



# “Just Holding That Space”: Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Create Counterspaces for Black College Students in AANAPISI/HSI Classrooms

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**Keywords:** Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), Black college students, culturally relevant pedagogy, race and critical pedagogy

**Abstract:** Black college students continue to face the specter of anti-Blackness which creates additional barriers to success and flourishing in higher education. This study investigates how instructors in higher education can provide racial equity to Black students in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms through counterspaces. We use culturally relevant pedagogy to investigate the experiences of 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI to understand better how higher education instructors can utilize counterspaces, places where Black college students can challenge dominant discourses and create a collegial learning environment. We identified three counterspace themes: (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones. Implications provide educators with ways to enact meaningful support both academically and socially to Black-identifying students in college classrooms.

## Introduction

In recent years scholars and instructors have made considerable strides to centralize Black students' racial identities in higher education following the highly contested racial events of 2015 (i.e., the murders of Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and the burgeoning Black Lives Matter Movement [BLM]) and 2020 (i.e., the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and a resurgence of the BLM movement) (Lacy, 2023a; Lacy, 2024a). Black students have endured the

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resurgence of BLM atop the COVID-19 pandemic which some scholars have deemed a triple pandemic for Black students (see Carpenter et al., 2022; see also Lacy, 2023b). As a response to systemic racial injustices, communication scholars have long argued for the dismantling of white<sup>1</sup> supremacy in communication and instruction (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020; Chakravartty et al., 2018; Hendrix & Wilson, 2014; Rudick, 2017, 2022; Ruiz-Mesa, 2021; Waymer, 2021; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023).

## Counterspaces Defined

However, less is known in the communication discipline as it pertains to the creation of intentional pedagogical counterspaces, which are defined as fixed entities (e.g., forums, classroom discussions), academic programs (e.g., mentorship, study groups), and social programs (e.g., sororities, fraternities, and student unions) (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces can mitigate racial microaggressions, a term coined by Chester Pierce, defined as everyday slights and degradations that can lead to mental and emotional material consequences like stress and trauma for students of color (SOC) (Pierce, 1970). Derald Wing Sue and colleagues have since created a typology for RMAs: (1) microassaults (e.g., name-calling), (2) microinsults (e.g., demeaning a person's heritage), (3) microinvalidations (e.g., devaluing SOC's feelings), and (4) environmental microaggressions (i.e., the manifestation of microaggressions in a centralized, specific location like college classrooms) (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2019). Counterspaces have been found to repair/counter harm caused by microaggressions through texts (e.g., ethnic studies readings), everyday validation (e.g., positive racial acknowledgment), environments (e.g., cultural art, banners, and cultural centers), and interpersonal affirmation (e.g., personal safe zones and creative spaces) (Huber et al., 2021).

## Academic Based Counterspaces

The intentionality of counterspaces is growing increasingly useful for Black college student academic and social success (Brooms et al., 2021; Sulé & Brown, 2023). Academic counterspaces are needed for Black students as literature authored by scholars of color and centering Black experiences has the potential to disrupt patterns of white privilege and Black students' marginalization. For example, Lacy (2022) found that after the events of 2020, Black students at a West Coast 4-year university felt more of a need for Black affirming curriculum as an academic counterspace. Huber et al. (2021) also found that after the events of 2020, SOC on the West Coast felt culturally affirming curriculum like ethnic studies, a discipline that centers the experiences and histories of communities of color, can be empowering for Black students as the culturally and racially affirming readings introduce students to scholars and provide respite from white scholars and recognition by way of diverse epistemologies and ontologies.

Although readings are a start to employing academic counterspaces, employing a holistic pedagogical framework of counterspace is also important; that is, creating counterspaces in classroom activities and discussions. As for social successes, STEM fields have experienced an increase in counterspace literature, suggesting that transforming aspects of their field into counterspaces for Black students, particularly on campus discipline-related affirming peer groups, affirming groups for SOC for conferences, and mentoring groups for Black students in STEM (Ong et al., 2018). Additionally, Masta (2021) emphasizes

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1. In de-colonial and anti-racist engagement, this study uses a lowercase "w" when referring to white individuals and capitalizes Black when referring to Black individuals to combat historical writing conventions that perpetuate white supremacy (see Bauder, 2020; Lanham & Liu, 2019).

the benefits of instructors creating discussion-based counterspaces for Black and Brown doctoral students at PWIs to breathe and learn as such spaces demonstrate a genuine concern for students' physical and psychological well-being. As few studies in the communication discipline have explored counterspace's pedagogical utility, we situate the overall counterspace concept in this research study as a bifurcated phenomenon that addresses (1) course curriculum and (2) interpersonal communication.

## Rationale for Counterspaces at AANAPISIs and HSIs

Accordingly, through this study, we attempt to provide a deeper understanding of Black students' experiences at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is federally designated an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution (AANAPISI) and Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) on the West Coast. We argue Black students' well-being at AANAPISI/HSIs has largely been overlooked in communication and education literature. Overlooking Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs could be due in part to the existence of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which were created during the Black US reconstruction years until the Civil Rights era to provide the mechanisms for Black advancement within a white supremacist culture (Clayton et al., 2023; Gasman & Esters, 2024). For example, US higher education began with Harvard in September 1636, then known as Harvard College, being funded by the Colonial General Court wherein the first Black student did not graduate from the institution until over 230 years after the institution was established (Rudolph, 2021). Currently, Black college students occupy approximately 13% of the US college undergraduate population (Lake, 2021), and approximately 10% of the US graduate population (Lacy, 2023b), 53% of all Black college students are enrolled in PWIs, many of which are emerging AANAPISIs, HSIs, or a dual designation MSI (e.g., AANAPISI/HSI), as opposed to the 7% enrolled at an HBCU (Lake, 2021).

