I SEE YOU!: CENTERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGIATE BLACK WOMEN ENGAGED IN ACTIVISM

Chiquita K. Baylor

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I SEE YOU!:
CENTERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGIATE BLACK WOMEN ENGAGED IN ACTIVISM

BY
CHIQUITA K. BAYLOR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND AND RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE 2022
ABSTRACT

Throughout American history, collegiate Black women have been at the forefront of many social and political movements in the United States. However, their voices, experiences, and perspectives have been erased, gone untold, or been excluded from the history, stories, and research on activism, leaving their experience to be interrupted or relayed by someone else. This qualitative research study illuminates the lived experiences of collegiate Black women who engage in activism. Using Sista Circle methodology, a culturally relevant- qualitative research approach, and Black feminist thought as the theoretical framework, this study seeks to explore how ten collegiate Black women from a predominantly White institution conceptualized their involvement in student activism.

The findings of this study revealed four main themes: collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) continue to experience a cold and unwelcoming campus climate that contributes to their oppression, discrimination, feelings of exclusion, and lack of support; collegiate Black women enrolled at PWI’s need space to develop communities and coalitions that help them counterbalance and survive within the cold and unwelcoming climate they experience; these women’s perception and understanding of activism (“Big A”) did not align with actions (“Little A”); and despite their understanding of activism, the events of 2020 forced them to change their activism, which I refer to as “pandemic activism.” The findings of this study continue to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Black women and contribute to the academic dialogue on collegiate Black women activists. This
dissertation concludes with recommendations for future research and implications for higher education policy and practices.

Keywords: Sista Circles, Black Women, Activism, Higher Education, Black Feminist Thought, Race, Inequality
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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Black students gather at the Black Student Union meeting in the dark of night to discuss the injustices they faced while on campus. They create a list of demands they plan to give to the university administration to improve the toxic and hostile campus climate. The president of the Black Student Organization, a college aged Black woman utters loudly, “We will not accept no for an answer” and those in the room cheer in agreement. Although the crowd includes both Black women and men, the vast majority of attendees are women. The next day the students march across campus with their fist pumping in the air, “No Justice No Peace” signs raised high, and chants about justice ring loudly through megaphones. At the front of the march with her megaphone in hand and the list of demands they created the night before at the meeting in the other hand, is the Black woman from the night before. To the University President’s office, they march. This is an image or scenario that many collegiate Black women have witnessed, led, or engaged in.

Throughout the history of higher education, collegiate Black women have played a pivotal role in shaping student activism within the United States (Rhodes, 2016; Wheatle & Commodore, 2019). Black women have served as the leaders of a number of student-led marches, protests, demonstrations, and organizations developed on their campuses and through the greater United States, e.g., Civil Rights, Women Suffrage, Black Lives Matters, #ConcernedStudent1950, #NotAgainSU, and
#SayHerName (Patton & Njoku, 2019; Locke, 2016). Over the last decade alone, collegiate Black women have assisted in bringing awareness to many issues through their activism such as gun violence, racism and discrimination, immigration, college accessibility, and affordability (Egan et al., 2016; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Sun, Hutchens & Sponsler, 2014; Wheatle & Commodore, 2019).

While enrolled in higher education, collegiate Black women have experienced cold, hostile, and unwelcoming campus climates that have forced them to seek political and social change through forms of resistance and activism (Hope et al., 2016; Collins, 2000). To survive within predominate White spaces within higher education, Black women have been required to overcome the hegemonic barriers of their intersecting identities of race, sex, and class which oppress them, suppress their voices, lead to their discomfort, dissatisfaction, and resentment within the campus community, and place them in an assigned, invisible, and subordinate place within the higher education system (Collins, 2000; Hughes & Howard Hamilton, 2003; Bartman, 2015). As a result, collegiate Black women have used their voices and bodies to resist the campus climate and pursue change, justice, liberation, and equality through student activism.

**Statement of Problem**

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that from 2000-2017 there was a five percent increase in Black women’s college enrollment (United States Department of Education, 2017). As more Black women enrolled into college across the nation, there was a high possibility that when enrolling into a predominantly White institution they would experience a cold and unwelcome campus climate. In turn, this
invites feelings of resistance and reveals the need for them to participate in activism. Research on the relationship between discrimination and activism revealed that the more Black students, especially Black women, witnessed institutional discrimination and racism against the Black community, the more they participated in activism activities (Collins, 2000; Hope et al., 2016;). Student activism literature revealed that students are often driven towards public concern and activism issues related to their identity, interests, and affinities (Linder et al., 2020; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017).

In the 2015 CIRP survey, 16% of Black students reported their desire to participate in student protests while in college, and 63.8% expressed a yearning to promote racial understanding as a personal goal (Egan et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the CIRP survey, like many other research studies, did not specifically look at gender and its relationship to activism. Like most narratives about activism, the experience of collegiate Black women is encompassed in the “Black student” data, which means an understanding of why Black women participate in activism, how many Black women engage in activism, and their leadership within these activities are not fully represented. When Black women’s experiences, stories, or data, are included with Black men, their experiences are excluded or erased from the narrative or research (Patton & Croom, 2017; Patton & Njoku, 2019). Furthermore, their experiences are often reported for them and not by them in their voices, leaving their perspectives to be interrupted and relayed by someone who does not understand how their identities intersect and are experienced within the dominant society.

Significance of the Study
Although there has been little research on the relationship between activism, race, and gender, we know that collegiate Black women have been at the forefront of many of the social and political protests, demonstrations, marches, and rallies that have occurred on college campuses for the past century (Arnold et al., 2020; Locke, 2016; Patton & Njoku, 2019; Wheatle & Commodore, 2019). Black women have lent their stories, narratives, and bodies to protest the patriarchy, dismantle systematic norms, racial inequities, and hold institutions accountable (Arnold et al., 2020). In earlier research about activism, when Black women’s participation in activism was documented, more attention was given to activities that focused on improving the family, neighborhood, and community and less on the significant issues or the leadership role they played within the movement (Stewart et al., 1998). Their leadership roles and grassroots efforts were not reported or were reduced to supportive roles to their male counterparts (Patton & Croom, 2017).

Interestingly, more collegiate Black women participate in activism than any other race or gender (Hope et al., 2016). In a study conducted by Hope, Keels, and Durkee (2016), the authors found that Black women reported more significant participation in movements like Black Lives Matter and Deferred Action for Children Arrivals. However, there is less research on the specific stories of collegiate Black women activists, and their voices are critical to understanding their college experiences, persistence, resistance, and retention. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the scholarship surrounding the experiences of collegiate Black women in higher education; however, there still is not enough. The limited research on the experiences of collegiate Black women or their experience participating in activism means there are
insufficient resources, services, the attention devoted to their needs, and support for them on campus. Additionally, as the number of collegiate Black women participating in activism increases, college administrators, policymakers, and practitioners must learn how to develop policies, programs, resources, and services that positively affect the experience of these students. If college administrators, policymakers, and practitioners fail to understand the needs of this population, they will be challenged to provide a campus environment that feels welcoming and warm and one for which collegiate Black women feel comfortable remaining in and engaging within the community. As a result, Black women will be forced to find new and creative ways to resist and engage in activism.

**Purpose of the Study**

Despite their challenges to overcome invisibility and exclusion within higher education and the history of activism, Black women continue to participate in activism in order to liberate themselves and their communities (Collins, 2000). Due to Black women’s struggle for survival, they are often forced to fight for change. Therefore, by grounding this research in Black feminist thought while employing a qualitative method that centers the experiences of Black women, I aimed for this study to create a space where collegiate Black women activists could tell their stories in a manner and space that honors their voices, cultures, history, and their ways of interpreting and understanding the world and higher education. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to examine how collegiate Black women conceptualize their experiences participating in activism and the benefits and challenges of their participation, which
will add to the scholarship surrounding collegiate Black women and include their perspectives into the scholarship on activism.

**Research Questions**

This study will explore the experience of collegiate Black women who participate in student activism by investigating the following questions:

How do collegiate Black women make meaning of their student activism experience?

a. How do collegiate Black women participating in activism make meaning of their experience during political and social unrest or stress?

b. What reasons do Black women give for wanting to be involved in student activism?

c. What are the perceived benefits and challenges for collegiate Black women who decide to engage in social activism on their college campus or within their community?

