EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF QUEER/TRANS, BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND/OR PEOPLE OF COLOR STUDENTS AT HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF QUEER/TRANS, BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND/OR PEOPLE OF COLOR STUDENTS AT HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

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In this thesis, I use participant interviews with 12 queer student activists at Humboldt State University (now Cal Poly Humboldt) and participant observation from 2019-2021 to provide a qualitative analysis of Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QTBIPOC) student knowledge. While student activism is not a primary site of analysis in this paper, all of the participants of this study identify as student activists which has implications on their overall experience. Participants in this study note the institutional efforts to disrupt institutional memory between student leaders and activists. This study was specifically designed to combat this issue by serving as an archive of their knowledge and experiences. Through the research, large categorical themes emerged such as the commonalities of student experiences of isolation, racism, and not feeling heard; experiencing institutional harm through the performativity of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, bureaucracies, inaccessibility of support, and burnout; and finally how students try to thrive through solidarity, building and maintaining community, being embedded in cultural resource centers, and having the support of BIPOC faculty/staff. Based on the participants' experiences I provide recommendations for invested stakeholders. I also provide an opportunity for participants to speak directly to other QTBIPOC students who are either already on campus or will be coming to campus. Finally, this research presents general insight on how to foster a more supportive

environment for QTBIPOC students as well as advice that is applicable for many student leaders, activists, and peers.

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to see this through. Even if I could go back in time, I would still absolutely choose to do it all over again. It is hard to imagine a reality otherwise. These experiences have changed me at my core and there is no other way around it. I love you all so much, thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I moved to Humboldt County in fall of 2019 from the Bay Area. I was not sure what to expect since I had already gone to a small rural town to pursue my undergraduate degree at a predominantly white institution in the predominantly white town of Ashland, Oregon. I was pleasantly surprised by how many people of color there were on campus. I was one of only a handful of students of color at my last campus so I felt much less alone on the Humboldt State University campus. If anything, I felt much more empowered to be more involved and to participate in student leadership and organizing.

I found myself working at the Womxn's Resource Center (WRC) which was located inside the Multicultural Center (MCC). Constantly surrounded by student activists of color, I felt seen in ways that I could have never imagined. My peers inspired me everyday to stand for something bigger than myself. I was committed to learning and growing. Through the community I found on campus, I was well taken care of. Having administrators of color felt very promising, yet something interesting was happening.

Slowly, I became more angry. Frustration was building. Without fail, everyday there was always something happening. Someone's teacher said something extremely racist. Someone was not getting the support they need to graduate, they will have to stay another year. More students were dropping out. A faculty member attempted to solicit sex work from multiple friends and while he was removed from campus, there was no public discussion. We were being told that we are not allowed to cook in the MCC anymore even though sharing food is one of the main ways we show care for each other. The administration condemning us for not making our space more inviting to white

students and reminded us that we must know that we “are not a women of color resource center, right?” The list of racist incidents was never ending. It was hard to know where to turn.

Sharing our experiences and bearing witness to the injustices each other suffered was sometimes all we could do. Still, we did our best not to leave it at trauma dumping. We spoke on panels and went to meetings to advocate for our community. There were so many meetings. Sometimes it felt like all it would end up being was trauma dumping because there were no material changes to what we were experiencing. Repeating ourselves over and over, the list was getting longer and longer. It felt like the administration was putting us through the wringer, and for what?

This research with queer and/or trans, as well as black, indigenous, and/or people of color, (QTBIPOC) felt like a chance to alleviate some of our disappointment. It was an opportunity to let the people in my community speak from the heart; not have it diminished or distorted. I saw that these students were so well equipped to speak up for themselves and so I simply wanted to provide a platform. Their knowledge is valuable and I feel privileged to get to share it. Understanding these student’s experiences helps inform tangible ways that we can better our collective circumstances. Through amplifying these students’ voices, we learn what steps we should be taking towards equity. Most of these QTBIPOC students have also been involved in student organizing which has had a significant impact on their experience. We activists knew that serving our most marginalized students is a means of serving our whole community. Through this work, we can create a safer and more abundant community.

Due to the ambiguous and political nature of the word queer, I would like to delve into it further.

Terms

The term queer has sometimes been used as an umbrella term for anyone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans. Yet, the official definition of queer is "having or relating to a gender identity or a sexuality that does not fit society's traditional ideas about gender or sexuality" (Cambridge University 2024). The definition of queer is intentionally vague and does not technically follow the rules of sexual orientation identification that would put it at risk of being a disciplinary force. It is within the obscurity that queerness is able to identify with anything outside of the norm beyond being cisgendered or heterosexual. Queer people who often do not follow the roles of heteronormativity are marginalized publicly and interpersonally. Queer and trans people's rights and lived experiences in our society are gravely impacted by these social conditions (Wilchins 2004).

In order to analyze the nuances of their experiences based on their identities, this study utilizes queer theory, critical race theory, and intersectional feminist theory. Queer theory helps understand sex, gender, and sexual orientation as political issues. Queer theory argues that there should not be prioritized ways of being in terms of the expression of desire towards other consenting adults in our society (Sullivan 2003). Again, queer theory, which I explore in the next chapter, is critical of the relationship that all people are expected to have with binary gender and heterosexuality. It also helps contextualize queer activism.

Critical race theory helps understand structural racism and capitalism as oppressive forces that heavily influence how people of color exist in our society. Because the participants in this work are both queer and people of color, they experience society in layered ways. Intersectional feminism helps understand the QTBIPOC perspective as layered and multifaceted. It also creates room for considering other cultural contextualization such as immigration.

These theoretical foundations create space for analysis of those who do not fit in heteronormative, cisnormative, and/or racially privileged ways of being. They also provide the necessary tools to analyze these activists' experiences in light of the multiple identity markers that queer and trans activist students of color of this study hold. Queer theory, critical race theory, and intersectional feminist theory are necessary and foundational to understanding my participants' experiences and perspectives.

While there is still so much research that still needs to be done in regards to understanding QTBIPOC student experiences, there is already valuable research available that I will be referencing. I refer to research that looks at the retention rates of students of color and different factors that impact their sense of belonging. Specifically, I look at research regarding students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). I also reference research about queer students' of color leadership and how the application of frameworks of diversity affects students. I also take a look at peer relationships and how student activism plays a role in student's experiences. Research shows that burnout is a critical aspect of student of color activist experiences as well. After reviewing literature, I will be going over my methods for this research.

I utilized semi-structured interviews to qualitatively analyze the experiences of my participants on campus and in the community. Due to my closely maintained relationships and my positioning within the community, my work is in line with the concepts of activist anthropology and barefoot activism as outlined by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995). I used mixed qualitative methods such as grounded theory, ethnography, and a case study. I also provide a list of the participants along with some of their important identity markers in my methods section. Afterwards, I begin to analyze the data that was collected.

In my data analysis, huge themes emerged. We get a picture of the general experiences of these students in the classroom and across campus. Then we get a look at the institutional harm that they experienced on campus via administrators and institutional structures. Finally, we see the ways that these students continued to try and thrive in this environment despite the circumstances. The research also shows the various things students are advocating for (e.g. more secured funding for resource centers and BIPOC faculty/staff).

Finally, in the conclusion, I provide some recommendations based on the findings of the research. These recommendations are listed and addressed to anybody with institutional or decision-making power that genuinely wants to do their part in bettering the circumstances of QTBIPOC students on campus and in our community. I also provided an opportunity for the participants of this study to speak directly to current or upcoming QTBIPOC student leaders, activists, and peers. This research was not designed with the intention of being useful for the institution. The main intention of this research

was to be helpful in informing and empowering our community by amplifying the voices of my participants. These students have a lot to say and they demand to be heard.

THEORY: QUEER THEORY, CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

Major classical sociologists such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber are just a few out of many who shared similar identities of being white heterosexual men. Many of them remained silent on the subject of gender, sexuality and bodies in this context. Perhaps they assumed that their gender identities and sexual experiences were natural and valid by the way they were experiencing societal expectations. This lack of consciousness about their own social location relates to the sociological idea that "what any individual unconsciously assumes as natural and good (i.e., normal, healthy, and right) are those aspects of one's life that confer privilege and power. Thus, just as the bourgeoisie assert the naturalness of class inequality and of their rule, individuals whose social identity is that of male and heterosexual do not question the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order" (Seidman 1994:611). In short, these classical theorists never examined the social formation of modern regimes around gender, bodies and sexualities, though others who were early sociologists, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and Harriet Martineau (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998), did think about the ways that gender, class and race, shaped peoples', especially womens' experiences.

Over time, Sociology did come to consider modernity and shifts in constructions of identity and power. Sociological views on modernity included efforts to understand

and conceptualize a sphere of sexuality, pleasures, desires, acts, and the organization of bodies as they relate to personal and public life. This resulted in the understanding that sexual and gender identities were constructed and not natural. It also produced discourses around cultural representations, enacted state policies and laws, and the religious and familial interventions into personal life. This means that the making of embodied gendered, sexual selves and codes were interlaced with the makings of the cultural and institutional life of Western societies (Seidman 1994).

One of the ideas that came to be heavily critiqued is the idea of the gender binary (Lorber and Farrel 1991). The binary of male and female, or the idea that there are only gender categories and that they are believed to be very distinct, is a crucial part of our societal need to set clear labels for people's gender performance. Additionally, gender theory demonstrates how cisgendered individuals who identify with the gender they are assigned at birth are considered the norm (Butler 1990). Anybody who does not clearly identify with the binary is considered deviant and ultimately undermines the fixed binary categories which often results in social and/or institutional backlash. For the most part, heterosexuality, where men choose women as partners and vice versa, remains unquestioned due to its proximity to what is considered normal (Sullivan 2003). In the heteronormative context, every person has their role in the nuclear family and are expected to perform such roles in accordance with their gendered duties. These expectations of gender and heterosexuality were also requirements that were built into the laws and policies governing social life.

Queer people, those not fulfilling heteronormative and binary expectations, have existed across cultures and history since time immemorial (Blackwood 1984; Roscoe 1998; Aspin and Hutchings 2007; Sigal 2007; Rifkin 2011; Fernandes and Arisi 2017). My focus is really on the development of queer theory and politics within the United States. I also include some theoretical interventions from Europe. As stated by Seidman (1994), the concept of sexuality as a composition of discrete desires, acts, developmental patterns, and sexual and psychological types is a recent and modern Western occurrence. While all cultures provide socially accepted ways of being for men and women, what constitutes these ways of being are not ubiquitous. More explicitly, Western methods for categorizing and naming gender and sexuality are not universal nor applicable to conceptualizing ways of being in all societies. Michel Foucault (1976) recognized that in our society specifically, the gender binary is a product of heteronormative culture and social conditioning. Additionally, Michel Foucault's work, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1* (1976) provided a deep analysis of the construction of sexualized identities as disciplinary forms that aimed to control queer populations. He theorized about how state control and modern powers are exercised through our political existence. "The law operates more and more as the norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory" (Foucault 1976:301). Contemporarily, Wilchins (2024) argues that queer theory uses Foucault to analyze the effects of disciplinary power where the state, medicine and public take hold of the infinite human potentiality and transform it into these fixed binary oppositions: homosexuality

and heterosexuality, woman and man (Wilchins 2004). These categorizations act in direct opposition to the expansive and infinite potential of queerness. In regards to sexual orientation, queer theory adopts the Foucaultian historical perspective where the categories of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' are said to be inventions of 'expert' knowledge that has ultimately come from medicine, medical texts, psychiatry, psychiatric conferences, the law, the education system and the popular imaginary (Green 2010; Panfil 2018; Spurlin 2019). This causes people to internalize these categories which influences how they will end up organizing their own identities, politics, and practices around these categories. People are influenced to act, conform, and comply with these norms in order to obtain agency, autonomy, and social intelligibility which speaks to the performative nature of gender and sexuality (Butler 1990). As modern social norms began to make homosexuality more normalized, the effects of disciplinary power still show in the limitations around the liberation of people in the LGBTQIA communities in the United States. The state continues to hold the power to dictate the legitimacy of homosexuality as well as the rights and agency that the queer community can act with (Valocchi 2005). Sex, gender and sexuality are political issues which provide a means of regulating populations and literal bodies of people through disciplinary processes set up through the state and civil society.

Before I move onto more discussion of queer theorizing, I explore queer politics as these are related, and they spur each other on in their development.

Queer Activism

The early days of queer activism in the US preceded explicit queer theory. In 1950, the Mattachine Society began in Los Angeles, and was almost solely composed of white men. The Mattachine Society stayed in existence until 1967. The first lesbian organization was founded in 1956 by lesbians of color and white lesbians. While it started as a social club it quickly became a political organization; as it moved into the public sphere, the working-class women who had helped found it (many of whom were women of color) left and founded their own organizations, such as Quatrefoil and Hale Aikane, out of fear of reprisals (Library of Congress). Additional organizing is found amongst queer and transgender youth - of particular note was the group *The Vanguard*, which was composed of queer and transgender youth (most of whom were BIPOC), many of whom engaged in survival sex work in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. This group is credited with helping start resistance to anti-trans women of color oppression and mistreatment at Compton's Cafeteria. Some of these youth were also involved in the riot at Compton's Cafeteria in August of 1966, when trans women fought back when police tried to remove them from the Cafeteria (Silverman and Stryker 2005).

While queer activism takes a huge leap forward in the US with the Stonewall Riots of 1969, there was relatively little theorizing about queer identities or activism in the immediate aftermath. This was largely due to the fact that the LGBT community made a political decision to exclude Trans and other queer identities in order to move closer to the social norm, thus becoming homonormative. This was evident in the first Pride march when Sylvia Rivera (a Puerto Rican/Venezuelan trans activist) was booed

off stage. In line with this exclusion in the political realm, in the early stages of sociological analysis of gay and lesbian populations (the 1980s), “sociologists approached homosexuality as a social stigma to be managed; they analyzed the ways in which homosexuals adapted to a hostile society” (Seidman 1994:612). In the early 1980s, social constructionist studies sought to understand the origin and social meaning around the modern homosexual (Williams and D’Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981; Plumer 1981). This body of literature was wrapped up in the politics of defining the homosexual population as a minority. Additionally, the newly developing theory in the US rarely discussed race or class. Instead, the theorizing was very white. These studies legitimized understanding lesbian and gay cultures in a way that minoritized and essentialized their way of being (Stein 1994) and were the foundation of lesbian and gay studies. While some queer theory (Elia et al. 2014) cannot be differentiated from constructionist texts that are more aligned with the early lesbian and gay studies, in the 1990’s there was a push to shift the discourse from explaining the modern homosexual to questioning and focusing on the operations of the hetero/homosexual binary as a social and political organizing principle (Butler 1990; Seidman 1994).