Specifically, the in-class experiences of Black students' psychological well-being in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms are critical to their learning process because "at best, Black [college] students feel excluded, and at worst, they suffer from racial trauma" (Sulé & Brown, 2023, p. 8). This study is critical for communication scholarship as Black college students are drawn to attending MSIs for perceived ethnic and racial diversity efforts only to feel underserved upon enrolling (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2022, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Therefore, we focus our attention to the necessity and benefits of in-class counterspaces as a means to highlight where additional support is needed for Black college students at AANAPISI/HSIs during a sociopolitical milieu such as: (a) the US police/citizen's murders of unarmed Black individuals which negatively impacts Black communities (Lacy, 2023a; Lacy, 2024a); (b) the US's education laws/censorship of racial, cultural, and ethnic difference in 36 states<sup>2</sup> which negatively impacts US education for Black students (Stout & Wilburn, 2022); (c) the Supreme Court of the United States overturning of affirmative action/race conscious admissions that enabled Black college students to experience their largest college presence in US history (Lacy, 2023b). And with MSIs enrolling over 5 million under/graduate students per year, most of whom are historically underrepresented and low-income students (Minority serving institutions, n.d.), it is important to determine how faculty at AANAPISI/HSIs can better racially support Black students through counterspaces. Insights gleaned from this study can benefit all higher education, given that effective Black student success initiatives are becoming increasingly interchangeable between PWIs and MSIs (Baker et al., 2021). In what remains of this study, we examine extant literature, outline our methods, provide a discussion, offer pedagogical implications, and explain future directions.

2. States to restrict education on racism: AL, AK, AZ, AR, CO, FL, GA, ID, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MI, MS, MO, MT, NE, NH, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA, WV, WI.

## Review of Literature

### Race and Blackness in US Education

Race, as postured by Allen (2007), is an obstinate systemic determinate which provides privileges to white individuals based on their skin color, and simultaneously oppresses Black individuals by creating a complex psychological space of cultural pride, internalized oppression, and/or systemic discrimination. In US school systems in particular, it has been well documented that Black students have been and continue to be subject to various oppressive phenomena based on their race such as inadequate materials pre-integration, racially hostile environments during post-integration, and beyond (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935; Dumas & ross, 2016). Due to a deathly and turbulent history and systemic entrenchment of anti-Blackness in US education, we situate non-supportive environments for Black students as two different dependent factors: (1) a site of struggle (Kendi, 2019; Orbe & Allen, 2008), and (2) as racially microaggressive (see Sue, 2010; see also Sue et al., 2019). Stated differently, race as a social construct has resulted in anti-Black policy, as well as anti-Black interpersonal phenomena that have deleterious and oppressive material educative consequences for Black students.

### Black Student In-Class Experiences at AANAPISI/HSIs

Scant literature exists on Black students' experiences inside AANAPISI and HSI classrooms, with even fewer studies existing at dual designated MSIs like AANAPISI/HSIs. The handful of studies that center Black students' in-class experiences at AANAPISI/HSIs show Black students contend with various acts of anti-Blackness. For example, Lacy (2022) investigated Black students' classroom experiences at an AANAPISI/HSI and found that Black students desired curriculum that reflected their ontologies and epistemologies. To this end, Lacy et al. (2024) conducted a departmental case study of social justice and antiracist curriculum transformation in a Social Science department at an AANAPISI/HSI and found that departmental efforts at AANAPISI/HSIs can improve their curriculum by providing their SOC with race and social justice curriculum through (1) course readings, (2) land-use statements, (3) disability statements, and (4) faculty interventions that are clearly outlined on syllabi. The authors illustrate how university schools/departments can collectively implement social justice and anti-racist readings, land inquiries, and disability support on their syllabi while also professionally developing faculty to engage in inclusive activities like ascertaining race and having amicable racialized classroom discussions with students. Such interventions proposed by Lacy et al. (2024) correlate to other communication studies like Simmons et al. (2013) who found that Black students at PWIs desired readings from/by scholars of color, as well as Black affirming ideals such as racial discussions and the appreciation of Black culture.

Still, the counterspace concept is imperative for Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs. For illustration, Flores et al. (2023) conducted focus groups of Black undergraduate students in STEM at a West Coast AANAPISI/HSI and found students had stressful encounters with instructors wherein instructors dismissed their academic-related questions which led to feelings of exclusion. Flores et al. also found that Black undergraduates perceived their non-Black and Latinx peers to be exclusionary which added to in-class environments being perceived as unwelcoming. Lu and Newton (2019) conducted one-on-one interviews of Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI and found students perceived their courses to be marginalizing as academic support initiatives on campus were not readily available for them as were for their counterparts SOC (e.g., Latinx and Asian peers). Likewise, Lacy (2024b) illustrates why Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI remain silent and do not participate in the learning process as they (1) felt racially underrepresented in their courses, (2) they avoided (negative) peer attention, and

(3) feared instructor retaliation if they were to speak up and advocate for Black ideals. Here, Black students communicated silence in West Coast AANAPISI/HSI classrooms due to perceiving their dual-serving MSI as racially intolerant of Blackness, which impedes Black students' academic successes at non-HBCU MSIs by not fully engaging them (e.g., Black students) in classroom spaces. Consequently, we argue that the long-term effects of Black students' recruitment, retention, and graduation rates can be improved through the implementation of pedagogical counterspaces at dual-serving MSIs. The few research studies centering Black students' experiences in AANAPISI/HSI courses elucidate how Black students at dual-serving MSIs perceive their in-class experiences to be marginalizing by way of being underrepresented, and due to non-Black affirming pedagogy.

## Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b) is grounded on stimulating instruction for students' in-class experiences. CRP can stimulate Black students in college courses by *affirming* their learning experiences in environments that allow students to perceive themselves as capable of learning (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995a) defines CRP as,

a pedagogy of opposition [ . . . ] not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

CRP aligns with the present study given its utility to offer pedagogical opposition to whiteness which provides a critical collective means to empower Black identifying students at MSIs. The first principle of CRP maintains that students must experience academic success signals a need to foster in-class engagement of Black students. As Lacy (2024b) illustrates, Black students at an AANAPISI/HSI communicated silence, wherein they did not fully engage in the learning process due to their racial underrepresentation, fear of instructor consequences, and a fear of peer backlash. Since a Euro centered lecture style is used in most college and university classes, students and instructors alike often feel comfortable with the lack of student voice (Ladson-Billings, 1996). In cases like these, CRP suggests that instructors should invest more deeply in their student's well-being and find ways to circumvent silences by implementing inclusive stratagems like distributing index cards to all students to solicit their questions and comments about course readings to be used in discussion (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Fostering in-class rapport is critical as Masta's (2021) study provides further insight that Black students desire interpersonal culturally responsive spaces that enable them to experience academic success through social/well-being check-ins. Another study found that the most integral predictor of faculty-student engagement is created and first fostered by faculty's genuine concern for Black students (Wood & Newman, 2017). These studies demonstrate the importance of instructor initiation/invitation in fostering students' academic success.

The second principle of CRP holds that students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence. We argue that curriculum is critical in developing and maintaining cultural competence for Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs as irreprehensible harms throughout education history for Black students cannot be separated from their learning environments or learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Studies illustrate how Black students desire relatable curriculum that: (1) acknowledges anti-Black systemic injustices (Lacy 2022; Simmons et al., 2013), and (2) also provides spaces for celebratory Blackness



like Black joy and Black excellence (Tichavakunda, 2022). CRP's second precept, cultural competence, challenges a white, Euro centered way of teaching, which may not be inherently evident for white individuals (hooks, 2014). For Black students, cultural competence in curriculum is *most* needed post-integration, for example, after the landmark *Brown v. The Board of Education* case given the extreme and intolerable acts of anti-Blackness in US education (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935). Using critical race theory, Huber et al. (2021) shows how ethnic studies has a positive effect on Black and Brown graduate students at a public 4-year university in California during the second wave of BLM in 2020. Under the cultural capital framework, Yosso (2005) illustrates how cultural investment in SOC reorients marginalized students' identities from a deficit mindset to an asset-based mindset in Euro centered pedagogy. Thus, ethnic studies/racially affirming curriculum that offers Black epistemologies and ontologies is vital in instructors' development and/or maintaining of cultural competence.

The third principle of CRP posits that students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. Black students in AANAPISI/HSI classrooms can be empowered to challenge a dominant social group and global (D)iscourse (e.g., white supremacy, and anti-Blackness). Glocke (2016) argues that unlike Euro centered pedagogy, African Centered pedagogy offers a holistic communal/worldview, which is the optimal way for African/Black students to learn thereby challenging white supremacy. To this end, a European worldview encourages values of materialism, control, domination, and linear-ordinal ranking which culminates in a one-size-fits-all approach (Glocke, 2016). Whereas Afrocentricity enables Black students to develop a consciousness that challenges white Euro centered pedagogy by dismantling material capital and hierarchical notions of individualism and instead fostering a communal and liberative educative freedoms of expression and learning (Asante, 2020). We suggest that instructors should employ a variety of epistemologies and ontologies that "acknowledges all identities of personhood in an equitable, affirming, validating, and asset orientation, wherein honest two-way learning occurs that (re)produces critically reflexive knowledge(s) and communication" (Lacy & Chen, 2022, p. 371). In other words, critical consciousness raising begins with instructor's cultural and racial affirming teaching (e.g., interpersonal communication and culturally relevant readings).

The present study builds on previous research by examining more closely *which* types of pedagogical counterspaces instructors at AANAPISI/HSIs can strategically employ for Black students under CRP. Although researchers found benefits of counterspaces, less is known regarding Black college students' narratives as to *which* counterspaces can be employed at AANAPISI/HSIs. Thus, this study is guided by the following research question.

**RQ:** How do Black college students at dual-serving MSIs articulate ways in-class counterspaces can communicate positive racial support?

## Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews of Black under/graduate students were used to collect data as "student testimonies offer a discursive and pedagogical space to cultivate public learning and a beloved community, an aspirational vision for a nation that seeks to reconcile legacies of oppression and close opportunity gaps" (Vue, 2023, p. 55). Here, we outline our positionalities, participant demographics, procedures, and data analysis.

## Researchers' Positionality

Author one is a Black, cisgender, late-30, able-bodied male who is interested in the phenomenon of racial experiences in Black college students. Author one attended an HBCU for a year and a half, an HSI, an AANAPISI/HSI, and a PWI. His research interests are to investigate Black college student affirmation and social and academic successes which seek to provide restorative justice for underrepresented Black and Brown communities (Gormley, 2005; Milner, 2007). Author two is an Asian, cisgender, mid-40, and able-bodied immigrant woman faculty who has taught and mentored Black college students across two historically white universities, one HSI, and one HSI and AANAPISI. She brings to this project her research interests in co-mentoring, communicating marginalized cultural identities, and critical intercultural communication pedagogy. Author three is a Black, cisgender, mid-30, able-bodied male who has taught and mentored Black college students at an HSI and served as a program coordinator for an on-campus academic center focused on improving the retention and graduation rates of Black students. Author three is also a first-generation student who attended an HSI for his undergraduate and graduate degrees. His research centers on the nexus of rhetoric, race, media, and Black male studies.

## Participant Demographics

Participants in this Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt study consisted of 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI on the US West Coast. Participants self-identified as Black, which we define as US-born, and descendants of US enslaved ancestry. Though we explain Black student experiences are not monolithic, nor should Black students be assumed to be lumped together as one singular expression of personhood; rather Blackness is a diaspora, and we investigated only US-born Black perspectives in this study as the majority of the sampled students were West Coast natives as 18 participants were born and raised on the US West Coast, 2 were born and partially raised in the US South and West Coast, and 1 participant was born and raised on the US East Coast.