**Historical Perspective**

Recently college campuses have experienced an increase in student activism (Harrison & Mather, 2017). Bauman (2018) posits this is due to the increase in racially motivated hate crimes on college campuses. In 2020, when this study was conducted, the country was experiencing an increase in racial tension and activism as a result of the unlawful murders of Black Americans, often at the hands of law enforcement. Since college campuses often reflect the social and political atmosphere of the larger society (Zamani, 2003), it was not a surprise that college campuses were also experiencing an increase in racial tension and student-led activism. To provide a brief historical context surrounding the state of the country and to fully understand the
campus climate and the experiences of collegiate Black women during the time for which the research study was conducted, a historical perspective of the year 2020 is offered.

This historical perspective helps to situate the data in this study through a historical lens and offers a foundational understanding of how participants conceptualize their activism experience. The year 2020 was unprecedented and historical. With the unexpected surge of the COVID-19 virus, increase in civil unrest, and the presidential election that ultimately ended the reign of one-term president Donald Trump, 2020 was a unique and iconic year nationally. It also presented colleges and universities across the nation with challenges they never would have expected.

**Political and Social Unrest or Stress**

Tensions across the United States were at their all-time high due to the misogynistic, homophobic, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric and tone of the 45th president before and while in office, which divided the country along racial lines (Gregory, 2019; Albright & Hurd, 2021; Thomas, 2019). College students nationwide began to protest the exclusive attitudes, behaviors, and dialogue reflected by the country on their campuses (Malaney Brown, 2019; Agua & Pendakur, 2019). Activism across the nation intensified on and off college campuses (Albright & Hurd, 2021). However, in the summer of 2020, the racial tensions brewing in the United States reached their boiling point, and civil unrest erupted (Albright & Hurd, 2021).

On May 26, 2020, protesters took to the streets to protest the unlawful killings and racialized violence committed against Black Americans. Triggered by the May 25,
2020, killing of George Floyd, who was murdered by police officers, the ongoing wave of civil unrest began (Oriola & Knight, 2020). As marches and rallies for justice for George Floyd ensued across the nation, more conversation about the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery emerged on social media platforms. On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was killed by police issuing a no-knock warrant at her home in Kentucky. Although not murdered by police like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, on February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was pursued and shot by three White men while he was out for a run. All three cases reignited the conversation about police brutality, the over-policing of Black communities, and the racialized violence against Black Americans. Cohen (2020) revealed that by August 31, 2020, 164 Black Americans were murdered by police officers in the year 2020.

As a result of the racialized murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and 161 other Black Americans, people across the globe began to protest and increase the dialogue to bring awareness to the ingrained and systemic racism and over-policing that affect Black Americans daily (Oriola & Knight, 2020; Buchanan et al., 2020; Taylor, 2021). Marches, protests, demonstrations, and rallies erupted in all 50 states spanning 140 cities, and email and phone campaigns to local, state, and federal officials began (Taylor, 2021). In some cities, the national guard was deployed, and city-wide curfews were issued as the unrest descended into the night (Taylor, 2021). With over 26 million protesters taking part, the civil unrest of 2020 was deemed the largest protest in United States’ history (Taylor, 2021).

During this year, the United States was also preparing for a Presidential election. This is often a stressful time for most Americans as they wait to see if their
candidate of choice will serve as the country's leader. However, due to the intense divisiveness and polarity of the sitting president, civil unrest, and racial divide across the country, the 2020 presidential election was even more stressful. With Donald Trump (the Republican candidate) and Joe Biden (the Democratic candidate) campaigning around the economic fallout due to COVID-19, vaccinations, immigration detention campus, voter suppression, and tax breaks, the country watched as the social media dialogue surrounding the election became more racially focused and toxic (Britannica, 2021). Right-wing extremist organizations like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers emerged throughout the country and their rhetoric also found its way onto college campuses (Britannica, 2021; Albright & Hurd, 2021).

Additionally, on August 11, 2020, Black women across the country became excited for the possibility to have a woman of color and graduate of a Historically Black institution serve as the Vice President of the United States when Joe Biden announced Kamala Harris as his running mate and candidate for vice president (Britannica, 2021). If voted into office, Kamala Harris would be the first woman and person of color to serve in the Vice President position (Britannica, 2021). On November 7, 2020, five days after the election, it was announced that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won the election (Britannica, 2021).

**COVID-19**

Not only was the country dealing with social and political unrest, but 2020 also resulted in unprecedented times for many colleges and universities across the nation as they dealt with the global spread of COVID-19. With stay-at-home orders, travel bans, business closures, masks mandates, gathering restrictions, and governmental
shutdowns, the global pandemic not only affected everyday life but also disrupted nearly every aspect of campus life, from admissions to engagement in and outside of the classroom. On December 8, 2019, the United States Department of Defense (DOD) informed the public that the first positive case of a new disease called SARS-CoV-2 or coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was reported in Wuhan, China (DOD, 2021). By January 20, 2020, the CDC confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the United States. Although many college administrators were alarmed by the new disease, it was not until February 1, 2020, when the first college student tested positive (the 8th positive case in the U.S and 1st on the East coast) that college administrators became concerned about the virus and the health and safety of their campuses (Goldberg, 2021; Becker et al., 2020; Smalley, 2021). It was even more concerning to the colleges and universities in New England since this student was enrolled at a university in the area.

As a result of the global spread of COVID-19, on March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and on March 13, 2020, the United States announced a national emergency (DOD, 2021). Additionally, on that same day, several New England states declared a state of emergency as positive cases totals began to double (at times quadruple) daily (Becker et al., 2020). As a result, New England schools began to announce closures, and several states banned in-person classes and instruction (Becker et al., 2020). During this time, New England colleges and universities announced an extended Spring Break. Later that week, several New England governors issued an executive order to shut down the state, and on March 15, 2020, the United States began to shut down to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
(Becker et al., 2020). Restrictions limiting social gathers, space, and mask mandates were set in place, and businesses began to close (Becker et al., 2020).

By March 20, 2020, several New England states began to close all non-essential business, and stay-at-home orders were issued (Becker et al., 2020). As a result of the stay-at-home orders, colleges and universities across the nation had to discover new ways to teach and engage their students virtually. Colleges and universities in New England were forced to send students home or continued to extend breaks and move to remote learning environments (Smalley, 2021; Becker et al., 2020). The move to online or remote learning environments promoted concerns from administrators, students, faculty, and family members about the quality of education offered by remote instruction (Smalley, 2021). One of the most significant concerns for colleges and universities was their students’ educational success during this time.

The pandemic also resulted in the loss of lives for millions across the globe (21,772 deaths in New England) by the end of 2020, economic repercussions due to business closures and shutdowns, and the increase of unemployment and poverty rate across the United States (CDC, 2021). The pandemic not only showed the inequalities between race, class, and access to health care, it made them worse (Edward & Lopez, 2021). Disproportionally, the Black community has been impacted by the pandemic more than any other race with the exception of the Indigenous community (APM, 2021). Due to ongoing economic and health care inequalities, the Black community lacked the proper resources needed to protect our community from the virus (e.g., access to testing, personal protection equipment, proper space to quarantine, etc.) (Edward & Lopez, 2021).
The consequences of the pandemic also affected college students and their enrollment within colleges nationwide. Colleges and universities across the nation reported steep drops in enrollment, especially at community colleges, which tend to serve low-income students and students of color (Goldberg, 2021). Students across the nation struggled to balance caring for their children, elderly or sick family members, had food insecurity, and financial hardships; all which took precedence over enrolling or remaining enrolled in college (Goldberg, 2021).

In the summer of 2020, colleges and universities across the nation began to discuss the safety and precautions needed to reopen their campuses, the continued use of remote learning environments, and the financial obligations of both (Smalley, 2021). While several New England colleges and universities announced their plans to remain closed in the Fall, others developed a return to campus plan that included testing protocols, housing and spacing requirements, online and classroom learning, and visitor restrictions. In the Fall 2020, as many students returned to campus, they not only had to manage the daily changing of COVID-19 restrictions from social gatherings numbers and mask mandates to their fears of COVID-19 exposure but the financial concerns from the unemployment of themselves and family members (Smalley, 2021; Goldberg, 2021). Throughout the Fall, colleges and universities that returned to in-person learning struggled to manage positive cases on their campus, resulting in several colleges ending the semester early, returning to remote learning, and enacting shelter in place mandates on campus (Schnell, 2021; Goldberg, 2021). At several colleges and universities across the nation, students protested and demanded that campus administrators take action as COVID-19 numbers on their campuses
increased (Schnell, 2021). For example, on 17 different campuses within the Georgia state higher education system, students, faculty, and staff staged a weeklong protest, which consisted of die-ins, marches, and rallies as they demanded stricter mask mandates (Schnell, 2021).

However, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic during the summer of 2020, college campuses did not experience a rise in their traditional forms of activism on campus, but it appeared within the campus’s virtual spaces. The racist, discriminatory, and oppressive behaviors, attitudes, and situations that contributed to the hostile and unwelcoming campus climate that collegiate Black women experience daily also appeared within the virtual spaces. It is within this broad but immediate historical context that this dissertation is situated.

**Positionality**

It is important to take into consideration the role of my identity in the development and outcome of my research. I begin with my positionality in chapter one as it frames how I approached this study, reviewed the literature, and analyzed the data. In qualitative research and with Sista Circle methodology, the researcher is an active participant within the study. I am an administrator at a small private predominantly White Institution (PWI) who identifies as a first-generation Black woman and alumnus of a predominantly White institution. I have worked to understand how my privilege and identity may intersect with this research study and may play a significant role in shaping the students’ perceptions, narratives, recruitment of participants, and how the data is interpreted.
As a researcher centering and examining voices and lived experiences, I have considered subjectivities and positionality when thinking about my participant’s narratives and the background and cultural knowledge that influences how we each analyze and interpret our experiences. In negotiating my positions as an administrator and researcher, I worked to determine and acknowledge both my insider and outsider status within the university setting and the Black community and how this may affect my interpretation of the data. Throughout the study, I was forced to reflect and reexamine my positionality and subjectivities while I explored the participants’ narratives and experienced their vulnerabilities along with my own. Additionally, my engagement in the study also meant serving as a resource for the participants, sharing my knowledge, and engaging in the dialogue with them. I carefully tried not to insert my opinions or bias and only provided information that would assist the participants outside of the study.

Although I shared several similarities in my identity with the participants, our experiences and interactions with student activism are different. Our racial and gender identity similarities will have a significant impact on the participants’ willingness to engage with me, their comfortability in sharing, and the narratives they share. Since my identity as a Black woman aligns with the participants’ identities as Black women, this allowed the research to flourish and allow the participants’ experiences to be highlighted. As a researcher and college administrator, it was vital for me to develop a process where the participants could naturally gather, be themselves, share their experiences comfortably, and be vulnerable. It was also equally as important to create an environment where the participants felt like they could contribute to the research
process. As a result, the participants served as collaborators to the research process, as their openness and willingness to share dictated the study's outcomes.

As a critical constructivist, I believe knowledge is socially constructed; however, to fully understand how Black women develop knowledge, the dominant systems which we live within must also be considered, questioned, and understood. This worldview reflects my ontological approach, as I seek to understand how systems and structures influence and shape how humans acquire knowledge. In this study, the qualitative methodology and framework directly aligned with my epistemological standpoints, and it was important that, as a researcher, I used a method that supported my position, identity, and beliefs about how one constructs knowledge, interprets and understands the world and themselves within the world. I discuss the Sista Circle methodology in-depth in chapter three.

Furthermore, it was my hope, as a researcher and creator of this study, that those who read it will understand that this scholarship itself is a form of activism. I hope it encourages the readers to consider the dominant systems that affect Black women and inspires them to take action to effect change.

**Theoretical Framework**

Since this study centers the experiences of collegiate Black women, it was essential to find a framework that would recognize the importance of Black women's lived experiences and the impact that their experience has on their participation in activism. Black feminist thought is the theoretical framework used to inform the research question identified in this study and help guide the data collection and analysis process, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. I selected Black feminist
thought to frame this study because it is a standpoint constructed by Black women to provide further insight into the lived experiences of Black women and our contributions to developing Black culture, history, communities, ideologies, and change (Collins, 2000). This section will provide an overview of Black feminist thought and how it connects to activism, Sista Circles methodology, and this study.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminism, or womanism, is a term first used by feminist scholar, novelist, and poet Alice Walker to address the survival and concerns of Black women during the Women's Movement (Kohli & Burbules, 2013). Black feminism highlights the struggle Black women in the United States endured, and are still battling, against slavery, racism, and social and political systems designed to discriminate against them (Collins, 2000). Comparatively, Black feminist thought was developed out of the lived experiences of Black women "living at the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p.17). Collins (2000) defines Black feminist thought as a critical social theory that documents the lived experiences of Black women by incorporating bodies of knowledge and practices that Black women face when placed within situations of injustice, like academia. Black feminist thought encourages Black women to express their lived experiences in an effort to dismantle the systems of power, oppression, and discriminatory ideologies.

Grounded in a critical perspective, this theoretical approach also emphasizes the social problems and issues that marginalize Black women due to the systems of oppression, power, and privilege, which they are committed to challenging (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought is a discourse steeped in multiple theoretical traditions,
Black history, and culture. Theorists like bell hooks, Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker have contributed to the scholarship and thought around Black feminism. These theorists posit that before Black women can truly be liberated, they must first liberate themselves from their oppressive way of thinking which the oppressor taught them (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). This theory also equips Black women with the tools needed to resist oppression and inspires them to persist towards liberation for themselves and their community. Collins (2000), hooks (2015), and Lorde (1984) argue that Black women first need to redefine their sense of self, what it means to be a Black woman, their place in society, and the relationships they have with other Black women in order to survive and be liberated. Collins (1986) explains that self-definition "involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" (p. 516). It's the power to name one's reality that assists in providing them with liberation and survival (Collins, 2000). In contrast to self-definition, she further explains that Black women need to develop self-valuation to redefine their sense of self. Self-valuation is the act of replacing the oppressive definitions, images, stereotypes, etc., with authentic ones that are established by Black women (Collins, 1986).

Black feminist thought has six distinguishing features that set it apart from other theories and highlight the experiences of Black women in the United States. Collins (2000) listed these features as:
1. Black women's subordination with gender, class, race, sexuality, and nation intersection to form an oppressive state that challenges Black women's experiences within the United States

2. the Black women collective will share similar challenges and experiences, but individuals’ experiences will vary due to their personal interactions with class, sexuality, religion, age, citizenship, etc.

3. Black women's group knowledge, knowledge sharing through dialogue and reflection assist in forming a collective thought which inspires action

4. Black women intellectuals are essential to Black women's standpoint

5. Black feminist thought will change as social issues, conditions, and Black women's experience within the United States change

6. Black feminist thought is part of a larger struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social change. These distinguishing features help to affirm the use of this theory in addressing the research question and the experiences of Black women within higher education.

Although class oppression is a key tenet to understanding Black women and their relationship with activism, the participants in the study did not directly discuss their issues with class oppression. The participants in this study focused on race and gender oppression. I also used race and gender as a lens to analyze the data and develop the findings. However, as Black Feminist Thought theorists (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks; 2015) revealed, due to the interlocking identities of Black women, they also experience class oppression, which caused them to resist the
systems of power. Collins (2000) explained that the structures of power are comprised of social institutions that are organized to keep Black women in a subordinate place. She stated, “These interlocking social institutions have relied on multiple forms of segregation—by race, class, and gender” to exclude Black women (p. 277). Collins (2000) also explained that the dialectic of oppression and activism influenced Black women’s actions and thoughts which characterizes their experience with their intersecting oppressions. As a result, Black women began to resist and fight against these structures.

**Why Collegiate Black Women?**

Black feminist thought highlights the unique experiences of Black women and uncovers the interlocking systems surrounding race, gender, and class-based oppression that continue to marginalize Black women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). Black women are forced to navigate and participate in systems that were not designed for them, like higher education. To successfully navigate and survive with the system of higher education and its spaces, Black women were required to learn the complex and interlocking connection between their race and gender identities. Black women's race and gender overlap in an interlocking relationship to create this condition for which they live (hooks, 2015). hooks (2015) explained that the race and gender of Black women could not be separated, and these two identities further display how systems of inequality affect their daily lives. Due to their race, gender, and class-based oppression (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015), Black women experience what Fleming (1983) refers to as double jeopardy. Double jeopardy is "the negative status of blackness and femaleness combine to make Black women the most disadvantaged of
the four sex-race groups" (p. 43). Crenshaw (1991) took the concept of double jeopardy a step further when she argued that Black women's gender, race, and class intersect at multiple forms of oppression. This intersection makes up an experience unique only to Black women and situates them at the bottom of the opportunity pyramid or social hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1991).