As is often the case, in the streets politics and academic theorizing are related. For example, later on into the 1980s, there was a shift in gay theory and politics around the issues of race and sex that contested the early conceptualizations of lesbian and gay identities. The emergence of queer people of color political activists’ and writers' (Combahee River Collective 1977; Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Teresa de Lauretis 1990) perspectives started to shed light on the limitations and oppressive nature of white-centric

lesbian and gay political organizing and theorizing. Lesbian and gay people of color had intense criticisms of mainstream gay culture and politics due to the marginalization, devaluation, and exclusion of their experiences and that ultimately ignored the particular modes of oppression that they were experiencing (Lorde 1985; Muñoz 1999; Seidman 1993). It is especially important to recognize that categories of "lesbian" and "gay", as they were constructed in early organizing and theorizing, were criticized for also functioning as disciplining and regulatory structures and political forces (Duggan 2001; Grzanka et al. 2020). Ultimately, the concept of lesbian and gay identity that was the foundation for community building and organizing had been criticized for reflecting white, middle-class experiences (Anzaldua and Moraga 1983, Lorde 1984) and excluding or silencing racialized others. The unstable nature of these identity constructions come from the inevitability that there will be human resistance to, and deviation from, the confinements of identity templates. Queer theorists of color began to present the possibility that "identities are always multiple or at best composites, with an infinite number of ways in which "identity-components" (e.g. sexual orientation, race, nationality, gender, age, ableness) can intersect or combine" (Seidman 1994:615).

Queer theory built upon the gay and lesbian theory and politics of the 1950's-80's and provided new and productive possibilities from these conceptualizations. Queer activism, post 1980s, while it had *always* been rooted in the resistance of queer people of color, had, as noted earlier, become framed as white organizing. This was challenged in the 1990's as queer activism aimed to move beyond white-centric LGBT organizing and theorizing because the undergirding arguments were accused of being homonormative,

single issued, and assimilationist (Weber 2015). Contemporary conceptions of queerness as a political framework have less to do with the identification of sexual orientation itself and more to do with antinormative relationship to heterosexuality and its structural pillars such as marriage, monogamy, capitalism, and white supremacy. The whole point of queer space that isn't focused on gaining access to the pillars of heterosexuality is that it allows queer people to exist without the constraints or disciplining powers of socially constructed sentiments of normality. It also allows folks to divest from investments in privilege, inclusion, and the neocolonial ambitions of Western powers (Grzanka et al. 2020). The growth of queer activism is intertwined with the growth of queer theory.

Queer theory continues to recognize that social rules and institutional orders around sexuality and gender are embedded in our experiences of the body and self in society. It critiques and destabilizes historically normative categories and rules around gender and sexuality. Queer theory allows us as researchers to ask questions about the roles of power and normalized structural forms of domination and oppression.

Queer theory's analytic capacities and methodological strengths comes from its political roots that opposes the postpositive notions of social theory that calls for objectivity, neutrality, and unbiased perspective to the social world. Queer theory ultimately allows us to build on the subjective experiences of queer people as an invaluable source of knowledge. Queer theory is foundationally important in this study for creating ample space for participants to express themselves and self-identify however they see fit; recognizing that there are often difficulties around having autonomous depictions of those with compounded marginalized identities (Rodríguez 2014). Many of

the research participants in this thesis have intersecting marginalized identities (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic background, etc.) that may create barriers to their feeling and being portrayed as autonomous in this study as stated by Rodríguez. Using queer theory as a foundation, my research participants were encouraged to be as autonomous as possible in their identification, expressions, and truth telling throughout the study. Queer theory lays the theoretical foundation to analyze the political and social environment that queer and trans participants are positioned within.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race theory (CRT) is an approach that seeks to understand and combat racial inequity. Critical Race theory grew out of critical legal studies which largely focused on how laws maintained and perpetuated class inequalities and oppression. Critical Race theorists saw critical legal studies as foundational to their understanding of society but it had lacked the consideration of race which is also considered fundamental to how people experience society. Therefore, these scholars built upon critical legal studies to form critical race theory.

Race and racism as an idea and ideology had come from European imperialism that shaped the world into spheres of influence and colonial domination. Neocolonialism and racial oppression, as we will explore, continue in different forms. Race is understood as socially constructed categories for people who share biologically transmitted traits that members of a society consider important. People have been classified racially based on physical characteristics like skin color, facial features, hair texture, and body shape. The varieties of physical traits found today are a product of migration. Since race is largely

based on social definitions, it is an extremely variable concept and can differ intensely depending on the society being analyzed (Macionis 2017). While biological racial categorization has been ultimately discredited, its role continues in maintaining hierarchies in society across class lines. For example, African Americans are almost entirely absent from positions of power in any major political, economic, and social institutions of society. Yet, they widely suffer from every kind of social deprivation such as housing, healthcare, and education.

Race plays into the mechanisms of capitalism. Racism and capitalism had been developed together in the exploitative system that helps both systems of oppression reinforce each other (Robinson 1983). We live in a highly segregated society that continues the racial division of labor with a high degree of racial inequality on all social and economic dimensions. Capitalism as a system relies on the private ownership of productive property. The owners of productive property earn profits by depending on the existence of a non-owning class that has no alternative but to sell their labor-power to these owners. Wealth is then accumulated through the profit and surplus that is extracted from labor. This class struggle develops between capitalists and workers as well as the rights of the capitalists to the surplus (Bonacich 2000). Capitalists will use racist ideology and structure in order to justify exploiting workers with the added layer of racism allowing for further exploitation. “The capitalist system maintains racism in part because racially oppressed populations are profitable. Racial oppression is a mechanism for obtaining cheap labor” (Bonacich 2000:320). The imbuing of capitalism with racism not only allows for racism to persist but it also creates it.

CRT is a framework that originated in U.S. legal studies in the 1970s and 1980s and began as an alternative to dominant white centric perspectives within legal studies. Traditional critical legal studies critiqued the liberal mainstream for its neglect of the ways that laws worked to maintain and further class oppression but still often overlooked racism and race inequity in its narrow focus on social class (Crenshaw 1988). Contemporary CRT can be characterized by topics such as the centrality of racism and the critique of liberal assumptions (Gillborn 2023). It is a framework that indicates that racism is systematically embedded in the social institutions of American society such as the legal system and government policies. CRT argues that racism goes beyond simple personal biases. Our racial system consists of outright racism, where people are oppressed on the basis of who they are, and white privilege, where white people are positioned in our society with systematic advantage. The system of white over black/brown is unchanged unless both racism and white privilege are addressed wholly (Delgado 2012). Systematic racism continues to position black and brown people at the margins of society via their skin color, immigration status, class, and cultural background (Hochschild and Weaver 2007).

Racism is foundational to the United States and is maintained via laws and policies that purposely aim to oppress people of color in order to uphold white supremacy. White supremacy is a system of rules, institutions, power structures, and ideological framework that holds media-influenced and government-supported mainstream values of American White, Western European-descended heterosexual, Protestant, Christian males as normative (Stovall 2016). This prototype of the worthy

person has been instilled with the most societal privilege due to their proximity to those who conquered, colonized, and continue to occupy the Americas. CRT criticizes having the colonial white man as being the standardized norm in society when black, indigenous and people of color remain considered deviant. Colonial forms of discrimination are at the core of the oppression people of color face in the Americas today (Lamana 2019).

Race is an undeniable factor that impacts how people experience American society. However, there are many political and theoretical stances that argue that race, or racism, are no longer meaningful in today's society. To be clear, going forth I am not referring to liberal versus conservative politics in the contemporary American political field but rather liberalism in the overall framing and foundational workings of our modern political system. As early as 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau began discussing the underpinnings of what we know as liberalism, which is the play between two political ideals, liberty and equality. While he did not use the same language, he presented the analysis that liberty as it pertains to autonomous choice is sacrificed and, in some ways, paid as a price when somebody agrees to the contracts and promises of a society, which can include equality (Rousseau and CGD 1923). As we contextualize liberalism as it pertains to us today, it is a political and social philosophy that promotes private property, individual rights and democracy. Liberalism responds to racism by undermining its salience through the assumption that we live in a post racial society because everyone is believed to be treated equally. Growing out of this, is the well documented phenomenon of "Colorblind racism" which is a form of racism that assumes that it is possible to ignore race entirely, and is utilized by most white-centric institutions and individuals to justify

their unwillingness to acknowledge racism (Sondel et al. 2022). It is harmful to assume that American society or institutions can be colorblind to skin color as they have deep historical investments in racism that can never be separated from their existence today (Delgado 2012; Farmer 2020). CRT heavily critiques the mechanisms of liberal racism.

Neoliberalism intensifies the original problems created by liberalism. It is an ideology of freedom and profits that dampens ethical recognition of differences as a tool for toxic individuality (Distiller 2022). Neoliberalism in itself is inherently racist in the way that it seeks to protect private property over the well-being of marginalized people. Race cannot be separated from the interests of property where all of society's fortunes are at stake and all individuals are implicated (Harris 1989). Neoliberalism asserts the idea that everyone is starting on the same footing in society by being afforded equal opportunities when this is not the case. Generational wealth and class privileges are examples of unequal economic footing that are inherent in how people navigate society. In neoliberal ideology, everyone is deemed solely responsible for their own wellbeing in society and the idea is that everyone should be treated "equally." This is where it is important to make the distinction that equity is more important in addressing racism than equality. Equality means that everyone is given the same exact resources. Equity recognizes that everyone comes from different circumstances and resources should be allocated based on those needs to reach equitable outcomes. CRT recognizes that there is a need for the equitable distribution of resources rather than equal distribution.

Even in the case where racism is acknowledged in the neoliberal context, people of color often bear the costs of racism while privileged people are reaping institutional

benefits. One way this happens is through the discourse of diversity. In many institutions, including higher education, diversity is often utilized as a commodity that can be measured and given value. Universities measure their demographics in order to calculate their obtained degree of diversity. Higher education institutions are often guilty of overrepresenting their extent of diversity while being unresponsive to diversity initiatives meant to serve people of color directly (Aguirre 2010). The discourse of diversity (ie. making sure that x proportion of BIPOC people are let in the doors) advantages whites by giving the illusion that the necessary work towards addressing racism has been done when it has not. In actuality, people of color are used as a commodity and tokenized (Burke 2017). Beyond that, white individuals benefit from the proximity they have to their counterparts of color by the knowledge they obtain through cultural exposure and the emotional work done by their counterparts. Racist structures that uphold white supremacy remain intact under a diversity discourse. These problems are indicative of institutional priorities that use diversity as a profiteering initiative rather than one concerned with equitable distribution of resources (Ahmed 2012).

Intersectional Feminist Theory

Intersectional feminism builds off of white feminist theory by offering the perspective of marginalized folk that was not previously included. Women of color made crucial contributions in the foundations of intersectional feminist theory by offering analyses at the intersection of gender, identity, race, and class (hooks 1984; Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Anzaldua 1987). Intersectional feminist theory looks to amplify the voices of people at the margins of society. As noted by hooks (1984), people at the

margins of society have a better view of what is going on in society as they can see along the margins all the way to the center. This adds to the argument that marginalized people are well equipped to speak on their own realities and on the structural systems they experience.

Preceding the use of the words intersectionality or intersectional feminism, there was a growing collection of theories that were created by feminists of color within the postmodern resistance movement (Kingston 1977; Anzaldua 1981; Moraga 1981; Walker 1982; Lorde 1984). These theorists understood that there were gendered, sexed, raced, and class lines where women of color live between and among. "U.S. third world feminism provided access to a different way of conceptualization not just feminist consciousness but oppositional activism in general: it compromised a formulation capable of aligning U.S. movements for social justice not only with each other, but with the global movements toward decolonization" (Sandoval 2000:42). Feminists of color provided intricate analyses of normalized social categories such as gender because their relationships to these categorizations are much different than those of white feminists. Feminists of color have cultural and community investments that differentiate their political interests to include decolonial projects that ultimately look to empower marginalized people globally. It should be noted that these theorists also were making needed corrections within queer theorizing as well. One such theorist was Gloria Anzaldua.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) developed borderlands theory, which argues that as a queer woman of color, she and others live in the borderlands (or liminal/between spaces)

like between the United States and Mexico. Anzaldúa often refers to the mestiza, a woman of a racially mixed ancestry, specifically one of mixed native and foreign ancestry, one who lives in the "borderlands." Anzaldúa argues that the mestiza has developed a new perspective of the world, a new consciousness that has the ability to tolerate multiplicity and ambiguity in the self, also known as mestiza consciousness (1987). Anzaldúa asserts that such multiplicity and ambiguity in the person is a source of power when considering knowledge formations. Anzaldúa further sees knowing and being as a process where one can feel tensions between colonial ways of knowledge development while weaving their multiple identities and experiences into their formations of knowledge. Keating (2006) notes the transformation from mestiza to nepantlera as theorized in Anzaldúa's work). Coined by Anzaldúa, the nepantlera refers to a unique type of visionary cultural worker who moves within and among multiple, often conflicting worlds and who also refuses to align themselves with any single individual, group, or belief system. The nepantlera has the capacity to utilize this inbetween space as a space for social change. Anzaldúa's theorizing is applicable to all participants in the study as coming from immigrant families as well as being change makers themselves.

Anzaldua also does the important work of culturally contextualizing the lived realities of women of color who are subjected to cultural tyranny. Culture forms the beliefs that people function with and which shape how people perceive the version of reality that it communicates. "Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture" (Anzaldua 1987:38). Culture, as a socio-political construct, functions to reflect the ideological norms

of dominant groups in a given society. In this case, it is men who have made the rules and laws that women must abide by. The culture of the church that Anzaldua emphasizes insists that women are subservient to men. This culture also expects that women express a greater commitment to this value system than men. Any woman who rebels risks being a *mujer mala*.