Participants ages ranged from 18–45 years. Genders included 13 cisgender women, and 8 cisgender men. In total, 11 Black undergraduates and 10 Black graduates were sampled. Of the undergraduates there were three 1st years, one 2nd year, four 3rd years, two 4th years, and one 5th year. Participants' areas of study included communication studies, mass media/journalism, education, engineering, political science, pre-law, and psychology. All 10 graduate students were in masters' programs: six 1st years, and four were 2nd years. This study sampled both Black undergraduates and graduates to bolster findings which places an emphasis on the underrepresented community of Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs (Choi et al., 2023; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019).

## Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, students were recruited through a university-wide research pool that required students to be enrolled in the university. The university-wide research pool allowed for convenience sampling, where students self-selected to sign up for the study. After student's signed up, they received a short 5-minute preliminary survey that culled demographic data to determine eligibility; students needed to be Black and a current student at the university to be eligible for this study. Eligible participants received an email containing a password protected Zoom link with a date and time. In addition to earning extra credit, all participants received a digital \$25 Amazon gift card upon interview completion, personally provided by author one.

Interview duration fluctuated from 35 minutes to 2½ hours, averaging 50 minutes. Interviews took place between February 2021–April 2021. Interviews were semi-structured and were informed by an interview guide which culled from Ladson-Billings’s (1995a, 1995b) CRP, particularly the idea of challenging the status quo and Yosso’s (2005) idea of cultural wealth. Author one conducted all interviews wherein participants were asked open-ended questions such as “based on your experience, can you share what makes an instructor supportive as opposed to unsupportive?” and “how can instructors best support Black students?” Questions sometimes evolved, and participants were asked follow-up questions for clarity (Tracy, 2020).

Data were collected via Zoom transcription and augmented with shorthand field notes in real time (Tracy, 2020) to provide rich context to each participant’s responses. The shorthand field notes were taken in the moment and added to the interview transcripts by highlighting body language and seriousness in participants’ voices. We employed tools such as NVivo to code and review interview transcripts, Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet to record codes, names, and definitions, and Microsoft Word to form participants’ narratives into thematic categories.

## Data Analysis

After interview data were collected, transcribed, and sorted, we conducted the initial thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to interpret the data and make meaning across participants’ experiences. The analysis process consisted of a two-tiered examination (Tracy, 2020), wherein transcripts were coded and analyzed a total of four times.

The first tier of coding involved “open coding” which enabled author one and two to examine what each participant shared (Tracy, 2020). The second examination of transcripts occurred under the open coding process which enabled author one and three to identify secondary patterns that were present in participants’ responses (Tracy, 2020). Within tier one, authors used two separate readings of the transcripts to interpret overarching clusters of similar information to build themes (Tracy, 2020). For example, data were first grouped in a theme called moments of validation based on phenomena that emerged (e.g., responses related to affirming or validating communication).

The second tier of coding and analysis required a deeper examination (Tracy, 2020) of how overarching themes of validation were used in each given context with Black students. Tier two consisted of two additional rounds of closed coding, proposed by Lawless & Chen (2019) which enabled authors one and three to strengthen the saliency of each theme. Tier two was a process that refined clustered phenomena into more crystalized categories of findings.

## Findings

In response to the posed research question, “how do Black college students articulate ways counterspaces can communicate positive racial support inside higher education classrooms,” our analysis underscore three themes concerning counterspaces: (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones.

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## Counterspaces That Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy

Theme one illustrates how Black students call for culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). For example, when asked what he would change about higher education, Vince, a 5th-year communication major emphasized:

I would change how professors start classes. And what I mean by that is, I think, professors need to have almost like an open house or some opportunity to formally meet their students, it can be difficult when you're teaching a large lecture, of course. But I think the professor at some point before the class starts need to look each student in their eye and get to learn their name—even if they don't remember it, you know? They need to get context, on what students are coming into their class with. What are their expectations how committed, are they to this class are you taking it because it's the "G," are you taking me because you need this class to graduate? By [the] time they start figuring out information about students is during course evaluations it's too late, by then, you need to know your demographic deeper . . . I think they need to be able to meet their students and get a general idea of who they are, and you know why they're there.

Vince challenges Euro centered pedagogy by signaling to instructors a need to foster community and personhood. Vince elucidates Ladson-Billings's (1996) pedagogical notions of the US's Euro centered lecture style that is used in most college and university classes, which promotes a minimization of student voice/input.

Continuing Black students' call to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy, Catrina, a 1st-year in psychology shared:

So, in my Africana Studies critical thinking class, my professor is [professor's name]. She does her class differently. She doesn't do points, she just has a contract that you sign in the beginning of the semester, saying that you have to do everything for a certain grade. So, she has listed what you need to get an A, and what you need for a B. What she has listed for an A, you like sign up at the beginning of the semester, and as long as you get everything done and you're actually learning. And she sees that you're learning you get the grade. I really don't think it will apply for a lot of classes, but I think that it could apply to some and that's really beneficial because she's lenient with students. Her classes are really personal, like she sees [understands Black students] and you can tell that she wants like the best for you. I don't think a lot of professors are the same way because I feel like a lot of the times it's just about the points it's not actually about the learning right.

Catrina was introduced to an African style of communal pedagogy early on, which she found stimulating and helpful in her learning illustrating Glocke's (2016) argument that Black college students at a PWI need and appreciate African/a (American) Studies due to the alternative pedagogical paradigms (e.g., Afrocentricity juxtaposed to Eurocentric pedagogy). Catrina challenges "points/percentage systems" as such tools are material capital and hierarchical notions of individualism and are not as liberative as her Africana Studies course (Asante, 2020).

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Jayda, a 4th-year political science major was asked what, if anything, would she change about instructors, she stated:

I feel like some professors teach in a very white narrative and don't express the full truth, and aren't receptive to the truth, because they feel that they're so entitled you know. That's one thing that I would change [if given the opportunity], is the way race is discussed in class. Like how it's centered in whiteness. But still, I think they should make it a requirement for some [white] people to take some of these [race] courses because I feel like they're always preaching to the choir, you know? I'm taking a race and politics class of course I'm going to; you know [get it]. To me, you're teaching about my life. I mean that's why I get so offended when professors misrepresent me because it's like you're teaching me, and you're teaching other people about me, you know. But I mean you're teaching [it] wrong.