Black feminist thought also provides a voice to Black women in arenas where their voices are often omitted or suppressed, such as in literature and academic settings, and aids in empowering them to advocate for their needs as well as their community needs (Collins, 2000). Due to their long history of marginalization and elimination from academic discourse, Black women within higher education are often left feeling like outsiders within a system that they have contributed to and helped develop. Often the concept of "outsider within" is used to understand the experiences of Black women in society and within higher education. Collins (2000) defines “outsider within” as the "social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power" (p. 300). This concept suggests that Black women have been on the outside of a system or setting even when they are active members within that space. This form of oppression is most commonly observed in academia, where Black women's ideas, experiences, and scholarship have historically been ignored, marginalized, and suppressed (Collins, 1986; Collins, 2000).

Black feminist thought highlights the lived experiences, past oppressive history, and future progress of Black women, which is needed to understand their identity and how the past affects their future development. This knowledge helps Black women "survive in, cope with, and resist" the injustices and discrimination they
face daily (Collins, 2000, p. 31). Evans-Winters (2019) revealed that Black women naturally develop an awareness of their identity, resistance, and Black feminism through (1) hearing family and community members share stories of struggle and triumphs against oppression, (2) participation in one's own experiences, (3) hyper-surveillance in urban schools and neighborhoods, (4) witness of symbolic lynching, (5) militarized public schools, and (6) being allowed in White spaces to represent or speak for their race. This consciousness is the foundation of Black feminist thought.

**Black Feminist Thought and Activism**

As indicated by Evans-Winters (2019), resistance is a critical element of Black feminist thought, and it is a significant component in the lives of Black women. Collins (2000) explains that the purpose of Black feminist thought is to "resist oppression" (p. 22). Throughout the history of the United States, Black women have served as activists, resisting and rejecting the rules and systems of oppression they have found themselves. Terborg-Penn (as cited in Collins, 2000) defines resistance as "women's involvement in the organized struggle against slavery, peonage, and imperialism" (p. 202). Activists, like Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and Shirley Chisholm, and currently, women like Tarana Burke, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, have served as role models to the thousands of Black women who have worked towards the liberation of Black women through their participation in activism. The Combahee River Collective of 1977 explains that Black women were taught to be activists by the "sacrifices, militancy, and work" of the generations of Black women before them (Taylor, 2017, p.16). Collins (2000) revealed that Black women participate in a dialectical relationship that connects their oppression and
activism. Activism is their response to the oppression they experience daily. Today, Black women are educated on resisting mainstream institutions of oppression (Evans-Winters, 2019). Black women born, raised, and encultured within the United States Black community are taught to challenge, resist, reject, and persist through oppressive ideologies, stereotypes, and social views as a form of survival (Evans-Winters, 2019; Collins, 2000).

For years, Black women have been able to confront systematic inequality, oppression, and discrimination while simultaneously being vulnerable and resilient (Evans-Winters, 2019). If Black women continue to experience marginalization, disenfranchisement, and oppression due to their identity, they will continue to challenge and resist the systematic oppression they face, fostering their participation in activism (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought suggests that activism helps Black women understand their resistance to the daily oppression they experience (Collins, 2000). Through their interactions with other Black women and their understanding of Black feminism, Black women are able to learn that their everyday activities are a form of activism and survival (Collins, 2000). Academia is one space the relationship between Black women, oppression, and activism can be viewed. In academia, Black women are continuously battling within a system that, throughout history, has suppressed their ideas and silenced their voice (Collins, 1986). The oppressive environments within higher education that Black women find themselves in, served as the catalyst to their involvement in activism, which explains why activism is an essential part of the collegiate Black women's experience in college.

Black Feminist Thought and Sista Circles
Black feminist theorists believe that systems of oppression and power must change in order to liberate the Black woman, but so does the Black woman's understanding of themselves, their relationship with oppression, and how they see the world (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Collins (2000) introduced the concept of rearticulation when discussing the transformation of Black women’s thought. She explained through the rearticulation process, Black women gain a “different view of ourselves and our worlds…stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge” (p. 32). This theory assists women in redefining and relearning themselves, telling their stories, overcoming systems of oppression, breaking the stereotypes associated with Black women's identity, and developing a sisterhood that empowers, supports, and educates other Black women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). To accomplish this, Black women must share their knowledge and wisdom (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Collins (2000) explained that sharing knowledge, lived experience, perseverance through struggles, and academic scholarship assist Black women in learning and in their liberation. Discussing individual stories with others can also serve as a method for self-healing because it provides them with a voice to tell their story and truth. By communicating their experiences with oppression and using their voice to name their reality, Black women can redefine and express their reality, develop self-valuation, and reveal to each other how the oppressed become oppressed (Collins, 2000; Landson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Landson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain, "the tragedies of education is the way in which the dialogue of people of color has been silenced" (p. 58). Black women have
used spaces like Sista Circles to teach each other ways to undermine oppression and assist in their survival (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019).

Sista Circles are women of color communities, identity-based organizations, or sororities that help Black women resist and counterbalance the hostile environments they find themselves in on college campuses (Linder et al., 2020; Patton & Croom, 2017). Sista Circles are support groups built upon the friendships, networks, and communities that exist between Black women (Johnson, 2015; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Murray, Payne, and Thomas (2011) explained that Sista Circles build on the “sense of collectivism and existing kinship networks” and “provide Black women with help, support, knowledge, and encouragement” (p. 267). These communities also provide Black women with space and support to help them cope with and counterbalance the oppression, discrimination, and hostile environments they experience daily. Additionally, Black women at PWIs started identity based student organizations or Sista Circles to counterbalance their feelings of being ostracized or socially restricted (Kendi, 2012). They used religious and political organizations, sororities, and formal and informal communal and civic spaces to validate, affirm and share knowledge about their lived experiences and community needs (Collins, 2000; Patton & Croom, 2017). These spaces served as the catalyst for their resistance and activism but also served as the foundation of their survival within the cold and unwelcoming campus environment (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019; Landson-Billings & Tate, 1995;).

Sista Circles also allow Black women to discuss their experiences, share their wisdom, and learn from each other. Learning from and teaching one another about
Black women’s experiences, struggles, battles, and triumphs with racial oppression assists in their survival (Lorde, 1984). The sharing of knowledge between Black women helps change their consciousness about Black women, which allows them to redefine themselves. Collins (2000) explained “Black women’s centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations allows us to share… our concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women. Sisterhood is not new to Black women…Black women have fostered and encouraged sisterhood” (p. 260). Lorde (1984) explained that if Black women do not teach each other, they contribute to the oppression of other Black women and the oppression themselves. The relationship, or sisterhood, amongst Black women has also served as a means of survival since the sisterhood aids in empowering, supporting, and uplifting each other (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). The sisterhood built within Sista Circles helps Black women survive in, cope with, and resist the discrimination and disenfranchisement they experience (Collins, 2000).

**Collegiate Black Women Activist Conceptual Model**

The theoretical framework above provided a framework for thinking about the experiences of collegiate Black women at predominantly White Institutions and how they conceptualize their activism experiences. In Chapter Three, I will further discuss the connection between the framework, methodology, and method, which provided a base for analyzing and understanding the data and served as a guide for developing this conceptual model. In the section below, I will discuss how the conceptual model, Figure 1, serves as a visual representation for how I conceptualize the findings of this study and how the research questions and the results interconnect. I briefly introduce
the findings of this study in this section; however, they are thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four.

As a result of their race and gender, Black women often encounter experiences that are unique to them (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Patton & Croom, 2017; Patton & Njoku, 2019; Porter & Dean, 2015). Due to their intersecting identities, the way they experience activism is also a unique experience that is only felt and understood by Black women.

**Figure 1**

*Collegiate Black Women Activist Conceptual Model*

The blue triangle in this model represents the foundations of this study: the people and the spaces. As collegiate Black women are the center of this research study and due to the unique experiences they face as a result of their interlocking identities, collegiate Black women are placed at the top of the diagram. Collegiate Black women are marginalized, oppressed, discriminated against, and disenfranchised due to the interlocking relationship created between their race and gender (Collins, 2000;
Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015). These two identities further display how systems of inequality, power, privilege, and oppression affect their daily lives.