Intersectional feminism as outlined by Anzaldua helps us understand that lesbians of color in this cultural context will be an inherent rebel to the church and traditional value system solely due to her sexual behavior. She will be considered a failure as a woman who is expected to marry a man and raise children in their shared home. She is also subjected to the fear of homophobia and returning home. She must also navigate life in the borderlands where intimate terrorism is a problem. "Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critics of her, when males of all races hunt her as prey" (Anzaldua 1987:42). The woman of color is alienated from her mother culture and seen as alien in dominant culture at the same time. She is no longer safe in her inner world that is being suspended between the different worlds she inhabits. While the cultural expectations of dominant systems often push queer women of color to the margins of society, Anzaldua's articulations of intersectional feminism both help understand their lived realities and strengths built by their specialized perspective on society.

Patricia Hill Collins was one of the first sociologists who wrote about intersectional feminism (1990). Intersectional feminists agree that their experiences of oppression cannot be understood or solved in isolation from each other. She, and

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a foundational legal scholar of Critical Race Feminism wrote about the layering of identities as social positions. For example, a woman of color not only experiences racism. She also experiences misogyny. She experiences intersecting oppression at the hands of white supremacy and patriarchy. Her experiences are also impacted by other facets of her identity such as class and immigration status. This intersectional lens coupled with bell hooks' notion of "white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy" allows for a more nuanced analysis of the social structures at play when examining the layers to the lived experiences of women of color. Intersectional feminism analyzes an individual's experience of structural oppression and privilege based upon the layers of their identity markers as they relate to societal systems. To better articulate the complexity of such layers, Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) coined the term, "matrix of domination" which refers to the interlocking systems of oppression due to race, class, and gender which are all part of the integral structure of domination. Understanding the matrix of domination helps evaluate the pervasive mechanisms of oppression as the root of the problem rather than the identity markers of marginalized subjects themselves.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) noted how the dominant group has investments in the suppression of knowledge production of the oppressed group as the lack of dispute suggests that the oppressed group is willing to collaborate in their own victimization. Dominant groups benefit from maintaining the erasure and invisibility of marginalized communities as it upholds social inequalities. Social inequalities ensure that there are privileged groups and exploited groups of people who continue to work in maintaining

the system of domination. Knowledge production amongst the oppressed group presents the possibility of enhancing their agency and building a rebellion against the powers oppressing them. This is why knowledge production in oppressed groups poses a huge danger to dominant groups. Collins' theoretical contribution calls for "building participatory, democratic interpretive communities across differences of experience, expertise, and resources" as the hallmark of intersectional projects (Collins et al 2021:692). Building knowledge across cultures and various oppressed groups is an effective means of fighting collective subordination and exploitation. Specifically, Collins focuses on how "the complexities of the multiple resistant knowledge projects that inform intersectionality lie in the parallel and intertwining narratives of Indigenous peoples, refugee and immigrant groups, women, LGBTQ teenagers, religious and ethnic minorities, and poor people" (Collins 2021:691). She makes it clear that these subordinated groups face social problems that actually cannot be understood separately from each other.

Intersectional feminist frameworks have brought forth voices that were either silenced or too far in the margins to hear. In academia and the community, intersectionality combats structurally oppressive forces by prioritizing the voices of the marginalized. Intersectional feminist theory is applicable to this research as participants hold at least two marginalized identities (being queer/trans and BIPOC). This research pushes to amplify the voices of those at the margins. It also aims to posit participants as valued knowledge sources who can make the best sense of their lived realities.

Upcoming

The theoretical foundations that I have outlined in this chapter help analyze the upcoming literature that covers the experiences of QTBIPOC students in the university. From retention to participation in activism, QTBIPOC student's experiences can be better understood through the lenses of queer theory, critical race theory, and intersectional feminist theory. Further findings of QTBIPOC student's experiences will be presented following the review of literature on QTBIPOC students and the methods chapter.

LITERATURE: QUEER STUDENTS OF COLOR IN THE UNIVERSITY

As we move to consider the narratives of queer BIPOC students in this specific university, we first need to look at the literature that can be used to help understand folks' experience. We begin by first looking at literature on the retention and graduation of students of color in higher ed, then literature regarding students of colors' sense of belonging. Then I will explore literature specifically on queer students of color.

Retention and graduation for students of color in higher education is a topic that needs to be discussed when trying to understand the experiences of marginalized students in higher education. According to national data, there are clear disparities in graduation rates between certain populations of students of color and their White and Asian counterparts. Six-year completion rates at four-year institutions reveal that African American students were least likely to graduate (45.9%) followed by Hispanic students (55%) (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, Hwang, 2017). These disparities were not specific to first time/first year college students. Students transferring from community colleges also revealed differences in graduation rates by race. Data shows that one in four Asian transfer students graduated and one in five white student transfer students graduated. Meanwhile, only one in 10 Hispanic students graduated and one in 13 Black students graduated (Shapiro et al., 2017). At Humboldt State University, during the years that my participants were attending school, the rates of first-time students graduating with their bachelors within six years was 50%. The percentage of those who were labeled as underrepresented minorities that graduated within six years was 42.5%. Amongst those listed, the lowest percentages were: 33.3% for African

American students, 40% for American Indian students, and 45.4% for Hispanic/Latino students (Cal Poly Humboldt, 2024a).

. Looking at the numbers only tells part of the story; Using unstructured interviews, Dulabaum (2016) studied the retention of African American and Hispanic Males at predominantly white institutions (PWI) where they found that students of color did not always feel like they could relate to instructors, counselors and teachers which was a critical factor in their retention. African American males self- reported feeling stereotyped and discriminated against while being viewed by professors as not belonging or incapable of success (Dulabaum 2016). Through their qualitative study, Moragne-Patterson and Barnett (2017) found that African American students reported feelings of isolation, lack of institutional support, and having to prove their intellectual capability. These feelings and experiences help explain differing rates of retention for these students.

How connected students feel to their institution is an important factor when considering why students may or may not graduate. Students of color report loneliness when having little to no interactions with students and faculty of color, which is common at PWIs. Racial minorities have also been shown to experience cultural dissonance in academic environments at predominantly white institutions due to lack of minority faculty role models and mentors, euro-centric curriculum and little support or encouragement to persist (Hoffman, Llaga, & Snyder 2003). Students of color were shown to be most hurt by racist interactions with faculty and staff at their university where they expect a higher standard of acceptance and cultural awareness in comparison

to the expectations they have of their student peers (Moragne-Patterson and Barnett 2017). Many students also reported being surprised by the microaggressions they experienced from faculty. For example, an African American student recalled a time where they were accused by their professor of cheating because they had a high score on a test and they were forced to retake the test while being monitored (Moragne-Patterson and Barnett 2017). This example demonstrates the ways in which some BIPOC groups are often surveilled and expected to prove themselves in ways that their white counterparts are not. Students of color are pushed to exhaustion when constantly trying to prove themselves despite their records of success.

Students of color that attend schools that are predominantly white with predominantly white faculty often experience instances of institutional, implicit, and blatant racism which result in feelings of isolation and disengagement. According to González, qualitative studies show that various forms of discrimination such as tokenization, perceived double standards, lack of respect from others in the academic community, lack of mentorship, and collegial support negatively impact academic self-confidence (2006). These experiences are also shared by many queer students. According to Weise, Courtney, and Strunk (2021) queer students have been shown to be less likely to report any bias incidents due to the expectation that their report would be minimized or worse, problematized. All of these types of discrimination isolate students and lead to lower retention and graduation rates. These reported barriers and forms of discrimination are just some examples according to studies of what should be considered and can be

done institutionally in order to positively impact the retention rates of queer students of color in higher education settings.

Sense of Belonging

The lack of diversity in higher education institutions also creates challenges for students of color, who may require additional supportive services to feel a sense of belonging (Jani, Ortiz, Sowbel 2011). Faculty who actively work to enhance a sense of belonging for ethnically diverse students through meaningful interactions may influence the students' academic engagement and their persistence toward graduation (Beadlescomb 2019). Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2011) assert that students who perceive their faculty members as being approachable, respectful, and available are more likely to report being confident in their academic skills. Studies have also shown the importance of peer support groups composed of students of color for their overall academic success (Palmer, Maramba, Dancy 2011). While students of color heavily benefit from having faculty of color present and as mentors, studies also show that faculty of color also benefit from similar resources as mentorship and peer support groups (Comer et al. 2017; Abel and Gonzalez 2020; Endo 2020). These systems of support have a positive impact on their continuation in a position. Other factors such as cultural taxation and lack of clarity around their promotion correlate to lower satisfaction in a campus community (Reddick et al. 2020. Satisfaction was also lowest amongst Black faculty at PWIs. These experiences of faculty of color connect to how students of color are often tasked with doing extra work for the community in response to equity issues while having little institutional support.

In studying the factors that impact the retention of graduate students of color at PWIs, Trent, Dwiwardani and Page (2020) found that participants heavily reference the interaction of race and gender in their experiences in PWIs. This suggests the need for an intersectional training framework for faculty when seeking to improve the retention rates among graduate students of color. As discussed in the theory chapter, intersectionality is a concept that refers to the ways that social categorizations such as race, gender, class, immigration status, sexual orientation, ability, and others are interconnected. These categories intersect and influence the ways people with multiple marginalized identities will experience discrimination, exclusion, and/or displacement. This concept is especially useful in addressing issues of social justice and inequality. Students can use the intersectional framework as a tool to reflect on their multidimensional identity which may strengthen their racial identity salience and overall positive perception of themselves (Trent, Dwiwardani and Page 2020). University programs that have been successful in addressing opportunity gaps between students of color and their White counterparts in learning environments by focusing on creating feelings of belonging, implementing a culturally responsive curriculum and considering the many strengths of students (Banks and Dohy 2019). Another factor that institutions must consider is that focusing on the financial needs of students of color has a positive impact on their retention and graduation rates (Banks and Dohy 2019; Moragne-Patterson and Barnett 2017). Finances can disproportionately create barriers for students of color to persevere through school.

By considering the various facets of social and material barriers that students of color face in university settings that white counterparts do not, there is no denying that an

equitable distribution of resources would entail students of color being offered specialized resources and programming. Programs must also make a collective effort to recognize discrimination when it happens and immediately take action to address it and implement strategies to prevent it from happening in the future should be part of retention efforts for students of color (Chang 2007).

Queer Students of Color

Oftentimes, in an attempt to create a more welcoming space for all, schools will strive towards diversity to get more people of different racial, ethnic, gender, age, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds to be part of their institution. While well intentioned, diversity can actually prove to be unhelpful or even harmful by continuing to uphold oppressive ways of being. Kumashiro provides insight to how questioning the concept of diversity can be beneficial to better understanding queer students of colors' experiences,

> What if we think of the "problem" differently? What if we acknowledge that we can ever have full diversity? What if we acknowledge that the practice of including more voices masks the real problem? What if, in other words, we acknowledge that the "problem" is not lack of diversity, but a resistance to diversity (and an insistence on maintaining certain categories of privilege)? What if our question was not, *who has yet to be included,* but rather, *why are certain voices silenced in the first place?* (2001:11).

Educators and administrators would be overlooking real roots to the issues that queer students of color face if they treat diversity as an achievable goal. Providing queer students of color certain resources or opportunities that they were excluded from before is

only part of the issue. It is important to understand and contextualize the history of their exclusion in order to adequately serve them.

In studying leadership and activism exhibited by queer students of color, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) found that self-identified queer student activists of color experienced various challenges. These student activists struggled with juggling their multiple responsibilities on and off campus while longing for rare or practically nonexistent spaces to safely explore their multiple, intersecting identities. Many of these queer student activists of color experienced pressure to support their families and communities. Yet, the support available and accessible to these queer student activists of color was scarce. The extra stressors and lack of support they experienced led to experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and even suicidal ideation for some of these queer student activists of color (Vaccaro and Mena 2011). Duran reiterates that queer students of color may experience hardships because of their identities, yet there is a general lack of resources and representation that is maintained (Duran 2019). Queer students of color have a difficult time finding students of similar identities which may relate to their experiences of depression (Duran 2021). Interacting with people who have experienced similar struggles can positively affect one's mental health but queer students of color regularly have trouble finding faculty and staff who have similar identities to them (Vaccaro and Mena 2011).

Literature shows that having peers with shared identities has a positive effect on queer students of colors' experiences on campus. Hughes (2019) conducted a study to explore the experiences of friendship between queer college women of color and its

relationship to racial and sexual identity development. Hughes (2019) evaluated two dyads of queer women of color friendships, one at a historically black college and university and one at a predominantly white university. Both peer relationships were revealed to have the quality of mutual empathy and other similarities: zest and vitality, awareness of ability to act in the world followed by action, affirming self-image/affirming image of the friend, greater sense of self-worth, and the desire and fulfillment to create more peer connections. These participants showed how the friendships between queer women of color may be a source of reassurance, encouragement for identity exploration and provide information to overcome challenges to healthy sexual identity development in the university setting. Vaccaro and Miller (2017) studied six queer activists of color at a predominantly white university and revealed how participants defined leadership. Queer BIPOC students believed in needing a solid foundation of self-awareness that allowed them to honor their intersecting privileged and minoritized social identities. Queer students of color also engaged in leadership in order to promote social justice by advocating for themselves and other individuals of minoritized backgrounds. There is evidence that queer student leaders of color may also crave leadership development programs that affirm leadership as collectively oriented and non-hierarchical which differs from traditional leadership patterns of stressing individuality, and being hierarchical and position-based. Similar to the findings on women of color activists (Rivera 2023), queer student of color activists also stated they experienced exclusion by white LGBT activist peers in supposedly safe campus spaces. Due to this experience of exclusion, queer students of color activists of

the study felt responsible for creating safe and affirming spaces for individuals living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities similar to them (Vaccaro and Miller 2017).

Space is important for queer students of color. In a study by Garvey et al (2018) that explored outness among undergraduate students that identify as queer and trans people of color, results emphasize how QTPOC students navigate in complex ways their racial, gender, and sexual identities as they negotiate their levels of outness while in college. The study also revealed that the presence of LGBTQ student organizations afforded QTPOC students avenues to mobilize, create community, and engage with critical discourse surrounding LGBTQ issues on their campuses. Each of these opportunities provided by student-run organizations offer QTPOC students spaces to find a sense of belonging that positively affects student retention and success. Environmental influences such as co-curricular involvement and capacity to form relationships with other queer and trans students also had a noticeable positive impact on QTPOC students' higher education experiences (Garvey et al. 2018).