Jayda describes feeling misrepresented in classrooms, which leads her to challenge the standard Euro centered pedagogy that is employed in higher education, mainly by non-Black instructors. However, Jayda does not speak up and correct her instructors which continues (Lacy, 2024b). Jayda's experiences support Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), and Yosso (2005) which all indicate that US education racially and culturally misrepresents SOC. This theme illustrates three different ways Black students articulate desires to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy through the use of counterspaces to improve learning environments at AANAPISI/HSIs.

## Counterspaces That Employ Black and Critical Scholarship

The second theme describes Black students' yearning for Black affirming curriculum in their classes. Chloe, a 3rd-year communication major was asked what she would change about her classes, and she responded:

I believe curriculum is easier to guarantee because sometimes these old white professors are just set in their ways. There's no way to guarantee that every professor is going to be accommodating to Black students, that they're going to stick to their word. You know, there's no way to track someone's every move, every class, it's not a guarantee that someone will speak up against it or be heard, so I feel like implementing better curriculum would probably be best.

Chloe's response illustrates how some Black students desire (critical) readings authored by scholars of color, similar to Simmons et al.'s (2013) findings. Chloe explains that some instructors may not "change" their beliefs or become social justice oriented for their diverse body of students, though, they would be more amenable to differing perspectives if readings, theories, and studies authored by Black scholars, along with race-related discussions and activities were an integral part of their school/department's mission similar to Lacy et al.'s (2024) proposed interventions.

Relatedly, Martin, a first-year master's student in mass communication stated:

Most of them [white instructors] are performative in a way, where they just don't do much. I do think when you like, promote Black excellence, professors should research Black scholarship too, and read the articles by both white and Black scholars so they're more accessible for everybody. Because there's a lot of Black journalist columns who aren't getting recognition for

their work, they write some good articles too, and actually we like always read the same white people's articles we're just like?

Martin desires to read scholarship produced by Black scholars but does not understand why Black journalists are excluded from course curriculum for the same recycled white authors. This illuminates Chakravartty et al.'s (2018) findings that show white-authored citations and assigning the same white authors in course readings perpetuate relevance amongst white authors in communication. Additionally, as a graduate student, Martin's experience with a lack of racial diversity in graduate communication curriculum illustrates Chakravartty and Jackson's (2020) findings that reveal communication graduate departments have not included diversity of racial readings which perpetuates Euro centered racial apartheid.

Similarly, Karissa, a 4th-year communication studies senior, recalls the impact two instructors had on her when they employed intentional critical curriculum:

The first Black professor I ever had, [professor's name] is the reason why I switched to communication. He's such an amazing professor, like everything that he did was inclusive, it was intentional. There was so much community built in his classroom, and then taking other people's [white instructor's] classes after taking his class, big difference. I just feel like, how do I say this, some professors they mentioned race or gender and class in a very specific pocket in their curriculum, so I don't really take it seriously if you're only going to talk about it once in a semester. I don't think you genuinely care, but [university professor] did spread it out all the way across his semester, and I had him for ethnography too. He wanted us to be very conscious of the way we interact with certain communities or research sites, and he wasn't afraid to approach things and he didn't tread lightly, so I really appreciated that from him.

Karissa's experiences with two of her professors highlights how instructors can make positive impacts on Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs with inclusive and intentional race-related reading. This idea is captured by Tichavakunda (2022) who addresses the numerous ways higher education, particularly PWIs, impede ways Black students can experience joy in higher education—even in the substance they read. Extending studies like Tichavakunda and others, this theme demonstrates a need for AANAPISI/HSIs to create counterspaces that are intentional and inclusive in terms of readings and curriculum.

## **Counterspaces That Foster Black Excellence Zones**

The third theme highlights Black Excellence Zones we define as hyper-reflexive, interpersonal environments that are Black affirming in ways that acknowledge the humanness and full capabilities of Black identifying individuals in a loving, communal, and asset (not deficient) orientation. For example, Blue, a 2nd-year pre-med student, disclosed:

I took an English class last semester [at the university] and I'm not part of the LGBTQ+ community, but when we got in there the teacher was like okay everyone say your pronouns. It really didn't affect anyone in the class; everyone pretty much said their pronouns. But I just thought it was a way to accept everyone, if that makes sense. It's like getting the community to accept you, like who you are. It was, in my opinion, a very accepting way, even though that's not racial it really opens the door. You matter in the class.

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Blue explains the importance of valuing students' identities and the importance of establishing and maintaining a class community. The idea for community is evident in Blue's excerpt as she herself does not identify as LGBTQIA+, but the mere idea of a community deeply affected Blue's perspective on the instructor and the class in a positive way.

Having a sense of community for Black students is imperative to their experiences in class (Lacy, 2022; Lacy, 2024b). For instance, Angie, a 3rd-year communication major shares how she interprets very initial displays of acknowledgment and validation,

You know in today's world that we live in, it is not enough to not be racist, you have to be anti-racist. So, I had a professor last semester my history class, and you know, her syllabus she made it explicit that she was like you know, I support this, I support that I support this, I support that. That's who I am you know, she was not Black, but she was like I support what's happening right now the Black Lives Matter movement. I support that full time here. So, like, acknowledgement I think that's one big thing.

Angie's narrative perspective exhibits how non-Black instructors can be validating by acknowledging Black student's realities and supporting their racial and social justice efforts from the very onset of class to foster community. This finding is similar to Huber et al.'s (2021) findings that Black graduate students at a Californian 4-year university were interpersonally validated in the wake of 2020 with interpersonal validation.

