs.

BCEEs have played a critical role in honoring the roots of Black aesthetics, challenging Eurocentric views, promoting belonging, and promoting cultural agency and community-building. Research is hardly robust enough to account for the tremendous benefits of BCEEs to Black students and campus communities. We strongly encourage education researchers—particularly those familiar with BCEEs and knowledge of their promise—to construct agendas centering Black creativity as worthy of research and crucial for democratizing educational experiences.

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NOTE

¹Dr. Gloria Boutte gave us permission to print the summary of LDAC from her co-authored manuscript and requested we also note the scholars whose work shaped the LDAC: Boykin, 1994; Hale, 2001; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992; King, 2005; King & Swartz, 2014, 2016; Shade, 1997.

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