Yet, student leaders of color access and experience space differently than some of their peers. Miller and Vaccaro (2016) found that queer student leaders of color need organizing space that includes their intersectional identity groups in order to provide adequate room for their complex identity development. Singular identity support groups, such as ones based on race or sexual identity alone, will likely be inadequate in providing the kind of support queer student leaders of color need. Queer people of color are often torn between their racial identity and sexual identity and are often forced to move

between social groups that focus more on race or more on sexual orientation (Misawa 2010). In other words, there is little focus on sexual minorities in racially centered spaces while there is little focus on racial issues in mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) spaces.

Understanding how QTBIPOC people of color experience activist spaces is critical to understanding how student leaders of color operate. Pastrana (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with four leaders of color within the Lesbian and Gay movement where they use their intersectional imagination as a form of analysis to understand individual and group level oppressions experienced by participants. QTBIPOC people of color in the United States continue to feel isolated, unrepresented, or disempowered in mainstream lesbian and gay organizations and within organizing spaces. While some movement divisions were acknowledged, such as ideological differences, race was rarely examined in these spaces. Pastrana's (2006) study shows how race, for leaders of color, can act both as a barrier and conduit in the activist work that they engage in. Participants expressed how their racialized experiences inform their decisions around organizing and working towards social change. On the other hand, their experiences of race in organizing spaces can complicate things even as simple as how leadership is defined for leaders of color.

Parker (2016) conducted a qualitative analysis of the complexities of negotiating leadership amongst queer and transgender students of color. Overall, QTBIPOC students demonstrated high levels of resilience and moderately high levels of leadership efficacy but the experiences of QTBIPOC students differed greatly from their white peers

regarding mentorship and involvement in LGBTQ student organizations (Parker 2016). In other words, queer and trans students of color found mentorship and LGBTQ student organizations to be less accessible than they are for their white peers. Another difference was found where transgender students report lower levels of resiliency than their non-transgendered peers (Parker 2016). The findings of this study also problematized the literature that attempts to conflate the experiences of white LGBTQ students with those of queer and trans students of color who have unique lived experiences at the intersection of race, gender and sexual orientation.

Duran and Jones (2020) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study about queer students of color at a historically white institution (HWI) that echoes many of the findings of prior literature. Queer students of color at HWIs encounter marginalization on a structural and interpersonal level due to the legacies of structural oppression. Their study also shows that there is a need to evaluate the effects of overlapping systems of powers as they negatively correlate with queer students of colors' ability to explore their own identities in higher education spaces. The findings of this study also note that queer students of color at HWIs perceive that administrative decision making about larger issues often uphold systematic oppression especially in regards to the de-prioritization of resources for queer people of color. This then ensures the erasure of QTPOC identities in curricula and programming (Duran and Jones 2020). Through counter stories told by queer black undergraduate students in STEM, another study (Levya et al. 2022) has shown that the ideologies of neutrality and objectivity in STEM fields can ultimately function to erase the perspectives of Black queer people in STEM fields both historically

and in the present day. Levya et als study (2022) also showed that solidarity within their peer groups, along with study groups that were specifically affirming their queer and racial identity, had a positive impact on the persistence of Black queer students through their programs.

Queer and trans students of color require that student affairs professionals operate with a queer, intersectional, social justice lens that allows them to support these students in more culturally responsive and affirming ways at the very least.

Student activism on campus

While my research didn't ask students to talk about their experiences with activism on our campus, as discussed in the Introduction, my connections with those who participated was because we were all engaged in campus activism. We knew each other through the struggles in which we were jointly engaged. So, while I don't ask specific questions about activism, I include this literature as a way to understand my, and the participants, living and educational context.

Students are often motivated to participate in organizing and activism on campus for various reasons. Students may be eager to become activists or organizers for reasons such as social justice, equity, environmentalism, and institutional accountability. Some will choose to self-identify as an activist whereas others who are perceived as resistant to the institution may be labeled as an activist by staff and administrators (Linder 2019). Student activism is particularly important in contextualizing the positionality of participants in this research. Most, if not all, of the participants in this research have been in activist spaces on campus at one point or another during their time at university. The

specific and specialized experiences of student activists on campus warrants being analyzed.

Hirsh (1990) identified four central processes in college student activism: consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, polarization, and joint decision making. These processes are critical to student recruitment and participation in movements. These processes are known to then create a willingness for students to sacrifice their own personal welfare for a collective cause. Fung and Adams (2017) found through researching environmental activists on college campuses, that the motivations of these activists are influenced by factors such as the individual's passions, a sense of community, and self-satisfaction derived from activist behavior. These examples of research give some insight on the motivations of student activists in a general sense.

Linder and Rodriguez (2012) conducted research with women of color student activists about their pathways to activism. Many of the activists first experienced marginalization in their own ways which pushed them to understand their marginalized identities. Marginalization refers to social processes in which certain people, based on their identity, are pushed to the edge of society which result in their exclusion or limit their access to resources and opportunities. Marginalization can happen on political, economic, and social levels. Research (Linder & Rodriguez 2012) has shown that women of color activists can experience marginalization in the general campus community as well as in specific identity support groups due to their multiple layers of marginalization. These activists explained that safe spaces include ones where they do not have to explain themselves, their experiences, or their feelings of anger. They also articulated the need

for social justice allies to do their own work around racism and sexism before offering themselves as effective allies.

Chaudhary and Dutt (2020) conducted research that echoes the findings of the previous study when looking into women of color activists in Ohio. The phases through which women of color moved into activist spaces included building awareness of inequality, conscious interdependence, and putting awareness into action. The connections that women of color activists had with each other were a critical aspect of their relationship with, and journey through, activist spaces. "Connections built through shared disadvantage elucidates how women made meaning from their ability to relate and empathize with others who are similarly marginalized through their deepened understanding of community interconnection" (Chaudhary and Dutt 2020:335). In understanding the interconnected nature of their shared marginalization with other community members, women of color activists were able to put their growing awareness into action in their community. I believe this understanding of shared marginalization, created through organizing and activism within the university context, also shaped the experiences and analysis that participants in my research expressed.

Rosati et al's 2019 study showed that student activists also experience marginalization when interacting with student affair professionals. Student activists are marginalized by staffs' misconceptions around student organizing, because they did not feel heard, and they lacked authentic interactions with student affairs professionals. Students in this study noted a disconnect between the perception that student affairs professionals had of them as a conglomerate of angry students wanting something to fight

about rather than as a group advocating for their rights. Students also used activism as a means of educating campus constituents but were often met with not being heard. Student activists felt as though when they were authentically and vulnerable expressing their feelings of marginalization they were often met with inauthentic interactions with student affair professionals. Students also felt as if student affair professionals purposefully prolonged any substantial change to the campus climate or policy in hopes that the group of activists will eventually graduate. Finally, these activists complained about the fact that when they protest, they are often met with the response that they should utilize the "proper channels" in order to be heard, but when they would follow administrative suggestions to utilize formalized channels, they were met with inaction.

The emotions that activists of color experience are sometimes complex and contradictory. In a study conducted by Emejulu and Sobande (2023), they found that activist labor incites conflicting emotions amongst the activists around oppressions and privileges that they experience and witness. Specifically, the vulnerabilities of women of color's activism are considered bittersweet, where both love and discomfort riddle the radical spaces built by and for women of color because they recognize the structural inequalities that shape their social relations.

> It is radical to care about those who are despised and dismissed by society. Looking to mother those to whom care and protection are not typically offered is to fully embrace vulnerability by stepping into an intimate relationship of looking after each other. While this might not transform the world, it does have real, immediate, material and emotional effects in which we can clearly see the dual nature of vulnerability play out in ways that transform and give comfort to activists facing everyday harms (Emejulu & Sobande 2023:89).

In addressing the duality of the vulnerabilities of women of color activists, we are able to recognize the mechanisms of communal care in which these activists carry out their work. In doing this work student centers and organizations can be spaces of refuge from the exclusion and marginalization they experience in the larger campus community. However, there is not enough research that shows how these spaces which are meant to be inclusive still have the tendency to exclude women of color. Rivera (2023) conducted a study of women of color that revealed their critiques of single-identity approaches, their distrust with those they engage with, and how they seek to explore/raise their consciousness. Women of color activists are often marginalized in LGBT spaces where they may experience racism from their white peers. They would also sometimes experience further marginalization and sexism within their own ethnic groups. Consciousness raising was a means of healing through organizing for these women. These women of color organized spaces where they could help raise each others' consciousness. Similar to findings in other studies, the participants in my study also specifically sought out spaces where they would not have to explain their feelings or worry about being seen as crazy. Spaces of refuge made by and for women of color activists are complex and require a special understanding of their needs.

Activist Burnout

Activists of color also often experience burnout in their dedication to activist spaces and organizing work. Burnout refers to the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion that activists may experience while engaging in their advocacy work that ultimately forces them to slow or stop their participation in such work. Queer activists of

color often take on social justice education as a form of activism which entails its own type of burnout (Gorski and Cher 2015). In their study, Gorski and Chen (2015) demonstrate how the culture of martyrdom in social justice education activist spaces often leads people to push themselves to burn out due to being dedicated to their community and the work.

Burnout can happen for many different reasons, however according to Gorski's 2019 research the attitudes and behaviors of white activists play a substantial factor in the burnout that activists of color experience. The actions of white activists include harboring unevolved or racist views, undermining the work of activists of color, being unwilling to step up when needed, exhibiting white fragility, and taking credit for the racial justice work of people of color (Gorski 2019). Gorski's study did not explicitly ask participants about white activists, yet 18 out of 22 participants mention white activists as playing a substantial role in their burnout. One of the ways that white activists create harm and contribute to burnout is through committing microaggressions. Nuru and Arendt (2019) have identified three themes of racial microaggressions that women of color activists experience by white women allies in feminist-ally safe spaces: tone policing, expecting to be educated, attacking and defensive posturing. The study showed that these women activists of color responded with active confrontation, casual consciousness, and aggressive confrontation (Nuru & Arendt 2019). Regardless of the intention of the white allies, these microaggressions ultimately worked to silence women of color activists.

Activists of color also reported (Irwin and Foste 2021) that interacting with whiteness impacted their satisfaction in service-learning programs. Service-learning

programs vary by institutional history and mission but generally refers to any type of service or advocacy work integrated with a learning experience. Irwin and Foste (2021) argue that traditional service-learning programs are rooted in whiteness and facilitate racial capitalism in ways that benefit white students and institutions at the expense of students and communities of color. They outline three critiques of what they call, "white-serving service learning": race and racism are communicated at the level of bridging individual difference, white heroism is promoted without critically interrogating whiteness, and people and communities of color are commodified for the advancement of white students and white-service institutions. They argue that, "developing cultural competence through service-learning reflects how diversity is commodified and understood as an achievable goal" (Irwin & Foste 2021:433). The commodification of diversity relates to how white students and white institutions can demonstrate benevolence and social justice at the expense of the complex humanity of people of color.

Commodification is a general problem in higher education. Dolhinow (2020) argues that the neoliberal focus on education as a product for sale is common practice in higher education today. This framing of education poses students as consumers and university administrators, staff, and faculty as service providers that are more concerned with numbers and funding rather than other aspects of student experiences. The interests of the university and institution begin to resemble that of a corporation. In a neoliberal university, there is an emphasis on corporate-like practices and principles such as efficiency, privatization, and less government intervention. These universities may also

look to directly partner with corporations. Student activism has been on the rise against the corporate university even with the crackdown on activism within the university (Dolhinow 2020). As Bousquet (2008) noted, the neoliberal corporate university is all about control just like any good corporation. The exercise of control can be seen in the increase of rules and regulations, increase in organization divisions, administrative bloat, and the committee and assessment work that these new divisions ultimately create for faculty and staff (Dolhinow 2020). Neoliberal corporate values in universities also rely on being able to effectively maintain control over student activists.

Administrators play a crucial role in how QTBIPOC students and activists experience school. Cole (2020) argues that college presidents have an obligation to speak out against racial injustice and historical silence. Administrators have an obligation to acknowledge social justice issues on campus. “Campus initiatives geared toward racial equality are only as effective as the college president’s clearly articulated acknowledgment that racism is a problem. Anything less is negligent of each institution’s unique mission to educate” (Cole 2020:317). Narratives of student activists addressing campus administrators reiterate the sentiment that administrators are responsible for supporting activists. They can do this by listening to student activists and reflecting on their own power and privileges; as administrators they must do this if there is any hope in making their campus more just and equity-minded (Quaye & Lange 2022). It is actually important for administrators to remember that “activists are not troublemakers; in fact, they often love their institutions so much that they want to see them do better. Administrators must resist the urge to frame activists in these ways” (Quaye & Lange

2022: 333). Campus administrators and stakeholders addressing student activists on college campuses who want to advocate for equity and justice can self-reflect in order to be more effective in their positions of power.

Evans and Stewart (2021) outlines strategies that supervisors of student activists on campus can use: building self-awareness, understanding context and history, changing one's behaviors, challenge systems, understanding roles of power, and standing in solidarity with student activists. Facilitating growth and self-awareness is a pivotal aspect of being an effective supervisor in supporting student activists. Evans and Stewart (2021) advises campus supervisors to also have an awareness of the historical contexts of activists movements and moments on campus. They can do this by researching campus/university histories and legacies around certain identities and issues, and host formal and informal conversations to gain a full understanding of how activists arrived at any given activist moment. Beyond that, supervisors need to be willing to act with courage in a way that constantly questions their own institutional investments that conflicts with their ability to stand in solidarity with the student activists. These power dynamics impact all "supervisor/supervisee" relationships which is only further complicated with activism and challenging larger power structures (Evans and Stewart 2021). All things considered, supporting staff and student activists are an important first step in materializing equity and justice in the higher education context.