The base of the blue triangle further anchors the study: the Black community and Seaside University. This study revealed that collegiate Black women often experience cold and unwelcoming environments while enrolled at predominantly White institutions that cause them to feel isolated, excluded, unsupported, and oppressed. As a result of their negative experiences, they often seek communities of support or create an alliance of like-minded people to help them fight for change, a coalition (displayed at the bottom left corner of the blue triangle). Often, their participation in coalition building and community building will spark their desire to or to continue to participate in activism (displayed at the bottom right corner of the blue triangle). How Black women conceptualize their community building, coalition building, and activism is the foundation of the study.

The collegiate Black women in the study participate in community activities like Sista Circles, in order to build a sense of community, learn, and be validated. Within their Sista Circles, knowledge was shared about the issues that affect their community on and off campus. The need to take action against the inequalities and discriminations was further revealed within their circle, resulting in coalition building. For collegiate Black women, it is often in these counterspaces that an action plan to create change is developed, and they begin to participate in resistance and activism (Croom et al., 2017; Keels, 2019; Linder et al., 2020; Patton & Croom, 2017). Several of the participants in this study actively participated in activism before joining the Sista Circle, which further validated their need to continue participating in activism. A
few women explained that their participation in the Sista Circle helped them to define their actions as activism. The reciprocal relationship between coalition/community building and activism is indicated on the diagram with a two-sided arrow to further show that Black women mutually participated in both coalition/community building and activism activities.

Placed on top of the blue triangle, there are two overlapping circles that provide the rich context of this dissertation study. The year 2020 was an unprecedented year for most Americans, especially Black women as I discussed above in this chapter. Political upheaval/social duress and the COVID-19 pandemic are central to my work. These two major phenomena were represented in the diagram as two intersecting circles, as these two events occurred during the same time span and also intersected in the lives and experiences of the participants.

The collegiate Black women in this study reported experiencing uncertainty around college attendance, family financial impact, and on campus and community engagement due to the virus. Due to COVID-19, the participants often questioned or felt they could not fully participate in the marches and protests surrounding the social and political issues that affected their community for fear they would become infected with the virus and pass it on to members of their families or community. During this time, the collegiate Black women in this study wanted to find ways to support and empower each other from afar, continue to build community, and invoke change within their campus and residential communities. They supported and empowered each other to have a voice to speak out about issues that affected their community on and off campus and helped to educate each other by bringing awareness to the issues.
They discovered ways to protest and campaign despite being in a global pandemic: SOCIAL MEDIA (seen in the center of the diagram). Although protesting and marching was not a reality for some due to their worries about how COVID-19 would impact their family, not being able to participate in activism provided them with a huge dilemma, as their need to participate in activism collided with their responsibility to care for their families. The empowerment provided by their (digital) Sista Circle and creative strategies led them to use social media as a form of activism during these unprecedented times (as you can see in the center of the diagram where the circle of COVID-19 and the circle of social and political unrest intersect).

As a result of the social unrest and the global pandemic, the participants engaged in both coalition/ community building and activism virtually through social media platforms. Collegiate Black women established a sense of community, built a coalition of like-minded individuals, and shared knowledge. Additionally, they used social media platforms as a form of activism to induce change on and off campus. Although some researchers (Barnhardt, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017) argued that engaging in online activism is not an actual form of activism, engaging in traditional forms of activism was not possible for several of the participants. During this time, online activism presented them with a safe way to engage with their community or alliance of like-minded individuals and to bring awareness to the issues that affect them. Their online activism further reveals how collegiate Black women made meaning of their activism experience during political and social unrest.
This conceptual model is a visual representation of how I visualize the data and findings of this study. Unfortunately, this diagram does not explicitly represent how the participants perceived themselves as activists, which was an overarching theme of the study and discussed in Chapter Four. However, the model does provide an understanding of how collegiate Black women conceptualized their activism experience during a time of uncertainty, unrest, and stress. A full list of the terms and definitions associated with the literature and study can be found in Appendix A.

**Overview of the Chapters**

This dissertation continues with a literature review, Chapter Two, which situates this research with a historical perspective and existing scholarship. The literature comprised two main sections: Black women’s experiences within higher education and their need for social and political change. Each section further assisted in answering the research questions and insight into the findings of this study.

In Chapter Three, the methodology section, I discuss my rationale for centering the experiences of Black women within this research and the method and procedures used to examine the topic. This section outlines the research protocols, research design, data collection, and analysis processes utilized in the study. This chapter ends with a review of the validity of the study.

Chapter Four – broken up into four distinct sections – reveals the findings of the study. In this chapter, I explain how the four significant findings emerged from the data collected and assist in answering the research questions presented in Chapter One. Each of the four main findings of the study is further discussed in detail within the four sub-chapters and is illustrated by using the narratives of the participants collected
during the data collection phase. In Chapter 4A, I discussed the cold and unwelcoming campus climates experienced by the collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions. Chapter 4B reveals how the collegiate Black women in this study counterbalanced the cold and unwelcoming campus climate by establishing communities and coalitions. In Chapter 4C, I explained how collegiate Black women conceptualize their student activism experience, and in 4D, I look at how the global pandemic and social and political unrest of 2020 changed their activism experience.

To conclude this dissertation, Chapter Five serves as a discussion about the findings and their impact on higher education. In this section, I also reflected on the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This dissertation explores the voices of collegiate Black women, their experiences in higher education, and their coalition building that leads them to participate in activism. In order to fully make sense of these women’s stories, it is important to contextualize them in the scholarship that so many others have taken up before me. In this chapter, I will lay out the literature in three areas: Black women’s relationship with the sexism and racism within the education system; the need for social and political change within higher education, and collegiate Black women’s activism within the United States.

Collegiate Black women have notably contributed to advancing racial justice in higher education and throughout the nation (Malaney Brown, 2019). To understand why Black women participate in activism, it is crucial to understand how the historical underpinning of racism, sexism, and oppression has affected their relationship with the educational system. This chapter also reviews the history and evaluation of both student activism within the United States and collegiate Black women's experience participating in activism to provide a context for investigating how collegiate Black women make meaning of their activism in this study.

Black Women's Historical Relationship with Sexism and Racism in Education

From slavery until today, Black women have actively participated in a system that was not built for them (Collins, 2000). Higher education was created to educate
elite White men. Although it has changed over time, it still maintains patriarchy and
White supremacy, which marginalizes Black students within this system (Linder et al.,
2020). Historically, underrepresented or marginalized student populations refer to
students who identify as members of a racial or ethnic population disproportionately
underrepresented in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012; Keels, 2019). Often these
students feel powerless, alienated, and disconnected from the college environment
(Baker, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). The education system is the most significant and
impactful system of oppression that Black women participate in and they are
consistently viewed as and made to feel like outsiders (Collins, 2000). As a result,
Black women in higher education often experience unwelcoming and isolating
environments despite their increasing college enrollment and graduation rates (Patton
& Croom, 2017). While enrolled in higher education institutions, collegiate Black
women struggle to overcome the racism, sexism, oppression, tokenization, and
inequality they experience daily, which ultimately affected their access, retention, and
ability to graduate from higher education institutions (Patton &Croom, 2017). The
history of oppression displayed within the higher education system has played a
significant role in shaping Black women's collegiate and activism experiences
(Collins, 2000; Linder et al., 2020; Patton &Croom, 2017).

Several laws, policies, and systems have historically prohibited Black
students\(^1\), especially Black women, from receiving an education. Institutionally racist

\(^1\) It is important to recognize that the collegiate Black women’s journey within higher
education and activism is often understood as the Black students’ experience as Black women
and men’s experiences are reported and viewed as one shared experience (Patton &Croom,
2017). Therefore, when reviewing this chapter, it is helpful to understand that the term Black
student is used when a distinction cannot be made between the Black women and men’s
experience.
systems, laws, and policies like slavery, Jim Crow laws, Civil Rights Act, and Brown vs. Board of Education, have shaped Black women's access to and experiences within higher education in the United States (Wilson, 1989). To this day, they have assisted in molding Black women's relationship with education in the United States. Slavery (from 1619-1865) was one of the most significant contributors that limited Black women's access to education. Slavery placed Black women in a racial, economic, and social disadvantage that still affects them today (Collins, 2000; Willie, 2003). Unwritten policies, property laws, and codes outlined throughout the history of slavery prevented enslaved people from gaining an education during that time. It was believed that the education of the enslaved would threaten the institution of slavery (Willie, 2003). Under these laws and policies, the formal education of slaves and free Blacks were forbidden, especially in the South, where most Blacks lived. As a result, literacy was outlawed for the enslaved. They were not taught to read, write, or receive a formal education (Woodson, 1919; Willie, 2003).