Likewise, Tiana, a master's student, shares the importance of interpersonal counterspaces for Black students:

We need supportive energy. Not even like checking into the beginning of class, but *just holding that space* and being like y'all got anything on your mind you want to talk about or if you don't want to talk about it now send me an email after. Maybe I'm getting more comfortable with emailing now because I'm a grad student, but like it's okay to email us. I know in large lecture classes, probably wouldn't you know be okay, but like they give us their cell phone numbers and working with us as far as due dates when we have to call in Black, you know.

Tiana articulates how Black undergraduate (and graduate) students look to their instructors for racially affirming spaces at AANAPISIs and HSIs, corroborating the idea that Black students look to such MSIs for perceived ethnic and racial diversity efforts with hopes to be racially validated (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Blue's, Angie's, and Tiana's recommendations align with Masta's (2021) findings which show Black college students require in-class pedagogy that mitigates Euro centered pedagogy and cultivates dialogue by providing voice, space, and racialized respite to/for Black students as part of their integration into the learning process.

## Discussion

This study investigates the narratives of 21 Black college students' experiences at an AANAPISI/HSI on the West Coast with particular attention to the types of counterspaces that can be employed by instructors to better support Black college students' classroom experiences. As places to challenge dominant discourses and create a collegial learning environment (Solórzano et al., 2000), counterspaces

in this study are places where Black collegians at a dual-serving MSI can mitigate Eurocentric pedagogy, employ Black scholarship, and foster Black excellence zones. As part of our discussion, we consider inferences drawn from our findings and offer practical implications for instructors at MSIs and PWIs.

**Mitigating Eurocentric Pedagogy.** Our first theme challenges Eurocentric teaching at AANAPISI/HSIs and PWIs to advocate for a deeper connection in the instructor-student relationship and encourage instructors to adopt different approaches that Black students find to be beneficial to their academic success. Instructor-student relationships should contain a genuine concern for Black students' rationale for registering and attending courses (Hendrix & Wilson, 2014; Lacy, 2024b; Wilson & Hendrix, 2022). As Vince recommended, faculty can invest in the way courses begin their semester, trimester, or quarter. Here, faculty can get to know their students through an open house or instructor-student conferences from the onset because student evaluations are too late to make considerable change for the current class. Instructors should foster rapport early on, beyond the Euro centered lecture style and better understand students' identities and goals. For example, if instructors developed a connection beyond that of the lecture style with students, SOC who may feel marginalized on their campus may be prompted to increase their participation during in-class activities due to feeling a sense of interpersonal relatability with their instructor. By mitigating Euro centered instructor-student power dynamics like the standard lecture in a one-size-fits-all approach (Glocke, 2016), instructors can provide a counterspace whereby Black students and other SOC can be engaged from the first day of class.

Other students articulated a need to provide counterspaces that mitigate Euro centered pedagogy beyond how courses might begin. For example, Jayda articulates an overwhelming feeling of whiteness in her college courses which impacts her feelings of misrepresentation by white instructor's pedagogy. Black students like Jayda who feel misrepresented in higher education classrooms can experience a strong urge to challenge standard Euro centered pedagogy, though they may remain silent and not fully engage in the learning process in courses. By providing a counterspace for Black students to share their thoughts, or concerns, Black students like Jayda might be encouraged, though not required, to teach racial epistemologies and ontologies in a collaborative learning environment. This finding highlights Lacy's (2024b) study that illustrates why Black students at AANAPISI/HSIs will remain silent in college classrooms due to their underrepresentation, perceived instructor retaliation, and perceived peer repercussions. This finding also highlights Ladson-Billings's (1996) idea of challenging the US' Euro centered lecture style, a style that is common across all higher education, even though it encourages the marginalization of student voice/input, or a controlled input of student voices; that is, allowing student voices to be selected when called upon by the instructor through the act of showing/raising of hands or instructor derived cold-calling. The instructor platform provides such a power differential that SOC do not always feel comfortable interjecting their racialized experiences.

Encouraging students to be a part of the learning process is critical as it reduces a Euro centered pedagogy, and, thus, reduces control. For example, reducing the Eurocentric control was mentioned by Catrina as she spoke of an African style pedagogy that she found to be beneficial to her academic success. Specifically, Catrina's experience with a non-Euro learning environment illustrates how some Black students can be validated outside the false purview that the Euro centered model of teaching is "the only" or is "the best" way to teach an increasingly diverse demographic of college students. This finding is imperative as research illustrates that it is highly improbable to challenge a European worldview within a European centered pedagogy as the structure of the two not only embrace racism, white supremacy, and white privilege, but academia is specifically designed to work in the best interest of white students



(Asante, 2020; Glocke, 2016; Rudick, 2017, 2022). Hence, alternative paradigms of teaching like that of Afrocentricity can be employed to mitigate Euro centered pedagogy. Just as Catrina indicates by eliminating the use of a capitalistic-like points system, African/Africana and Black Studies paradigmatic structure operates differently because it is based on the African Worldview; uses an African Centered pedagogy; and contests racism, white supremacy, and white privilege, which greatly benefits Black students' in-class experiences in all of higher education (Asante, 2020; Glocke, 2016).

**Employing Black and Critical Scholarship.** In the second theme, participants described a need to provide curriculum-centered counterspaces (e.g., counterspaces that mitigate white Eurocentric readings that perpetuate whiteness), continue to keep white scholars and authors relevant, and also perpetually marginalizes alternative epistemological and ontological perspectives (Chakravartty et al., 2018). Some Black students like Chloe have little to no faith in white instructor's abilities to be racially affirming to Black students in their pedagogy; hence, they, Black students, feel their course readings, at the very least, should promote inclusion of diverse perspectives insofar as authors of color. This discovery is vital as instructors can glean the importance of providing diverse readings for Black students which is evident not only here, but also in Simmons et al.'s (2013) findings. Engaging Black students in critical scholarship in each respective discipline not only creates a curriculum counterspace for SOC, but it also showcases representation in each respective field/discipline which may broaden Black students' purviews into pursuing graduate studies with said authors of color thereby fortifying disciplinary pipelines (see Lacy & Chen, 2022; see also Waymer, 2021).