Misawa (2006) suggests that all educators should consider using queer race pedagogy (QRP) as a holistic teaching approach to create learning environments that are more inclusive to queer students of color as their educational needs may be more

complicated than those of majority groups. QRP demands that educators address as many issues relating to racial identity, sexual orientation, sociocultural issues, power dynamics and equality among diverse populations as much as they can in their practice. Additionally, Phillip (2013) notes that teachers also should be very aware of their own social locations. Even when a teacher may consider themselves a part of a common struggle with their students and communities, within the context of the classroom, they must remember that they are still agents of the state who are vested with institutional power (Phillip 2013). By understanding both their desire to support students and dismantle oppression and recognition of their location as employees vested with institutional power, they may help QTBIPOC students succeed.

Finally, all staff, faculty and administrators in a university need to remember that "as long as racism and heterosexism continue to permeate every corner of our higher education institutions, scholars and practitioners must ask themselves how they are either contributing to the issues or becoming a part of the solution for queer collegians of color" (Duran 2019:397). Becoming aware of what QTBIPOC students need to thrive in a university setting, by paying attention to what the students themselves say they need, is a crucial first step.

METHODS

This chapter provides the details of my research setting, recruitment methods, data collection, research design, and data analysis.

All participants of this study identify as queer, trans, (QT) nonbinary, and/or gender nonconforming and as black, indigenous, and/or people of color (BIPOC). I will be using the acronym QTBIPOC as a way to classify my participants with these specific compounded marginalized identities in regards to gender and race. While they have other important identity markers such as student and activists, QTBIPOC allows for an analysis of the intersections of oppression that these student activists had faced institutionally.

All participants had attended Humboldt State University and had graduated prior to HSU becoming Cal Poly Humboldt in the beginning of 2022. I began collecting data by conducting my first semi-structured interview in the fall semester of 2019 with the last interview conducted virtually in the spring semester of 2021 in the midst of the COVID pandemic (IRB #19-039).

The population of this study were living in the rural town of Arcata, California where Humboldt State University (now known as Cal Poly Humboldt) is located. HSU is one of twenty-three campuses that are part of the California State University system situated in the most northwestern corner of California. The university is just 95 miles south of the Oregon border and 270 miles north of the San Francisco Bay; surrounded by redwood forests, ocean beaches, and elevated mountain ranges. Humboldt State University's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (2019) reports the most recent and relevant student demographics at the time of this study. The total student headcount as of

fall of 2019 was 6983 students with 6658 students enrolled full-time. White students made up 44.6% of the majority of the student population with a total of 3361 self-identified white students. Hispanic/Latino students made up 33.5% of the student population with a total of 2653 self-identified students. Students who reported two or more ethnicities made up 6.7% of the student population with a total of 508 self-identified students. Students whose ethnicity remained unknown during reporting made up 6.3% of the population with a total of 525 self-identified students. Black students made up 3.1% of the student population with a total of 274 self-identified students. Asian students made up 2.7% of the student population with a total of 217 self-identified students. "Non-resident Alien" students made up 1.4% of the student population with a total of 118 self-identified students. American Indian students made up 1.3% of the student population with a total of 96 self-identified students. Pacific Islander students made up the smallest percentage of the student population at 0.3% with a total of 21 self-identified students.

The majority of the student population came from out of the area with 28% from Los Angeles, 12.4% from SF Bay Area, 10.8% from Northern CA, 7.4% from San Diego, 7% from Central CA, 5.1% from Western Undergraduate Exchange states, 4.9% from Coast, 4.2% from Sacramento, 3.1% from other states, and 0.7% who are foreign. This means that only 15.4% of the student population are local to the Humboldt County area. More than half of the undergraduate student population also identify as first generation (52.9%) and low-income (56.1%). In 2019, the total number of tenured/tenure track faculty and lecturers was 534. Of the 243 tenure/tenure track faculty, 173 (or 71%) were

White, 10 (4%) were American Indian/Alaska Native, 14 (5%) were Asian, 7 (3%) were Black, 13 (5%) were Hispanic, 6 (2%) were reported as two or more ethnicities, and 23 (9%) are listed as “unknown.”

According to the 2020 census information, Humboldt County estimated a population of 136,463 people. The racial demographic of Humboldt County reported to be 82.3% White, 13.2% Hispanic or Latino, 6.4% American Indian or Alaska Native alone, 6.2% two or more races, 3.1% Asian, and 1.6% Black. The small town of Arcata where HSU is located estimated a population of 18,845 in 2020. The report estimated Arcata's population to be 73% white, 14.4% Hispanic or Latino, 11.3% two or more races, 3.8% Asian, 2.4% Black, 1.6% American Indian or Alaska Native alone, and 0.9% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander alone. These demographics provide the setting into which queer, trans and/or non-binary BIPOC students attended the university and engaged in their activism.

Recruitment

Before starting my research, I applied for, and received approval for my research from our campus’ Institutional Review Board (#19-039). This provided oversight regarding the work that I was doing and ensuring that I was in compliance with provisions regarding the protections of human subjects.

In order to participate respondents had to: (a) be 18 years of age or older, (b) be currently or previously enrolled at HSU, (c) self-identify as BIPOC, and (d) self-identify as queer and/or trans.

I recruited 12 participants who fit the criteria by using non-probability sampling methods such as purposive sampling, the snowball method (word of mouth), and convenience (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Purposive sampling meant that I selected members from a specific group that I had prior knowledge of (Charmaz 2014). These methods were effective and very convenient due to my heavy involvement in student spaces such as the Women's Resource Center (WRC) and what was known as the Multicultural Center (MCC) at HSU. While it was not my explicit intention, it was in only a matter of weeks that I was integrated into queer students of color social circles as an insider because I shared similar identities to my participants. My involvement at the WRC began in the fall of 2019 when I spent a lot of time volunteering and spending time at the resource center. At the beginning of 2020, I became the fiscal staff coordinator of the WRC which was located inside the MCC. There were many students who fit my research criteria who utilized the resources in these spaces. Also, the community of people within these centers were often eager to speak about their experiences on and off campus in search of peer-to-peer support.

This study was partially constructed after witnessing how many of the accounts of knowledge and vulnerability made by these students were often left to disappear without ever being addressed. My closely maintained relationships with the participants based on paralleled experiences exemplifies how "fieldworkers are never passive observers no matter how unobtrusive they attempt to be" (Warren & Karner 2010: 101). My role as a researcher was actively engaged from the beginnings of recruitment methods to the exchange of knowledge and conversation that would later become data; my work is in

line with Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1995) framing of activist anthropology and barefoot activism to explain her own research and experiences (ibid). While my sampling method included explicitly looking for students who fit the criteria I was looking for, as a researcher, I wanted to let my participants lead the research. Therefore, all of my participants were leaders in one way or another, whether through activist engagement or community organizing. All participants were eager to speak on their perceptions and lived realities.

Data Collection

Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to sign the IRB-approved consent form. Those whose interviews were conducted virtually were sent the consent form and were asked to send it back before starting. In order to maintain confidentiality, their real names were not to be used in the research and they were each asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves. All participants chose a pseudonym they felt comfortable being addressed as in the research. All participants agreed to be recorded. All participants were reminded that they were not required to answer any question or touch on any topic that they were not fully comfortable with talking about. Participants were also all reminded that they are allowed to take a break or stop the interview entirely at any moment if they felt the need to. At the end of each interview, all voice recordings were uploaded onto otter.ai. After being uploaded, all voice recordings were transcribed and reviewed for errors by myself.

Of the 12 interviewers, the first four were conducted in person in a private meeting space on campus in the fall of 2019 where I took live voice recordings using the

iPhone voice memo application. Upon the start of the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020, the rest of the eight interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and voice recorded that way up until the spring semester of 2021. Interview questions were written with the sole intent of amplifying participant voices while they speak on their lived realities on the campus and in the local community. Prior to the pandemic, I collaborated in activist spaces and community care with all of my participants. This dynamic made the exchange of asking for participants' time and vulnerability feel warranted and equitable. While all of my participants were still eager to partake in my study after the start of the pandemic, I struggled as a researcher and peer to ask the same from my participants as easily during such a daunting reality. This is where I felt the need to dedicate more time in investing care into the community that myself and my participants were living as QTBIPOC in the small rural town Arcata, or in our respective hometowns, trying to navigate a global pandemic together yet isolated from each other. In the most COVID conscious way possible, I did my best to practice mutual aid while receiving it during this time. The community of peers that my participants and I come from were able to help each other in material ways during the time of learning how to survive and heal. It was through this process that I felt comfortable to ask them to continue this research with me. This is largely the reason why my interviews were spread out over the course of two years.

Grounded Theory

My methods of research so far have included mixed qualitative methods such as grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. Specifically, methods revolving around

grounded theory are representative of processes utilized with my study as “grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (Charmaz 2014: 1). I prioritized dynamic and open structure from data collection to analysis. I utilized semi-structured interviews to guide the interview process. I constructed and directed questions around the interests of queer students of color accounts of their own experiences on campus and in the classroom. A critical intention within these methods is to elevate the voices of these students with marginalized identities, specifically those who identify as queer and as a person of color in conjunction to their role as a college student.

Interviews ranged between 30 minutes to four hours. Participants were encouraged to talk about things more or less relevant to the initially proposed questions. The questions written to guide the interviews were meant to create a relatively open slate for participants to paint their own picture of their experiences (see Interview Questions, Appendix). The idea was that “by creating open-ended, non-judgmental questions, you encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (Charmaz 2014: 65). All of my participants come from different racial, cultural, socioeconomic backgrounds and identify differently across the spectrum of gender and sexuality. So, while some participants may have shared some similar on campus experiences (in the classroom, activist actions, or with faculty/administrators) they all have different means of telling their stories and may find different things important to share. This is why I was adamant about encouraging participants to talk freely about what they felt was important.

Research Design & Rationale

I am a student who moved from a city to the small town of Arcata to study. My experience is similar to many other students that are recruited by Humboldt State University. Being Vietnamese, I am a person of color, and I recognize that the lives that people who are all considered BIPOC have are shaped by differing experiences of racism, classism and colorism. Still, my positionality as a queer student of color, as broad as it is, frames the trust I have with many of my participants as well as my accessibility to the community. Epistemologically, I draw from intersectional feminist ideologies that recognize certain identities to be privileged while others are marginalized. Queer students of color are articulated somewhere in the margins of a privileged society and an institution riddled with various power roles. I consider in my work how, "rather than seeking to describe or reflect reality, researchers must consider the political act of promoting, activating, and engendering realities" (Markham 2005: 267). In this case, I seek to embrace the political act of bringing the voices of queer students of color towards the center where they can be heard, validated, and utilized to better the collective circumstance.

Research Participants

My sample consists of 12 Humboldt State University students who identify as queer, trans, and/or nonbinary as well as black, indigenous, and/or people of color. Each participant had chosen a pseudonym to be addressed as in the study. Participants are listed in the order that they had been interviewed.

1. Jordan (23) identifies as a queer gender fluid Latina that uses they/she pronouns. They also identify as a first-generation Mexican American city girl who was born and raised in San Francisco, CA. She had been a student at HSU for a total of three months at the time of their interview.
2. Nicole (23) identifies as a gender fluid lesbian and comes from a Peruvian background and uses they/she pronouns. They majored in critical race, gender, and sexuality with a pathway in ethnic studies. They minored in music. Her hometown is the San Fernando Valley, Northridge and grew up in a single mom household for most of their life. She had been a student at HSU for a total of five years by the time of their interview.
3. Miguel (23) identifies as a first generation gay/queer Mexican American/chicano cismale who uses he/they pronouns. His hometown is Palmdale, California. He had been a student at HSU for one and a half years at the time of his interview.
4. Violet (21) identifies as gender fluid, pansexual, and Mexican. Violet uses she/they pronouns. She grew up in a Catholic household and their hometown is Santa Ana, CA. They had been a student at HSU for a total of four years by the time of their interview.
5. Deems (22) identifies as queer, trans, and uses they/she pronouns. They also identify as Arab, specifically Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian. In recognition of their ancestors prior to implementation of colonial borders, they are also from the Levantine region. Their hometown is San Francisco, CA. They had been a student at HSU for a total of four years at the time of their interview.

6. Sarah (21) identifies as bisexual and Latinx, she uses she/they pronouns. Their hometown is a little city in the Los Angeles area. She was a student at HSU for four years at the time of their interview.
7. Starfire (24) identifies as queer/bi and uses she/her pronouns. She is an Oglala Lakota descendant and an enrolled tribal member. She is also a scientist who had gotten her degree in cellular molecular biology with a minor in chemistry. Her hometown is Fresno, California. She had been a student at HSU for a total of four and a half years.
8. META (21) identifies as a cisgender, bisexual, Latino (Nicaraguan) man with indigenous roots in the Sonoran Desert (Yaki) who uses he/him/his pronouns. He majored in film with a minor in Native American Studies with an emphasis in tribal government. He had been a student at HSU for a total of 4 years at HSU at the time of his interview.
9. Izzie (24) identifies as a gender nonconforming Mexican American who uses they/them/theirs pronouns. Their hometown is Long Beach, California (Tongva land). They had been a student at HSU for three years at the time of their interview.
10. MalignedNative (27) identifies as queer (as a political orientation), Native Hawaiian, and mixed race (East Asian & Portuguese). They use they/them/theirs pronouns. They spent much of their childhood on their homelands of Kauai. They consider Arcata, California their hometown because that is where they grew up.

They had been a student at HSU for a total of about six years by the time of their interview.

11. Patty (24) identifies as nonbinary, lesbian, native Mexican, and brown as fuck. Patty uses she/they/he pronouns. Their hometown is Santa Ana. They had been a student at HSU for a total of four years.
12. Isabella (23) identifies as pansexual, black, Mexican (Michoacan) and indigenous (Pomo and Miwok). Isabella uses she/they pronouns. Their hometown is Santa Rosa, California. She had been a student at HSU for a total of three years by the time of her interview.

All of the 12 participants of this study were students at HSU for the duration of three months to five years.