Most colleges and universities established before the Civil War (from 1861-1865) would not admit free Blacks. Only four schools would accept Black applicants: Oberlin College, Cheyney State, Lincoln University, and Wilberforce University (Willie, 2003). However, due to travel restrictions for Blacks, these schools were not easily accessible. Before the Civil War, only 28 Black students had received a baccalaureate from a college or university in the United States, and only one was a Black woman (MacKinnon et al., 2004). In 1850, Lucy Sessions Stanton became the first Black woman to graduate from college. Stanton graduated from Oberlin College
with a literary degree through the Ladies Literary Course program (Ohio History Central, n.d.; Kendi, 2012).

After the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, all Blacks were free. However, the pursuit of education remained an unobtainable task. Laws and policies like the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws (from 1865-the 1960s) set restrictions on the freedom of Blacks and legalized racial segregation (Willie, 2003). Black codes were developed to detail when, where, and how formerly enslaved people could work and how much compensation they could receive (Willie, 2003). These codes also dictated where Blacks could live and travel. Willie (2003) explained that Black codes provided Whites with "statutory rights" and Blacks with restrictions that helped protect Whites from Black uprising. In the 1890s, a new set of Black codes called the Jim Crow Laws was established. These laws were a set of state and local laws, mainly in the South, that marginalized Black people by denying them the right to vote, hold a job, receive an education, use public transportation, and live life freely (Willie, 2003). These Black codes also had a significant impact on the education received by Blacks.

Unfortunately, Black women were affected the most by these codes, laws, and policies. Black women were not expected to receive a formal education. Instead, they were expected to marry and raise a family (Wilson, 1989). A study on the collegiate Black students’ experiences from 1860-1899 by W.E.B. DuBois revealed that 50 percent of the Black women graduates were married (Perkins, 1983). Additionally, according to Perkins (2017), who studied the lived experience of Black undergraduate women from 1923-1960, "Black women's aspirations and lives during this period... were overwhelmingly restricted due to traditional gender and racial stereotypes" (p.
Black women were taught to become competent housewives in an effort to restore the Black family that was lost as a result of slavery (Perkins, 2017). In her study, Perkins (2017) revealed that due to slavery, many Black women did not know how to learn in a classroom setting and were never taught domestic skills because many Black women were field hands during slavery.

Although many policies throughout the history of the United States hindered Black students' access to higher education, not all of the policies during this time were designed or created to limit Black women's access to higher education. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 granted access to higher education for Black students. This Act provided federal funding for Black students' education by requiring that admission to already established institutions be granted or by providing separate and equal funding for institutions for these students to attend (Harper et al., 2009). As a result, colleges and universities with a mission to educate Black students were established, known as historically Black institutions (HBIs) (Harper et al., 2009; MacKinnon et al., 2004). During this time, the Black women who attended an institution of higher education were only taught how to become housewives, learning the essential household duties of sewing, washing, ironing, mending, and basic literacy (Perkins, 2017). The only reason Black families sent their daughters to college was to prepare them for a respectable job to assist their families financially (Perkins, 1990; Perkins, 1983). W.E.B DuBois further revealed in this study that ten times as many collegiate Black women graduates from 1860-1899 than collegiate White women were employed, which further reflects the economic role that Black women played within the Black family during this period (Perkins, 1983). Between 1860-1890, nearly all
Black women who graduated from college became educators to fulfill the growing number of Black teaching positions in the South since Black and White students could not attend school together (Perkins, 1990).

By the 1900s, only 22 of the 156 graduates of HBIs were women (Perkins, 2017). However, between 1910 to 1949, there was tremendous growth in the enrollment of collegiate Black women. In 1910, HBIs like Howard, Fisk, and Shaw Universities reported graduating a very impressive number of Black women; Howard graduated 23, Fisk 58, and Shaw 82 (Kendi, 2012). By the 1940s, 90% of all Blacks who held degrees received their education from an HBI, but only 17.3% were Black women (Perkins, 2017). However, the HBIs established under the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 did not receive equal funding. Compared to the predominantly White institutions (PWIs) established during this time, HBIs were poorly funded and were forced to operate with unqualified and untrained faculty and inadequate facilities, a disparity that still exists (Harper et al., 2009).

Historically, PWI's excluded Black students from accessing higher education; however, due to the passing of affirmative action policies in later half of the twentieth century, more Black students began to enroll at these institutions (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). Affirmative action, signed into law in 1961, is a practice or policy that strives to increase enrollment, participation, membership, or access to those historically underrepresented, deprived of, or have been discriminated against (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003). However, equal access and equal treatment are not the same thing. Once enrolled at PWIs, Black students were not welcomed, were discriminated against, and did not receive the same
treatment as their White peers (Kendi, 2012). Court cases like Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Brown v. Board of Education (1954) opposed racial segregation in the education system and questioned the validity of a separate but equal clause. However, despite the many court cases desegregating and improving public education for Black students, it was not until 1964 that the Supreme Court ruled to admit Blacks to any higher education institutions that receive federal funding (Willie, 2003; Harper et al., 2009). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 indicated that "no person in the United States, on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, or the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Harper et al., 2009). In 1965, the Higher Education Act provided funding for the improvement of "developing institutions." This Act was an effort to provide Black serving higher education institutions with funding to enhance faculty training and programs, curriculum, student services, and administrative improvements (Harper et al., 2009).

Although PWIs were enrolling more Black students, little effort or thought was given to their adjustment or experience on campus (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). Instead of joining a campus environment designed for student success, Black students were met with barriers and issues ranging from campus climate to academics (McElderry & Rivera, 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017). Black students began to speak out about the racial injustices they experienced on campus; thus, student activism efforts emerged nationwide on college campuses (Kendi, 2012; McElderry & Rivera, 2017).

Black Women's Persistence and Challenges Within Higher Education
Even though literacy was outlawed for many Blacks throughout American history, for many Black families, education was viewed as a way to emancipate and liberate their families and the entire Black race from the systems of oppression that marginalized them (Perkins, 2017). Those who received an education were viewed as achieving the American dream and given higher social status by the community (Edwards, 2000). Historically, Black women's experience accessing and enrolling in higher education, specifically at PWIs, has been challenging. However, acts, requirements, laws, and policies like racially-bias college entrance exams, increasing college admission standards, statewide standards for public K-12 education, school to prison pipeline schools, the decline in need-based federal financial aid and programs, and racial discrimination while enrolled at PWIs, have contributed to the declining enrollment for Black students in higher education (Harper et al., 2009; Nolan, 2009).

The outlawing of literacy kept Black women in a powerless, oppressed, uneducated, and economically deficient position, which had a lasting effect on their educational preparedness and access to higher education. Access to higher education has been one of the most significant challenges, which has affected Black women's enrollment and retention in college (Morales; 2012; Patton & Croom, 2017). Due to the generations of historical and systematic oppression and lack of formal and unequal education obtained by Blacks, many Black women were unprepared to attend higher education institutions. A 2017 National Center for Education Statistics report revealed that Black students scored lower than any other races on their college entrance exams (on both the SAT and ACT tests), scoring significantly lower than the other races on both math and reading/writing (United States Department of Education, 2017b). As a
result, Black students are being admitted and enrolled in higher education institutions at a lower rate. In 2017, Black students' college entrance rate was 36% compared to 41% for White students and 65% Asian, with enrollment rates being higher for Black women than men (United States Department of Education, 2017c). Morales (2012) argues that the history of "unequal school funding, language barriers, meal and nutrition disparities, lack of cultural and social capital, parents' lack of formal education, and the consequences of historical and current racism" has presented a significant gap in the opportunities afforded to Black students, especially Black women (p.90). Although the opportunity gap started with the outlawing of literacy during slavery, it continues to affect students as they prepare for college and upon enrolling in college.