Black students like Martin feel a need for curriculum counterspaces in the field of communication due to an overt exclusion of Black scholars' works. Students like Martin seek Black scholarship outside of their graduate course materials due to the lack thereof on course reading lists. The need for this type of pedagogical counterspace highlights Chakravartty and Jackson's (2020) argument that graduate programs in communication reify Euro centered whitewashing of curriculum that they call a "whiteout." The communication "whiteout" refers to the white, male laden readings that microcosmically reify colonial notions of European privilege and domination in the field of communication (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). Students like Martin not only recognize the "communication whiteout," but they can also become disengaged in such learning environments. This idea supports Lacy's (2022) findings that Black students at MSIs need a culturally validating curriculum for their academic success, and also supports Pirtle et al.'s (2021) finding that Black students are ultimately underserved at HSIs. Yet the need for Black-centered curriculum interventions have long been salient since the wake of the landmark *Brown v. The Board of Education* case given the lack of racial relevance and its importance to the learning processes of Black students in US education post-integration (Bell, 1980; DuBois, 1935).

Racial and cultural readings can not only provide representation for Black students, but they can also provide Black joy. Analyzing Karissa's excerpt, she demonstrates how Black college students can be validated and inspired by curriculum and pedagogy when instructors are intentional about their interpretation/s of racial and ethnic realities. Karissa validates Tichavakunda's (2022) study that addresses the numerous ways higher education impede Black students' possibilities and sensibilities for joy, and Black affirming curriculum is one way Black students can experience joy. For instance, employing curriculum-centered counterspaces can increase Black students' positive learning experiences as studies like Huber et al. (2021) show that ethnic studies readings are affirming for Black students, and Lacy (2022) found that Black students desire culturally and racially representation in course readings. Illustrating a fervent commitment to Black students in such a way not only demonstrates inclusion of

Black-affirming curriculum but can exemplify how instructors, departments, and institutions can no longer remain passive/neutral on such matters. Such auspices will need to establish where they stand and when standing in solidarity with the increasing diverse student demographics, Karissa further explains how curriculum centered counterspaces should not be limited to one unit or week; instead, the intentionality of critical/race scholarship should engage students throughout the semester which corroborates Lacy et al.'s (2024) notion that anti-racism and social justice readings should be intertwined within curriculum at AANAPISI/HSIs as opposed to being delimited to one week, or one unit.

**Fostering Black Excellence Zones.** The third theme draws from LGBTQIA+ community's safe zones, as such spaces are also critical for Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs. Students in the current sample explain how they yearn for communal Black-affirming spaces within classrooms. For instance, Blue's narrative illustrates how Black students at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs value community inside classrooms. Blue's narrative reveals how community and being acknowledged is paramount from the onset of classes for Black students at a time where/unarmed Black individuals are being murdered, and curriculum denounces Black experiences. Instructors' establishment of a classroom community is critical, even if it may not be a community that Black students identify with, which extends Wood and Newman's (2017) claim that the most integral predictor of faculty-student engagement is created and first fostered by faculty's genuine concern. Here, it is imperative that faculty initiate such counterspaces to enable Black students to (a) understand their instructor's position in terms of Black (and marginalized student) allyship, and (b) provide the platform for students to accept their instructor allyship.

However, declaring for anti-racism is critical as Angie recalled how her history professor, though not a Black instructor, explicated how she supports the Black Lives Matter movement using her syllabus to ensure her Black students were valued in the learning environment, while also providing notice to white (and other) students who may oppose the civil rights premise that the organization stands for. Angie's narrative highlights a tangible example of Kendi's (2019) argument of making active, antiracist acts, rather than the passivity of claiming non-racist stances, as the instructor committed to antiracist acts through the use of her syllabus. The use of a syllabus also builds on Huber et al.'s (2021) findings that show how "texts" like readings can be used to validate SOC, yet this finding extends how "texts" can include syllabi (e.g., typically the first text reviewed in a course). Angie expresses how such acts are not only memorable to her and other Black students but demonstrate a positive impact on Black students which enable for a more invested experience in the learning environment as compared to the instructor not establishing such a counterspace. Black excellence counterspaces do not merely mitigate Euro centered teaching or include Black scholars as part of the course reading list, but instead this type of counterspace demonstrates a Black-affirming interpersonal commitment above all other types of counterspaces. That is, employing Black excellence counterspace situates Blackness and Black affirming instruction above whiteness and Euro centered power dynamics.

Black excellence counterspaces require a holistic dedication to Black students. For instance, Tiana explained how flexible due dates and instructor empathy is critical for interpersonal success for Black students, but also the act of holding a physical and psychological space is where social-emotional learning can occur. The corroborate Masta's (2021) notion of creating counterspaces as they demonstrate a genuine concern for students' psychological well-being, and Zembylas's (2021) notion of employing anti-racism acts which simultaneously challenges neoliberalism in educational spaces. Tiana's words, "supportive energy" suggests a community where Black students' concerns are heard and valued. Moreover, Tiana

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reflects on her time spent as an undergraduate and indicates that she is just now comfortable emailing instructors as a graduate student which could be helpful to understand Black undergraduates' perceptions at AANAPISI/HSIs. Tiana also mentions working with Black students when they have to "call in Black" following anti-Black events (e.g., police killing unarmed Black people). Instructors can provide equity to Black students with flexible due dates and having access to instructors beyond standard email. This finding supports Black students feeling underserved upon enrolling at MSIs (Choi et al., 2023; Lacy, 2024b; Pirtle et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019).

## **Pedagogical Implications**

Based on this study's findings, we provide two practical implications for higher education instructors to employ for Black students' (and all marginalized students) in-class validation: (1) *Reimagining Syllabus Day and Beyond*, which addresses the need for interpersonal counterspaces, and (2) *Taking Black Scholarship Seriously*, which addresses the need for curriculum-related counterspaces.