In the next chapters I will explore the narratives provided by the students and the common experiences they shared. I have organized these by themes that arose through my analysis of their interviews. To begin we will explore the themes around these QTBIPOC student activists' experiences on campus. An analysis of the institutional harm these students experienced will follow. Then we will look into the ways that these students found ways to thrive in this environment.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I analyze the experiences of these QTBIPOC activist students that came through the participant interviews, as well as through participant observation. My analysis of the data revealed large categorical themes: students' experiences, experiences of institutional harm, the ways that students tried and thrived within the university, and advice/closing statements provided by participants. This organizational structure helps provide a clearer picture of the interaction between participants' compounded identities and the institutional structures at play. This way of organizing the data also allows for nuances around unique participant feelings and experiences to be included within the narrative. Because these categories are inseparable there are deep connections between these categories. Student's experiences mentioned in this study cannot be detached from the power or influence of the institutional context. The institutional harm that these students endure are foundational to their overall experiences on campus. The reciprocal relationship between these two categories ultimately effect what kind of resources participants found important and how they attempted to thrive despite the circumstances. The advice and last words that participants offer their community are shaped by all of the previously listed categories.

Student's experiences of isolation

In this study, everyone discussed experiencing isolation on campus and in classroom spaces. The participants also noted experiencing culture shock, feeling unheard, and experiencing various instances of racism.

The first interaction with isolation that participants mentioned was with culture shock upon arriving in Arcata, California. Two participants explicitly mentioned how they were overwhelmed by how white the population was when they initially arrived. They felt unprepared for the nature of rural life compared to the cities they had come from. These participants' experience with culture shock due to the dominant demographic aligns with Jani, Ortiz and Sowbel's (2011) analysis of how the lack of diversity in learning settings necessitates extra support for students of color. Without the extra support, the BIPOC population that is present will have a weakened sense of belonging. One of the experiences that participants explicitly mentioned over and over are the ways that racism on campus, and in the classroom, harmed them and continued to make them feel disconnected from the university.

Seven participants specifically mentioned experiencing racism in the classroom or in campus spaces. Violet mentioned that she was told that she "sounded so ghetto" by a peer after having heard her professor use the same terminology in class to describe something as "gross." During a class photo, Patty had made the "ok" hand gesture, holding it below her waist, which refers to what many know as the circle game. The circle game is relatively harmless where the person doing the gesture is attempting to get the viewer to spot the circle being made with their hand. After the photo had been taken, Patty was pulled aside by the professor and was intensely questioned as to whether or not she was in a gang. She felt discriminated against and unfairly singled out by her professor due to her race. Miguel described how a professor in one of his science classes had made a border joke that was insensitive to those with immigrant backgrounds. The accounts of

racism that the participants mention are aligned with studies that show how students of color are hurt and isolated through their experiences with discrimination and racist interactions with faculty and staff (González 2006; Moragne-Patterson and Barnett 2017). Experiencing racism itself is merely the beginning of these participant's negative experiences on campus.

Students in this study also described the experience of feeling silenced and unheard following the incidents they experienced. Nine of the participants had mentioned that they were pushed or forced into sharing their experiences in multiple ways while nothing substantial had been done to address their issues. Nicole had described a racist incident she had experienced in the classroom where a professor had made explicitly violent remarks regarding indigenous populations in a crass manner because the class had not greeted her as they normally did due to tension created by an altercation that took place prior to the professor's entrance. Nicole said that after, "I got up and left and I was just crying because I was mad at this whole department. That was for sure the most gruesome thing I've heard a professor say. It was highly inappropriate and disgusting. I don't know why a professor would feel the need to relate violent actions done during a genocide to people not saying hi to her." Following the incident, Nicole went to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to make a report where she gave her accounts of what happened but she said, "I don't really know if anything was done about it." Other participants also reported incidents where they ultimately went unaddressed. Patty experienced discrimination in the classroom and was instructed by a trusted advisor to make a report to the Dean of Students and continued with "so I did. I went through the

whole process of reporting and nothing happened." A reflection of these students' accounts demonstrates that QTBIPOC students were made to feel like they had nowhere to go on campus where their issues would be acknowledged, much less resolved.

Isabella highlighted this feeling by saying, "there's actually not a secure safe place for us or no one to actually confide in. And it's just disheartening to know that people are harassed, people literally died and there's no justice." These accounts demonstrate that students of color feel unsupported by the institution especially since there has not been collective effort towards addressing the problems that these students face. This directly impacts their wellbeing and, in turn, their retention (Chang 2007). On top of that, when the identities of students of color are compounded with their queer identities, they become significantly less likely to turn to the institution for support. The very places that these students were advised to go in the event of experiencing a harmful incident were specifically unwelcoming to them. MalignedNative said, "I didn't want to go to the dean's office anyway, because I knew they wouldn't do anything. Because for me, the dean's office is where I get in trouble." Studies have shown that queer students remain reluctant to reach out for support or report on their experience because they expect that the institution to be ill equipped to support them or worse, fear being problematized (Weise, Courtney, and Strunk 2021). Sarah speaks on the essential need to feel acknowledged: "as a queer student of color, I just want to feel seen. I just want them to feel heard like I want to feel appreciated. I don't want to feel like I have to constantly fight for what I'm needing." The overwhelming instances of feeling silenced and unheard

is only the beginning to understanding the thematic experiences of queer students of color in this study.

Whiteness in the Classroom

All but one of the participants in this study had mentioned some instance of being overwhelmed by whiteness in the classroom. Whiteness in this context refers to predominantly white demographics, euro-centric perspective/curriculum, and/or white supremacy in practice. Deems described a time where instruction that a professor was giving them was evidently prioritizing the success and wellbeing of their white counterparts while creating barriers for them as a queer student of color:

> I am read as a muslim bipoc person. This professor, I'm struggling in her class. She's telling me to quit her class because maybe it was too tough for me. I needed that class to graduate, I didn't have a choice. I see this white girl walk into her office before me. I've had multiple classes with her. That girl is ignorant. I'm not saying that what she's saying isn't intellectual, but she doesn't get what we're reading. It's this refusal to understand it, not because it's difficult, but because it makes her whiteness uncomfortable. And my professor is begging her to stay. And five minutes later I go into her office and she's like "you're struggling, you should drop out."

Deems had been left feeling like their best interests were not being considered in this situation by their professor because they were being told to quit the class. This is a direct example of how discrimination, perceived double standards, and lack of mentorship/collegial support that students of color often experience can impact academic self-confidence (González 2006; Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya 2011; Endo 2020). Deems was especially frustrated with this situation because not only did they feel inadequately supported but they felt like they were being pushed away from graduating since this class that they were being told to quit was a mandatory class.

Starfire shared a similar sentiment of not trusting her white professor who was unwilling to acknowledge the racially privileged place that she was teaching from which had a colonial influence that also went unaddressed. Students are more likely to be confident in their academics if they perceive their faculty members as being approachable, respectful and available (Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya 2011). Starfire was not afforded this kind of experience as she was deterred from ever bringing it up because she perceived her professor to be very defensive. She continues on to describe the learning environment: "they're teaching a one-sided version of things because HSU is so stubborn. From the top down. A really white serving and white storytelling place, there's not really room to bring up much else." Even though Starfire would have wanted to address some of the issues she had been witnessing, the lack of receptiveness and overwhelming whiteness in these spaces affected her capacity to engage. Various studies have shown how the erasure of people of color perspectives in the classroom can have intense adverse effects on students of color (Hoffman, Llaga, & Snyder 2003; Chang 2007; Banks and Dohy 2019; Duran and Jones 2020).

The stressors for queer student activists of color worsened as the pandemic came around. MalignedNative describes the layered issues they were experiencing in and out of the classroom: "simultaneously, we got COVID. Simultaneously, we have George Floyd protests. We've got Humboldt Mutual Aid trying to get food out to people. There's shit going down. We have wildfires. At the same time, [unnamed faculty member] is playing defense for this white woman." MalignedNative was frustrated with faculty response to rising tensions between white students and students of color in their program.

MalignedNative described how white peers in their program were being protected despite their ignorance and racism in the classroom. MalignedNative felt that during classroom conflicts, the students of color were gaslit and unsupported to say the least. MalignedNative's account exemplifies the findings in the studies that reveal how queer student activists of color typically end up juggling multiple responsibilities on and off campus due to their dedication to family and community on top of their academic responsibilities (Vaccaro and Mena 2011). MalignedNative was navigating through a global pandemic while remaining dedicated to activist/mutual aid causes. The support provided to these queer students of color remained severely inadequate amongst these complexities and the over prioritization of their white counterparts persisted. Queer student activists of color disproportionately go underserved and disproportionately experience institutional harm.

DEI as institutionally performative

All 12 participants in this study responded to my question, "what comes to mind when faculty or university advertisements utilize the words "diversity", "equity", and/or "inclusion" (DEI)?" with a similar sentiment. Every single person interviewed asserted that they got the impression that the University's investment in equity and the general well-being of the most marginalized students was nonexistent or not to be trusted. Isabella called any of HSU's DEI efforts "performative." Patty was outwardly angry in their response to this question:

> I want them to shut the fuck up forever. I don't believe in diversity, equity and inclusion. I don't see that as a thing at the institutional level. I don't want to be taken for a token for this institution. Especially when I see the pages on HSU and it's just

> all these different brown faces and everyone's happy. It's like that's not the fucking case. You know, that's a really good PR move on their part but that's not the case.

Nicole claims that "[the university] likes to recruit POC but doesn't care about the retention or the safety of POC in this community which says a lot when they spit out these words. For me personally, they turned into buzzwords because they've been used so much with no real substance." Jordan had brought up the fact that HSU is considered a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) where they are able to apply for earmarked HSI funding for having a certain number of "Hispanic" students at the university. They continued to say that they did not see this extra money being put into the spaces that explicitly serve this population. Jordan was speaking from their experience, and their peers' experience, of constantly fighting for funding for the spaces such as the Womxn's Resource Center, Multicultural Center, and Scholars Without Borders. Queer students of color, but specifically Spanish speaking students utilized these resources a lot. Yet, they felt like funding for these spaces were constantly in danger or the student activists working in these spaces were always at risk of being pushed out. The overall sentiment that these students have was that the University's position on diversity, equity, and inclusion was that "it's all arranging and posturing" on part of the institution, as said by Starfire. Irwin and Foste (2021) found that learning environments that prioritize the education of the white population through white perspectives will ultimately profit off the presence of students of color but at the expense of their wellbeing. Similar to the findings of this study, other studies have found that when diversity is asserted to be an achievable

goal to be met, students of color are likely to be tokenized and ultimately commodified within this process (Kumashiro 2001; González 2006; Irwin and Foste 2021).

Half of the students interviewed critiqued the University for functioning on neoliberal principles that relied on the profitability of students. Nicole described the neoliberal mindset as, "self-centered people. People who are very capital driven and people who are very single issue oriented. I feel like a lot of administration is like that." Deems made a similar point when reflecting on the institution and the administrators, "they don't really give a fuck about us because students are nothing but dollar signs." MalignedNative had contextualized how the administrators of color are also guilty of exemplifying neoliberal principles and practices: "they really think they're doing something for us and they really aren't. They're doing something for their checkbook." MalignedNative made it clear that representation of marginalized identities in positions of power within the institution can act as a tool of distraction from how the pillars of domination across class and race lines are actually being upheld. Another aspect of the neoliberal mechanisms at play at the institution that was mentioned was about graduation. META brought up an example that his sister had made about how some people of indigenous or other cultural backgrounds would like to wear traditional regalia upon graduation, but they are not allowed to. META said if one wanted to, that "you can't do that because they're selling an image. They're selling a student. It's hard not to fall into that trap." All of these accounts speak to the fact that these students have felt confined to the expectations that are set out by institutional capital investments in particular formations of what a student should be. Capitalist interests are convoluted with the

workings of white supremacy, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism and so on. These QTBIPOC students are keenly aware and critical of liberal politics at play in the context of HSU as a higher learning institution that is predominantly driven by capital. Another tool that ensures the preservation of power structures and profitability is bureaucracy and surveillance.

Bureaucracy

Five students explicitly mentioned having experienced and/or witnessed the use of bureaucracies to control or suppress the student body. Administrators would ask these students to follow their complicated procedures in order for their voice to be heard. Jordan describes their experience being a student leader:

> There's a lot of consequences and a lot of problems with the students who want to make change, and just looking at the rules of this school… They limit you and keep putting walls and borders and you have to like to do this and that but wait you need to do this, so it just feels like door after door, no matter how many you open. You still have to do this last process, talk to another person or do another thing, and so it's like you're going in circles and it's exhausting.

Jordan notes the effect that the use of these bureaucracies has on them, but this will be analyzed further in a later section. Administrators would make it seem like these students' complaints are unprecedented which is why there is an urgency for them to follow institutional processes or for them to be present in formal meeting spaces. Patty recalls being constantly asked to be part of administrator meetings or inquiry groups around injustice/racial issues but not once being offered pay for their time or knowledge. Patty shares this frustration as many of their friends and peers, who were also queer students of color, were asked to do this work unpaid as well: "their knowledge is very valuable.

Their experiences are very valuable." These students with valuable knowledge are unpaid and possibly exploited by our institution of higher learning and student affair professionals make it possible. Patty's account mirrors the study that evaluated student activist experiences with student affair professionals who demanded that students utilize formalized channels to express their needs where the students are ultimately left feeling used and unheard (Rosati et al. 2019). These tactics ensure that student interests remain unprioritized and justified through bureaucratic processes. MalignedNative described another tactic that they witnessed the administration utilize to suppress student leaders. They said, "one of the things that the institution will try to do is find potentially charismatic or like, ambitious students, and be like, you can make this new program. You can be the leader of this new thing. You get to do this thing." This point that MalignedNative makes aligns with the findings of Dolhinow's (2020) research that shows how higher learning institutions will use tactics to exercise control over the student body through increasing rules and regulations, increasing the number of organization divisions such as committees and assessment work to inform administrative decision making. This tactic ensures that student leaders are exhausted and distracted from their potential of grassroots organizing by forcing them to be invested in institutional practices instead. The institution asserts control over student leaders with marginalized identities through surveillance as well.