Over the last few decades, one of the most consequential issues that many colleges and universities, particularly PWIs, have faced is the enrolling, retaining, engaging, and graduating Black women due to the chronic marginalization they experience while enrolled (Bartman, 2015; Patton & Croom, 2017). All students struggle with academic pressures, independence, time management, social interactions, and homesickness while in college (Bartman, 2015). However, Black women face additional stressors and challenges such as "pressure to conform, racial conflict, lack of support, institutional racism, social isolation and inequitable treatment by university personnel" (Grier-Reed et al., 2015, p.3). As a result, these students view college campuses as a place of stress, challenge, cultural conflict, bias, and prejudice and not as a place of learning and development (Grier-Reed et al., 2015). In addition, collegiate Black women must also navigate the stressors, challenges, and oppression
of a Black woman's dual identity. As a result of their double oppression, racism and sexism, Bartman (2015) explained that collegiate Black women "face additional stressors of racism and sexism to a degree unmatched by any other student group" (para. 3).

Additionally, Black students, especially Black women, in college have experienced unwelcoming and cold campus climates that lack cultural sensitivity (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Creighton (2007) reported that the discrimination, isolation, and lack of support that Black women face are often a distraction to their learning. This often results in the student withdrawing from their college experience. In addition, these students are more likely to leave their institution after their first year (Pascarella et al., 2004). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017) report, Black students are more likely to unenroll or drop out of college than any other race (41.1% Black women and 30% Black men).

Despite their historical struggles and challenges with higher education, Black women have met their college experiences with persistence and academic achievement. In fact, as of 2016, Black women, compared to all other races have earned the majority (64%) of Bachelor's degrees awarded to females (United States Department of Education, 2017a). Although Black women have been invited into higher education settings and have discovered ways to persist through the discrimination they face, they are consistently excluded from educational spaces, their ideas are suppressed, and their history and voices have been excluded from the research and curriculum (Collins, 2000; Hope et al., 2016). This exclusion has forced them to fight for change within academia.
The Need for Social and Political Change Within Higher Education

What is Student Activism?²

From its origin, student activism has successfully contributed to student life on college campuses (DeVitis & Sasso, 2019). Historically, student activism has been the center of change within higher education as it challenges the power structures and pushes institutions and the student body to become more inclusive (Cabrera et al., 2017). Although student activism has been widely studied, it has rarely been defined by researchers (Cabrera et al., 2017; Mendes & Chang, 2019). Morgan and Davis (2019) explain that researchers cannot agree upon a definition of student activism. The simple definition is taking action to effect social change (Jacoby, 2017). However, earlier student activism researchers, like Chambers and Phelps (1993), posit that the definition of student activism should frame the leadership and developmental skills students applied to activism. They define college activism as the "active participation of individuals in group behavior for the purpose of creating change - in attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and/or symbols" (Chambers & Phelps, 1993, p. 20).

However, many current researchers define student activism based on the actions taken to obtain the students' desired outcomes. In their research on student activism, Miller and Tolliver (2017) explain student activism as the "process used by students to speak out with different consequences. Some of the action is related to heightening awareness of a particular problem or issue, and some of the action is

² It is important to understand our own privileges as it pertains to how we understand student activism. For many collegiate Black women, activism is a form of survival, and unlike some other activists, they do not have the luxury to walk away from it when it is no longer newsworthy.
directly linked to seeking a solution or remedy to a perceived problem" (p 95). Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) acknowledged the lack of definition for the term. Instead, they provided ten premises for student activism, which indicates that student activism must be intentional, sustain a connection to a larger collective, involve developing and exercising power, and require a level of risk from those participating in it. They posit that these action steps will assist students, educators, and administrators in defining activism when they observe it on their campuses and engaging in dialogue around student activism (Cabrera et al., 2017).

The last camp of student activism researchers posit that the definition of student activism should acknowledge the historical context and highlight the oppressive and paternalistic system that continues to require students to participate in activism. In their book, Student Activism in the Academy, DeVitis, and Sasso (2019) argued that the definition of student activism should highlight social justice and the learning that occurs while participating in activism. They explain, "student activism is an attempt to reorder collective meanings, rendering new categories and practices legitimate and valued, with the aim of creating a change in the structure or allocation of social value or resources" (p. 9). Additionally, Dache, Quaye, Linder, & McGuire (2019) further expands upon DeVitis and Sasso's social justice and learning definition by positing that student activism is a form of education, intersectional, and transitional resistance to colonization, racialization, and capitalist oppression. These authors further explain that there is a difference between student activism and resistance, even though most people use them interchangeably when writing about activism (Linder et al., 2020). Finally, they explain that "all activism is resistance, but not all resistance is
activism," as resistance for some can be a function of everyday life (Linder et al., 2020, p. 58).

For Black women, their daily existence within systems is a form of resistance (Collins, 2000; Lacy & Stewart, 2019). Lacy and Stewart (2019) explained that resistance “disrupts the dominant ways of knowing and practice. Resistance can entail small, significant, and in-between actions (or inactions) that people employ to push against the institutions, the barriers, and the systems that make it impossible for them to exist in their natural state” (p. 158). Resistance for Black women is a way to survive in a system that was not designed for them, has historically excluded and marginalized them (Lacy & Stewart, 2019).

Although there is not a proper definition that researchers can agree upon for student activism, its mission over the years has remained the same. Student activists have always used their voices to draw attention to social and political injustices experienced on campus and in society (DeVitis & Sasso, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). To raise awareness of their concerns, student activists have employed many creative and innovative tactics to force those in power to change their actions (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Students, especially Black women activists, have used many creative tactics to activism such as marches, die-ins or sit-ins, teach-ins, demonstrations, occupying spaces, petitions, writing campaigns, walkouts, rallies, boycott or buycotts, hunger strikes, protests, and other creative means as an act of civil disobedience, to bring awareness to, and to make a statement (Barnhart, 2019; Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; DeVitis & Sasso, 2019; Harrison & Mather, 2017; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Morgan & Davis, 2019).
Student Activism on College Campuses

Student-led activism has addressed many campus specific issues, which has helped shape the institution and higher education system (Harrison & Mather, 2017). Student activism has assisted in the development of student services (e.g., the development of identity-based centers and services), creation of debate clubs, literary societies and magazines, fraternities and sororities, the establishment of the student government system, sanctioned sporting events, cultural and political student organizations, the development of academic programs and departments (e.g., African American Studies, Women's Studies, and Chicano Studies), curriculum changes, and altered institutional policies (Barnhardt, 2019; Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Linder et al., 2020; Page, 2010; Rhoads, 1998).

The first recorded student-led protest at an American university occurred during the Colonial Times was the Butter Rebellion in 1766 at Harvard University, the oldest college in America (Barnhardt, 2019; DeVitis & Sasso, 2019; Ireland, 2012; Pisner, 2011). The students at Harvard protested the stinky butter served in the dining hall (Barnhardt, 2019; DeVitis & Sasso, 2019; Pisner, 2011). Due to the economic difficulties prior to the American Revolutionary War, Harvard's administration was challenged with acquiring fresh food; thus, the quality of the food diminished within the dining hall (Pisner, 2011). After many of their complaints about the quality of food went unanswered by the University president, a student, Asa Dunbar, stood on a chair during class to voice his complaints, which resulted in his expulsion (Pisner, 2011). The students at Harvard were upset by his expulsion and began to protest on Dunbar's behalf about the unsatisfactory quality of food. This student-led protest lasted a month.
and was led by two students who identified themselves as the Sons of Harvard (Pisner, 2011). This was only the beginning of Harvard University's student activism and student-led activism in the United States. The Butter Rebellion serves as an example to reveal the history of student activism within the United States as it dates back to the beginning of higher education.

However, depending on the campus, student activism may look different depending on its issue, the student population, type of institution, and the local and nationwide challenges (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; DeVitis & Sasso, 2019). Over the years, student activism on college campuses has mirrored broader global, federal, and local movements and issues (Barnhardt, 2019). Although the uprising of student activism may be hard to predict, as it tends to be sporadic due to the many facets that can ignite activism, student activists have helped bring awareness to environmental issues, federal immigration policies, minimum wage, healthcare, voter suppression, and national economic inequalities (Altbach, 1989; Barnhardt, 2019; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Eatch & Iannacone, 1996; Linder et al., 2020).