### ***Reimagining Syllabus Day and Beyond***

First, reimagining syllabus day to thoroughly establish social justice understandings of systemic oppression can provide a much-needed counterspace for Black students that can establish trust and stands to prompt in-class participation from Black students (Lacy, 2024b). Similar to Glocke (2016) and Zembylas (2021), we argue that instructors must acknowledge that there are students who are privileged by societal norms and SOC who contend with racist discrimination, and as such, pedagogies should not ignore the deep emotional knowledge of their racial experiences in fear of potential backlash from maintaining a status quo. Providing a tangible example of what Kendi's (2019) argument of antiracist acts can look like in higher education classes, instructors can make the act of anti-Blackness an established in-class norm by placing it in course syllabi. Such endeavors can begin with racially validating and affirming statements along the lines of, "This is not 'my' classroom, this is 'our' classroom," and, "I stand with my Black students," and, "I believe Black Lives Matter." As Huber et al. (2021) asserts, affirming environments in higher education are critical for SOC. Simply uttering empty statements of solidarity with no follow-through should not be left to the notion that Black-centered (or social justice-related) words are the end-all, be-all; it should be self-evident that instructors still need to teach/communicate with affirming actions, and with the utmost ethical care. One way to move beyond performativity is to provide students with a number in syllabi that they can text (e.g., a google number). Such access can establish a safe zone for Black (and all) students. Hence, we argue that instructors should ask themselves, "Am I teaching to students, or am I teaching/learning with students?" Instructors should not expect (underrepresented) students to listen and learn when instructors themselves are not willing to listen and learn from their (underrepresented) students.

### ***Taking Black Scholarship Seriously***

Second, instructors can intentionally integrate Black scholarship into their curriculum. Like Lacy et al.'s (2024) study that illustrates social justice and anti-racism should occur across (1) readings, (2) land-use statements, (3) disability statements, and (4) faculty intervention at AANAPISIs, HSIs, and PWIs, we further contend that instructor reflexivity should be a starting point for including Black scholarship. As Lacy et al. (2024) asserts, instructors should ask themselves,

(1) What am I teaching? (2) To whom am I teaching “it”? (3) What does this material reify, support, or challenge? (4) Why should the material be taught to the next generation of thinkers? (5) How might I make changes in myself to serve and connect to students better through my teaching this material? (6) Are my instructor efforts working toward providing an equitable education? (p. 3)

However, extending these interrogatives, instructors should ask themselves, “In what ways am I communicating anti-Blackness through my selected readings for this course?” This concept is supported by Lacy’s (2022) notion of a “culturally relevant curriculum,” where Black students desired to learn from Black scholars. Corroborating both Nxumalo (2021) and Tichavakunda (2022), Black students deserve to read and learn about Black excellence and Black joy in their classes. The onus is placed on instructors to integrate such scholarship and perspectives for a democratic learning environment. Based on participants’ responses, including Black authors in course curriculum can do at least five things: (1) it can showcase Black excellence and scholarship, (2) it can help Black students articulate phenomena that may not be readily understood by dominant culture (Lacy, 2022), (3) it can stimulate areas of research for rising Black scholars (Lacy, 2023b), (4) it can increase the participation of Black scholars during in-class discussions (Lacy, 2024b), and (5) it can provide alternative epistemological and ontological perspectives to non-Black students (Chakravartty et al., 2018). Though Black authors’ work should be integrated throughout the course (e.g., weekly, or included within each unit/module) as opposed to one barrage of Black scholars at or near the end of the semester/quarter when students are mentally checked out to ensure an even distribution of readings and epistemological perspectives per topic/unit (Lacy et al., 2024).

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study presents some notable limitations as it contained Black college students’ perspectives at one institution that is designated an AANAPISI/HSI in one US region. Although we define “Black” as US born, and descendants of US enslaved ancestry, we posit that all Black students’ experiences are not identical, nor should they be treated as such. Still, interviews from Black students at a singular higher education institution provides the lived experiences of part of the Black diaspora at one university. Future studies can include interviews from a multiple site approach in addition to non-Black classmates for their perceptions of how racial phenomena manifests within the classroom, with particular attention to counterspaces. Instructors and academic advisors should also be interviewed for their interpretations of racialized counterspaces inside and out of classroom contexts. Future studies can benefit from interdisciplinary partnerships between social sciences and humanities such as psychology, sociology, political science, public health, history, anthropology, Africana Studies, ethnic studies, communication, and other disciplines to garner a wide array of racial phenomena across courses and students.

## Conclusion

In solidarity with the 21 Black college students at an AANAPISI/HSI in this study, we conclude by arguing that more research on Black student in-class experiences at MSIs like AANAPISI/HSIs is needed as Black students’ experiences at MSIs have largely been overlooked in higher education literature. Using CRP, this study extends research on counterspaces by answering: How do Black college students at dual-serving MSIs articulate ways in-class counterspaces can communicate positive racial support? We highlight three themes produced by our Black under/graduate participants that called for counterspaces



that, (1) Mitigate Eurocentric Pedagogy, which challenges transactional Euro-centric pedagogy, (2) Employ Black and Critical Scholarship, which calls for the integration of Black and critical scholarship in course readings, and (3) Foster Black Excellence Zones, which are places/spaces where Blackness is not under attack, but is instead validated and nurtured to thrive. In other words, Black collegians at non-HBCU MSIs and dual-serving non-HBCU MSIs can benefit greatly from interpersonal in-class counterspaces that are initiated by their instructors, in addition to intentional race-based curriculum-centered counterspaces that are also provided in instructor syllabi. By creating and maintaining at least these two types of intentional pedagogical counterspaces, instructors at AANAPISIs, HSIs, PWIs, and dual-serving MSIs can provide more meaningful support both academically and socially to Black identifying students in higher education classrooms as such instructor-initiated interventions can positively affect Black students' recruitment, retention, and graduation rates.

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