Four participants explicitly mention their interactions with and impressions of the HSU's University Police Department (UPD) in the interview process of this research. Yet, a majority if not all of the students who participated in this study had expressed

being upset over the fact that the UPD chief Don Peterson had never been fired even though there was at least one confirmed racist incident where used the words “slave” and “master” in conversation with a Black police officer (Burns 2019) during formal/informal student leader organizing meetings. Even though racist behavior was documented, HSU UPD chief, Don Peterson, had the ability to voluntarily retire in 2020. Over the years prior to that, students were constantly fighting for his removal and attended administrative meetings where they felt dismissed. One student worker was fired from the MCC for putting up a political banner in the window “Fire Don Peterson” during the contentious time prior to his departure and was told that the MCC was not a place for her to be political. The administrative control enacted on this student for being political in a space that is specifically meant for students of color and has historically been used for student organizing is in line with the literature. The literature shows how institutions of higher learning continue to be invested in upholding racism, classism, the police state and corporate investments through the control of dissent on campus while commodifying diversity in minoritized student spaces (Dolhinow 2020). Starfire said that UPD did not keep students safe but instead, “they’re there to keep things running as they’re supposed to. Protect property and buildings. They will answer to the beck and call of white students.” Sarah gives more insight on marginalized students’ interactions with UPD: “I’ve never heard of a good interaction with UPD. Every time a student of color actually needs help, they end up getting put in harm or far worse than they already were.” Starfire outlines this as another way where students with marginalized identities will consistently be less inclined to report their issues in fear of not being heard or have their situation

become worsened (Weise, Courtney, and Strunk 2021). These students had little to no trust in UPD as a department but they had larger complaints about University's overwhelming investments in policing compared to the possibility of other resources that would help students feel safer (e.g. social workers and community resources). The participants of this study had overwhelming criticisms of administrators, faculty, and staff.

All but one of the 12 participants in this study had some sort of critique for campus staff. Most of the critiques were geared towards administrators with only two making more vague references to teachers and curriculum. When referring to the administrators, Violet made the comment, "I think they need to get trained better on how to speak to people of color." Jordan expressed frustration about how some of their teachers had blamed their age or field of study for their lack of understanding of what marginalized students want when different student run workshops or community gatherings on race and allyship was extremely informative and available: "Teachers talk about how they I don't know how to help or how to incorporate diversity and intersectionality in their lectures, but I don't see them coming to these workshops, these events." In order to create a culturally responsible curriculum, educators are required to be dedicated to understanding students of color as people (Banks and Dohy 2019; Duran and Jones 2020). Patty had discussed how when her boyfriend had passed away during finals week, the Dean of Students was ultimately unhelpful. Another time when they were homeless, they said "I realized I couldn't ask for help and actually see anything happen. I just didn't feel supported by admin." This shows an example of how student

activists are likely to see little to no resolutions to their requests by student affair professionals (Rosati et al. 2019)

Much like many other students, Starfire was angered by Tom Jackson becoming President of the university. Upon taking office in fall of 2019, Tom Jackson was interviewed by El Leñador, the campus Bilingual Newspaper produced by students (Flores, 2019a). In this interview, he was explicitly asked about his perspective on students feeling safe in the community and about the murder of Josiah Lawson, an African American student murdered in Arcata, CA in 2017 and for which nobody had been indicted for the crime. The President's response was, "Is that different than anything that happens in LA or San Francisco or other places? Loss of life. How's this different?" His response incited a powerful response from Starfire where she gave her interpretation of what he had said, "he was like, "honestly, people get killed everywhere. That's just something that happens. People just die" That's all I needed to hear. That was disgusting, hurtful and ignorant. So vile and disrespectful to Josiah's mother. I guarantee that woman has done more for the community than he could ever dream of doing."

The president's response was infuriating to students for many reasons but it should be noted that the students that made up the Humboldt State University population that were from the cities of LA or San Francisco (not including surrounding cities) at this point in time was 42.4% of the campus. Generalizing the violence that happens in these large cities that students are from to the racialized violence they may experience in a small rural predominantly white town that they have been recruited to as students of color is an inappropriate comparison. Additionally, HSU had gotten backlash from the NAACP

in 2018 for their recruiting practices (Greenson 2018). The NAACP was asking HSU halt the recruitment of students of color and

> confront institutional racism and to actively engage with the campus community, the city and surrounding communities in speaking to the racism that students experience; to ensure that support is in place to help students of color thrive here; to budget for permanent staff and student support at the Cultural Centers for Academic Excellence; to be transparent in its recruiting efforts regarding the "climate of racism" in Humboldt County; to do more to serve the diverse population on campus; and to prioritize hiring more faculty of color and training current faculty in "cultural competency."

The school president at the time, Lisa Rossbacher, disagreed with many of the statements made by the NAACP in their letter to HSU. She did state that more needed to be done in order to create a brighter future for all of the students, but she did not address any of the demands outlined in the letter directly. These issues with campus administrators help understand the campus climate that the student participants in this study had experienced over the years.

META mentioned that there used to be a director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI), Dr. Cheryl Johnson, that he respected. META expressed that it said a lot to him as a student when she resigned in 2019 because she felt like she was unable to do the work she truly wanted to do because of the institution (Flores, 2019b). Dr. Johnson was actually appointed into her position by former President Lisa A. Rossbacher in response to the community uproar following the murder of Josiah Lawson. Dr. Johnson made strides in policies on campus along with community work through Equity Arcata. Dr. Johnson noted that she continued to experience explicit racism in the community up to the time of her departure. Dr. Johnson continued to say that she could

no longer be at an institution that no longer shared her values as an activist who is adamant about fighting for racial equality and equity, “to negate race and racialized experiences, I can’t get with that… On paper, governmental things, we’re an HSI and MSI - a Hispanic Serving institution and minority serving institution - because we’re over 40% of students of color. So, I would like that to be celebrated and acknowledged, not negated.” Critical investments need to be made in order to adequately support the faculty of color who ultimately support the perseverance of students of color in the university that go beyond basic needs (Comer et al. 2017; Abel and Gonzalez 2020; Endo 2020). The responses of students like META and Starfire align with Cole’s study (2020) that showed how campus initiatives are only as effective as the President’s clearly articulated acknowledgement that racism is a problem. Dr. Johnson’s approach to addressing violence and promoting equity included acknowledged issues explicitly. On the other hand, former President Lisa Rossbacher and current President Tom Jackson attempted to resolve issues around racism by minimizing them. In accordance with the study conducted by Rosati et al. (2019), student activists are keenly aware of when they are being met with authenticity or inauthenticity when interacting with student affairs professionals. Dr. Johnson showed up authentically in her work on campus and in the community, it is likely that she experienced burnout similar to student activists of color.

Burnout

Half of the participants of this study had mentioned experiencing burnout. META was describing his experience as a student activist who was consistently advocating for students of color on campus as well as in educational justice through a program called

Promotorx, which is a transformative educators' program that is social justice oriented. META found himself doing a wide range of activist work including learning how to become a social justice educator. META said, "you really got to learn how to pick your battles, because there's sometimes where the losses just really tear you down so much." While META's dedication to social justice education activist work was undoubtedly important for him and his community, it also positioned him to be more likely to experience burnout if he was not careful about dedicating too much of himself to activist work (Gorski and Cher 2015). Sarah was clear in expressing that her experience with burnout had more to do with the fact that she over dedicated herself based on misinformation she was receiving about what was possible: "it just burned me out. It just drained me, and it's just gotten me angrier. I think the university gives this big illusion that if you work, if you learn enough, if you work hard enough, you can be the person that changes the system. And that's a big ass fucking delusion to give students."

Izzie described the issues they were facing as a student worker and organizer who cared a lot about the resources they were providing students through the different spaces they worked at on campus, such as OhSnap, Scholars Without Borders (SWB), and the Women's Resource Center. In the months prior to COVID, Izzie was often in meetings with administrators such as the Dean of Students and representatives from Associated Students. The requirement of political neutrality from administration and associated students when making requests for funding, as well as the constant talks of resource center funding being in danger, were just a couple of the main issues they were facing on campus as a student advocate. Associated Students representatives and staff of HSU at

the time had heavily referenced the California State University (CSU) San Marcos case (McDonald 2020) where a student representative of conservative anti-abortion group on campus had successfully sued the university and their Associated Students Inc. auxiliary for $240,000. This created a ripple effect among other CSU campuses to gear policies around student funding to be more "viewpoint neutral" (The San Diego Union-Tribune 2020). Izzie described there being new pressure from university staff and Associated Students representatives to modify Womxn's Resource Center programming to be less political in nature. As the pandemic arose, there were many more meetings that they had to attend where they were told various things such as multiple resource centers were possibly going to be collapsed into each other, that certain centers would have to be more institutionally embedded rather than freely student run as it had been, or that student worker roles might be eliminated and would be replaced with volunteer positions. Izzie ended up spending a lot of time, unpaid, during the pandemic, virtually fighting for student resources when many of them were the first to be deprioritized in desperate times. In their own words, Izzie said, "that's the reason why I have two incompletes… I was paying more focus on having those resources secured than my own school work, so I didn't finish two of my classes." Studies have shown that student run centers positively impact QTBIPOC success and retention at a university (Garvey et al 2018). Izzie's ability to organize and mobilize in these spaces with other queer people of color was critical to their wellbeing, safety, and overall happiness on campus (Linder & Rodriguez 2012; Chaudhary and Dutt 2020; Emejulu & Sobande 2023; Rivera 2023). Ultimately though, Izzie's dedication to the student organizing work in the face of institutional harm was a

clear example of martyrdom as described by Gorski and Cher (2015). Izzie sacrificed their own individual academic success in order to fully dedicate themself to the advocacy work they felt like they needed to do instead.

The institutional harm that these QTBIPOC students faced at Humboldt State University was multifaceted. “Diversity” and “Inclusion” are not necessarily what the students are looking for if administrators are not taking actions to establish equity. Students with marginalized identities need to be adequately compensated if not through money but through resources for the work they do on campus. Big issues like racism need to be discussed clearly with students. Recruited students of color need to be briefed on the environment they are entering in an honest manner. Students are saying that they do not need more police presence on campus. Students need to be listened to and heard. These are all ways that institutional harm that QTBIPOC students can be minimized.

Ways Students Try and Thrive

Despite all of the institutional harm that students of this study had described experiencing, another emerging theme upon reflecting on their experiences related to the ways that they were able to thrive in this context and environment. In this section, I will be exploring the ways that students in this study managed to build community along with what they indicated as important to their success at HSU.

The first theme that emerges under this section is how participants experienced solidarity through community. Three-fourths of the participants mention how sharing spaces and values with people who have similar lived experiences made a positive impact on their sense of well-being and autonomy. More than half of the participants of this

study had partaken in a campus program called Promotorx during their time as a student. Promotorx is a transformative educator program that was created and is facilitated by Professor Dr. Marisol Ruiz. Promotorx utilizes a grassroots education approach that is driven by students' cultural strengths to collectively learn how to be social justice educators. Violet described how Promotorx is the community they identify with the most and they appreciated that while everyone in the program came from different programs, everyone had the collective goal to bring awareness to what is going on politically. Miguel describes his experience with Promotorx: "it does feel like in a strange way, like family."

Starfire talks about the campus Indian Nature Resource Center Science and Engineering Program (INERSEP) in a similar light: "INRSEP is a place where you're putting it all together and sharing that with others, building a shared vision, empowering each other in your own way, whatever your path is and your goals are." These accounts show how important it is for students of color to have spaces where they can meet with other peers of color as well as have mentors of color. Mentors of color are shown to lessen the likelihood that students of color will experience loneliness and cultural dissonance at predominantly white institutions and ultimately have a positive impact on retention and graduation rates, (Hoffman, Llaga, & Snyder 2003; Comer et al. 2017; Abel and Gonzalez 2020; Endo 2020) or in this case, the predominantly white town of Arcata, CA that HSU is located. Student leaders also played a critical role in the ways that additional students experienced solidarity through organizing on campus and crafting communities.

Izzie describes a specific experience of student organizing that was special to them. Over twenty queer students of color peacefully protested President Tom Jackson's library coffee meeting that was open to all students to come openly communicate with him and administrators. This meeting was held at 7AM during finals week of the fall semester of 2019. Students met that morning in the front of the library to share breakfast prior to protesting. The students practiced holding up the banners in a circle prior to entering the library cafe. Student's banners had various statements such as "We didn't come here to have a protest every week, we didn't come here to be angry. We didn't come here to get discriminated. We came here for an equitable education," "Students are more than the tuition we pay. Accountability now." "Hold racist tenured faculty accountable" and "Fund what matters! What is the office of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion being paid to do for us? Give MORE funding to the resource centers and programs that actually serve people of color - Stop cutting funds."

The President was upset upon the arrival of the student protestors. Without having yet even read any of the banners that students were holding, the President states that he understands our concerns but that there is a correct way to communicate these issues and that protesting is not the way. There was one student present that was addressing the President directly but was not holding a banner. The President took the opportunity to note that this student in particular is expressing their concerns in the correct manner compared to what the protestors were doing. At that moment, President Tom Jackson was utilizing a common institutional tactic by asking student leaders to utilize a formalized channel of communication in order to be heard by the institution. Rosati et al's 2019

study shows it is common for student activists to be met with administrative inaction even if they comply with such demands, especially when they have been perceived as a conglomerate of angry students more than anything else. The student that the President had singled out in an attempt to set an example of what he wanted out of students quickly shut down his claim and made it clear that while they were not holding a banner that they stand with all of the other student protestors and that there was no difference between them. The rest of the event consisted of dozens of administrators, faculty, and staff going around to read all the banners and engage in conversations with some of the students. An unnamed student at the protest offered a closing statement to address the HSU administrators, faculty, staff that were present [transcribed from video]:

> For those of you that have been talking to us, if you really are supportive, then you know where we're located, you know where we hang out, you know where our spots are, you know the cultural centers. We're tired of always having to go up to you all so we invite you all to step into our spaces and ask what it is we want and what it is we need to succeed in this university.

Izzie described this experience as empowering because they were able to build community in an unexpected way. Izzie said, "let's get all of these different groups together who happen to be queer and do something. We were watching out for each other." Queer student leaders of color expressed great admiration for each other.

Starfire describes the students who had some of the greatest impact on her experience at school and in the community:

> There were students who understood what was going wrong. Who wanted better and who cared enough to fight and who knew who they were and what they cared about and what they deserved, why things were going wrong for them. There were protests after protests. I just miss being in that environment. I don't miss the fighting but I miss being with those kinds of people.

Starfire reiterates the fact that she did not like protesting just to do it. Starfire, like many other student activists, felt like there aren't many other options than to show up authentically and vulnerably to fight for what they felt was right even if it is costly to do so (Gorski and Cher 2015; Rosati et al. 2019). Sarah talks about the hard work of student leaders of color that she admires greatly who also had roles as student workers at the MCC: "they're going to make sure that I have the resources I need more than the institution is willing to provide." Sarah's point suggests that student leaders may be capable of providing care and resources for students on campus in a way that is unfathomable to the institution or anyone working directly within it. QTBIPOC student leaders are able to make and hold space in ways that are particularly effective in serving QTBIPOC students through peer support (Palmer, Maramba, Dancy 2011; Miller and Vaccaro 2016; Hughes 2019; Rivera 2023). Given the importance of the Cultural Centers to students' sense of belonging, and therefore retention and graduation, funding for these centers is critical.

Funding for Resource Centers

Two-thirds of all of the participants I interviewed had mentioned the importance of funding the resource centers, especially the student run ones. META criticized the university for only giving small spaces to the campus' queer resource center called the Eric Rofus Center: "Have you ever been into the Eric Rofus Center? It was so small. It was definitely representative of how much admin and HSU values a queer space." Nicole also notes how she doesn't feel that the university adequately funds the resource centers that serve the diverse population of students that they claim to care about: "diversity,

equity and inclusion mean to me, means putting it into those resources that serve queer students of color… don't disperse them equally, disperse them equitably. Give centers that are lowly funded more because if you're trying to get a larger diverse demographic, you're going to have to fund those centers that cater to that demographic." Sarah speaks to the way that she has witnessed the defunding of student run programs and resources: "a lot of programs that directly support students of color, BIPOC students, get defunded first before anything else." Starfire says that above all else, she would like to see "solid funding for centers like unwavering solid funding, solid locations that aren't going to be taken away from them or squeezed into one tiny room or something like that." The dedication that queer students of color on campus have to caring for their community are not diminished by their limited space or funding. Deems talks fondly about the WRC despite its size: "we made that our little home. It was tiny, like an oversized closet. But still, that was our safe space." These student run spaces are evidently important to the overall well-being and success of queer students of color. Many studies have shown that having space to build relationships and organize with peers of shared identities contributes to academic success especially of students with layered marginalized identities (Palmer, Maramba, Dancy 2011; Vaccaro and Miller 2017; Hughes 2019; Levya et al. 2022). The importance of space for QTBIPOC students to connect is plain to see. In addition to these spaces, the presence of BIPOC faculty and staff is essential to both create community and provide necessary support and resources to BIPOC students on campus.

Importance of BIPOC Faculty and Staff

10 of 12 of the participants in this study mentioned the importance of having BIPOC faculty and staff on campus. META explains how he has gained so much from the NAS department as they have one of the largest groups of American Indian faculty and staff, and teachers and professors on a campus in the region, and "it's cool because you're learning these important histories from people who have actually experienced it and people who actually know what you're talking about." Students want and need more BIPOC mentors and educators. Upon discussing what he'd like to see more of from the institution, META says, "having more brown teachers." BIPOC faculty and staff have the ability to help promote racial identity salience, overall positive perception of oneself and good mental health amongst students of color (Vaccaro and Mena 2011; Moragne-Patterson and Barnett 2017; Trent, Dwiwardani and Page 2020). In this way, the NAS department on campus is setting an example for how BIPOC faculty and staff should be prioritized in hiring and retention on campus. Patty reiterates this point when she noted that she likely would not have graduated if it weren't for having a queer woman of color as her advisor. Violet also had a crucial moment of crisis that required the presence of a faculty of color as they struggled with alcoholism. Violet described how her professor addressed her: "he was like, I can smell it off your breath. You need some help." She continued to note that, "he was a faculty of color. So I felt like that's another reason why I really gave a shit about what he said to me." Violet's experience further indicates the necessity for BIPOC faculty and staff to be present and available on campus to support students of color through their struggles.

Multiple participants in this study had mentioned the lack of availability of BIPOC staff in mental health services on campus, also known as CAPS. Nicole underlines how QTBIPOC students experiencing discrimination and racism will especially need mental health services: “seeking therapy is super important but also it’s imperative for people of color to be super picky as to who they pick as their therapist. For CAPS, I wouldn’t trust someone that the school is offering.” Nicole was not the only participant to express this sentiment. Isabella said, “I don’t see myself ever talking to the administrator or therapist or the counselors, especially if they don’t look like me. I’m going to share my experience with somebody. I need to know that they can acknowledge me at that level of what I’m going through.” Isabella had a hard time feeling like there was anybody who worked for the university that could understand her in ways that are necessary for her to access campus resources, specifically mental health resources.

In this chapter, QTBIPOC participants shared their stories of harm in the classroom, how the institution has let them down through various offices, and how they show up to support each other and try and thrive despite the circumstances. Finally, they argue for more, and secure, funding for student run Centers and for institutional commitment to hire, retain, and promote BIPOC faculty and staff. In the final chapter, I also share additional recommendations and thoughts from the participants and discuss additional work that should be undertaken.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude this thesis I want to acknowledge limitations to this thesis and then spend the rest recapping the major points from the research and sharing the final words from the participants. I also capture the final recommendations for the university that come from these participants' shared experiences.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the fact that the participants of this study were recruited from the small circle of student leaders that I was personally exposed to after only six months in Humboldt County and on the HSU campus. I did not have immediate connections to many other QTBIPOC students across other student-led programs and resource centers on campus not listed in this study. Therefore, the accounts described in this study do not cover the perspectives or interests of all QTBIPOC students on the HSU campus. This study also lacks quantitative analysis that may be valuable in further understanding the importance of QTBIPOC resources. In general, more studies on QTBIPOC student experience, retention, and perseverance on college campuses need to be done.

Experiences of the QTBIPOC Students

This research used interviews and participant observation to explore the ways that QTBIPOC students experienced isolation, culture shock, and feeling unheard on campus. Experiences of racism in the classroom were relatively common while there was little to no support from the institution or administrators in these instances. Student activists and

leaders had especially strained relationships with administration which made accessing institutional support especially difficult for them further causing instances of burnout. QTBIPOC students noted the ways that the euro-centric curriculum and the over prioritization of white students ultimately made them feel dehumanized and unseen in the classroom. The participants in this study also felt like the university was deceptive in the portrayal of students of color's experiences on campus and in the community.

All of the participants within this study shared the sentiment that the university's usage of diversity, equity, and inclusion was predominantly performative. QTBIPOC students overwhelmingly did not trust how the university uses or applies those concepts. Participants spoke about how the university would not prioritize funding for the resources that served QTBIPOC students the most, especially the student-led resources. QTBIPOC students felt like the administrators and institution were guilty of maintaining capital driven, neoliberal principles that reduced the students to their profitability. The university continued to perpetuate oppressive power structures through carefully maintaining control over the student body.

Participants recognized how administrators would use convoluted bureaucratic systems in order to suppress student leaders and activists. Administrators would appoint charismatic student leaders into institutional roles as a tactic to push them to have more investments in institutional functions in order to distract them from their grassroots organizing potential. Administrators also continued to control the student body through police force despite QTBIPOC students explicitly expressing how police presence on campus makes them feel unsafe. Specifically, students were upset over the fact that the

police chief was able to stay in his role despite documented racist incidents. The police chief was not the only person who continued to hold a position of power at the university even though students did not want them to.

Many students were upset by Tom Jackson's responses and actions within his role as university President. Tom Jackson proved to respond to crisis and student activism in insensitive and inappropriate ways. He attempted to utilize tactics to suppress student organizing such as villainizing students and morally separating them. Tom Jackson would also minimize major issues such as racism. This campus climate was not conducive to supporting faculty and staff of color.

Dr. Cheryl Johnson was trusted by QTBIPOC students as the director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Dr. Johnson's resignation was ultimately due to the institution's values not matching hers as a racial justice advocate. The difference of student response to Tom Jackson and Dr. Johnson based on their resolution styles shows that students highly value being met with authenticity. Dr. Johnson ultimately experienced burnout that paralleled the experiences of QTBIPOC students in this study.

Participants noted learning how to become strategic about where to dedicate their time and energy as student advocates. It is imperative that student leaders do not rely on illusions or suggestions created by the university to ultimately guide their work. Student-lead (e.g. WRC, SWB, and ERC) and social justice-oriented programs (e.g. Promotorx) proved to be especially fruitful and nourishing for QTBIPOC students. Collective organizing to combat institutional harm was a source of strength and solidarity for

students. Cultural centers were also essential to the persistence of QTBIPOC students at the university.

A majority of the participants in this study had explicitly noted the importance of funding cultural centers. The insecurity of institutional funding that these centers were constantly experiencing was frustrating for students. Despite the circumstances, student leaders were still able to do impactful work in supporting the marginalized student community. QTBIPOC students also need the support of BIPOC faculty and staff.

Almost all of the participants in this study had noted the importance of BIPOC faculty and staff. The NAS department is setting a great example for how indigenous faculty and staff are necessary for educating and supporting indigenous students, and other students of color as well. A lack of BIPOC staff made it difficult for students of color to access mental health resources.

Student Recommendations

The original intention of this research was not necessarily to provide recommendations to the institution. The intention of this research was to create a publicized picture of the lived realities of QTBIPOC students that would help inform community decisions about what resources need to be prioritized. It was also meant to serve as an archive of QTBIPOC student knowledge. Students in this study have mentioned how there has been institutional efforts to disrupt institutional knowledge especially between cohorts of student leaders and activists. Over the years, students have constantly demanded things that they felt they needed and students are still here making similar demands. Here is where I wanted to provide a space for this cohort of QTBIPOC

students to talk directly to incoming student leaders, activists, and peers who will likely find themselves in similar spaces and arguments with institutional leaders on campus.

Despite the difficult, trying, and sometimes disappointing times that they experienced at HSU, those participants who talked about attending HSU mentioned coming to this school had said they had no regrets about coming. Deems mentioned how they experienced so much trauma from coming to this school and said, “I don’t regret going to HSU but if I was given a choice to do it again. I don’t know. I love my homies. No regrets on that end and that’s the only good thing that came out of it. Thank you for the opportunities. The homies, I fucking love you. No regrets for y’all. Everything else is trash. Humboldt county is trash.” Patty said, “I had a pretty good experience at HSU. I would do it all over again, just slightly differently.” Patty felt like they would have been able to navigate the institution and campus experience in a way that was safer and more effective for them had they known some of these things before coming to the university. Izzie reflects on how the things they have shared may impact incoming students: “I know a lot of what I said might be discouraging for folks to come. If people are trying to come to the school, I need to tell them that you got to be willing to fight. But take everything I say with a grain of salt because I am still here three years later. I am able to be myself and explore my identity being here. Students should still come to this school.” Despite the hardships that QTBIPOC students face especially regarding identity formations in a space like this, Izzie makes it clear that these difficult experiences were influential and fundamental in their journey to becoming the person they ultimately want to be.

MalignedNative says that “what people should be doing is relentlessly being problems and stop looking to the institution as the source of protections but demand it. Demand it anyway. Expect nothing and to never compromise.” MalignedNative continues to give specific recommendations for students who may experience harmful things on campus:

> What I recommend to students is to write down all their bullshit. Write down all the bullshit, name, date, location, timestamp, all of it. Make good records, not for the institution, for yourself. Compare those notes and talk about it often with other students with as many students as possible. Talk about how people have responded. How the institution has responded. To keep that memory going, and to create a notion of a continued movement through time. So, people are part of something and that it’s not this new thing people are doing.

This research is partially inspired by this sentiment. It should be known that the struggles that students are facing are not new. Students should not be continuously repeating themselves so many times over that they become used to inaction from the institution that is being paid to serve them. Students become accustomed to the struggle and begin to deprioritize their original demands as bigger struggles arise.

Recommendations to the University

Based on the findings of this research, these are the recommendations I can provide for any campus stakeholders who genuinely care about bettering the circumstances of QTBIPOC students' experiences on what is now the Cal Poly Humboldt campus.

1. Students need to be met with authenticity and transparency upon their arrival on campus as well as in moments of crisis. To be clear, administration is not protecting or serving the student body when concealing or distorting information

in an attempt to create the illusion of safety. Students are demanding clear and honest communication.

2. Resources that QTBIPOC students value need to be prioritized and secured in funding.
3. Substantial investments need to be made in hiring and retaining BIPOC faculty and staff across campus.
4. Last but not least, let student leaders lead. Encourage student leaders to lead.

Finally, student leaders are capable of caring for the student body in ways that may be unfathomable to the institution or anybody working directly within the institution. QTBIPOC students need QTBIPOC student leaders. As students, remember:

> "Don't rely on the police, try to be understanding and open minded. Love hard. Be outspoken. Don't ever let somebody make you feel less than and not heard. ***You being alive is the resistance***." (Isabella, advice to incoming QTBIPOC students)

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

General Categories

Opening, transitional, key questions, closing

Structured Guide

QTSOC Campus Experience

1. Tell me about yourself? (Opening)
    a. Probe: Salient identities, college attending, campus involvement 2. What has the timeline of your experience in higher education looked like? (Transitional)
    a. Probe: Timeline of track, breaks from school
3. What communities (if any) do you identify with or belong to? (Transitional)
    a. Probe: general identity markers, social groups, hobbies
4. What comes to mind when faculty or university advertisements utilize the words "diversity", "equity", and/or "inclusion"? (Key)
    a. Probe: Associations, feelings
5. What spaces do you feel you belong on campus and/or in the community? How did you develop to those relationships? (Key)
    a. Probe: Organizations, clubs,
6. What do you look in spaces that suggest that the space is for you? (Key)
    a. Probe: key people, interaction, markers, cultural associations

7. How do you feel about the role you have campus? (Key)

    a. Probe: Jobs, leadership positions, relations, integration

8. Tell me about some memorable experiences in the classroom that have influenced your sense of belonging. (Key)

    a. Probe: Instructor behavior, peer behavior, feelings

9. What are some notable campus experiences that have influenced your sense of belonging? (Key)

    a. Probe: Interactions with institutional figures, peer relations

10. In what ways would you like this research to be applied?

    a. Probe: initiatives, interests, community

11. Is there anything we missed or that you would like to talk more about? (Closing)

12. [Demographic Inquiry: Race, ethnicity, sexuality, hometown, time spent in Humboldt]