Student activism includes campus issues and consists of local, state, national, and global issues (Barnhardt, 2019). Harrison and Mather (2017) explained that several issues had ignited student activism on university and college campuses, such as immigration bans, food services, sexual assault, tuition increases, discrimination, investments in fossil fuel, and conflict/war. Often campus activism has sprung from events that happen off campus, such as local and national legislation or community struggles (Altbach, 1989; Barnhardt, 2019; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Rhoads, 1998). Events, like the Women's suffrage and Black Lives
Matter Movement, may not have started on a college or university campus; however collegiate students actively participated and have served as leaders in these movements, and both movements greatly affected campus life (Barnhardt, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017).

However, Altbach (1989) argues that student activism could be more effective. Due to the duration of the academic year, activist generations, and social factors, student activism has not been the most impactful form of activism (Altbach, 1989). Student-led movements generally last no longer than an academic year (occasionally two, which is unusual) (Altbach, 1989). This is primarily due to the university's academic life, which could help or hinder the activism on campus. The university's academic structure allows students free time to devote to student activism. However, it also provides a significant amount of pressure on students due to its examination schedule and course credit system (Altbach, 1989), which can often distract students away from their activism goals. Student activists are traditionally undergraduate students who change every three to four years. Altbach (1989) points out that the "pressure to pass examinations and complete degrees is intense toward the end of the programme, and students are less likely to be involved in activist movements" (p. 99). As generations of students pass through colleges or universities, the less likely it would be for the activism to be sustained. As new students transition into the college or university system, they may come with or develop different interests and goals than the earlier generation of students (Altbach, 1989). Lastly, Altbach (1989) explains that social factors play a significant role in the demise of a student movement on campus. Depending on the social issue, it may lose momentum or the students' interest or be
limited to a specific time. Whatever the case may be, it has a consequential impact on campus activism's effectiveness, making activism transitory and unpredictable (Altbach, 1989).

Nevertheless, university and college campuses are recently seeing a rise in student activism (Malaney Brown, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Linder et al., 2020). Student activism is still focused on student life and educational quality, but in recent years, it has taken on more social issues (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Today, many activists organize to address the layers of oppression often overlooked within higher education, which holds the colleges and universities accountable for their commitment to students in addressing campus-based oppression (Linder et al., 2020). College and university campuses are more divided than ever along the lines of race, gender, student interests, and ethnicity (Albright & Hurd, 202; Gregory, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Researchers like Bauman (2018) predicate that the increase in activism correlates to the rise in hate crimes on college campuses. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that nationally racial and ethnic hate crimes have increased across all college campuses and universities, with the majority of the crimes occurring against Black and Jewish students (Bauman, 2018). Hate crimes are crimes motivated by prejudice or bias based on race, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other marginalized identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, other researchers argue this is due to the growing diversity on campus (Eatch & Iannacone, 1996).

As a more diverse student body enrolls into college, they began to question higher education, the curriculum, and policies (Eatch & Iannacone, 1996). Depending on the university's response to meeting their needs, it determines the need for student
activism (Barnhardt, 2019; Eatch & Iannacone, 1996). Additionally, students are exposed to more political and social issues through their academic learning, which encourages them to ask broader political questions, question oppressive systems, and discover their place within the system (Altbach, 1989; Barnhardt, 2019). As a result, students tend to participate in activism that they can best relate to, understand, or that has affected them or their families (Hope et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2020). Understanding that marginalized or underrepresented students tend to engage in activism that focuses on the identity for which they experience systemic oppression explains why identity based activism is the most prominent form of activism for this population (Linder et al., 2020). Linder, Quaye, Lange, Evans, and Stewart (2020) explained identity-based activism as "organizing, resisting and engaging with issues directly tied to oppression and identity" (p. 4). Identity based activism is also the most prominent form of activism for collegiate Black women as systemic oppression tends to affect them the most due to their interlocking identities (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Linder et al., 2020; Malaney Brown, 2019;).

**Collegiate Black Women’s Need for Activism**

**Collegiate Black Women Activists**

College students tend to be guided towards causes that affect them or their families (Linder et al., 2020). In addition, they also tend to participate in activism where their concerns on campus have gone unsupported, unheard, or unanswered by college administration (Barnhardt, 2019; Linder et al., 2020). In his study on student activism perspectives, Altbach (1989) highlighted several attributes of activists that researchers still use today. While written over 30 years ago, his points are still relevant
to this context. First, he explained that student activists tend to be "politically aware and often ideologically oriented" (p. 102). Second, students who become activists are more likely to be members of political organizations before they participate in activism and typically active when the campus is quiet (Altbach, 1989). Third, students are more likely to participate in activism if they live on campus (Altbach, 1989; Eatch & Iannacone, 1996). Finally, due to pressures to graduate from college, activists are less likely to be involved in activism during their last year of enrollment (Altbach, 1989).

Additionally, student activists tend to be female, as more females than males participate in activism (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2020a). Black college students (25%) are more likely to engage in activism than any other race (CIRCLE, 2020a). Another study conducted by CIRCLE (2020b) revealed that Black women aged 18-24 are more likely to experience racism and are more likely to support and actively participate in social and political movements than any other race or gender.

**History of Black Women Activism in the United States**

Student activism in the United States looks different depending on the historical time and era (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; DeVitis & Sasso, 2019). For the context of this study, it is most important to highlight the development of Black collegiate women’s activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. During the 20th century, student activism began to shift from campus-based issues towards social and political problems (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Eatch & Iannacone, 1996). During this time, student activism hit an all-time high, especially
with Black collegiate students (Alford, 2020; Kendi, 2012). Each decade within the 20th century reveals a new social and political issue for which collegiate students protested and new approaches to student activism were developed. Black students, specifically collegiate Black women’s activism, took center stage in setting the foundation for many approaches to activism and large movements during this time (Alford, 2020; Kendi, 2012). Collegiate Black women during the 20th century were determined to voice their concerns with segregation, form student government associations, create student organizations that address their campus concerns, and change the oppressive culture they experience at their colleges (Alford, 2020). Although their activism addressed the White supremacist, paternalistic, and authoritarian structure, leadership, and social norms on their colleges, these were also the same concerns they also aimed to address and dismantle off campus as well (Alford, 2020).

In 1905, the first nationally recognized Black student-led movement began at Howard University when over 400 students gathered together to protest and demand the removal of their president, John Gordon, who the students felt was prejudiced (Kendi, 2012). Students assembled in the chapel and chanted "Down with Gordon" and in unison stood, waved their hats and coats, and hissed at the president. This was the start of a month-long strike; even though the students demanded the hiring of a Black president, the board of trustees selected another White president (Kendi, 2012).

In addition to the increase in student activism during this time, there was also a rise in national student organizations that focused on social and political issues, which became an active part of campus life and student activism (Eatch & Iannacone, 1996).
Due to the development of student organizations, student activism for the first time took on an organizational form (Eatch & Iannacone, 1996).

**Black Women's Club Movement (1896).** As a foundation to the organizations that would follow, the Black Women's Club Movement at the end of the 19th century allowed Black women space and opportunity to discuss with other Black women the issues that affected them, their families, and their community (Collins, 2000; Franklin & Collier-Thomas, 2001). The Black Women’s Club Movement is the emergence of several grassroots clubs and organizations established by Black women to fight for the advancement of Black Americans (Dickson, 1987; Franklin & Collier-Thomas, 2001; Kendi, 2012;). Black women created the Black Women's Club Movement, in 1896, with the creation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), to fight racism and bring awareness to Black women's systematic disenfranchisement (Collins, 2000; Dickson, 1987; Edwards, 2000). These organizations assisted in providing services, financial assistance, education, and awareness about issues that affect the Black community (Dickson, 1987). DeVitis and Sasso (2019) explained that social change begins with a conversation amongst peers who have similar ideas and concerns about an issue in their community. These conversations inspired their decision to take action and right the injustices they were experiencing daily. As many Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks (2015), Audre Lorde (1984), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), have explained, activism is a way for Black women to resist and dismantle White supremacy and the systems of oppression that have disenfranchised them for years.
Although many of the earlier organizations established during this time began in the church and community, collegiate Black women also established organizations on their college campuses to raise awareness and assist in their resistance. In addition to starting identity based student organizations that reflect their political and social interests, Black students began to establish Black fraternities and sororities on their campus. Black fraternities and sororities impressed upon their members the importance of work, service, racial pride, and the uplifting of their community (Alford, 2020). Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKAs), founded in 1908, was another club founded during the Black Club Movement with a mission to generate change for the Black community. The AKAs were the first sorority established by collegiate Black women. The organization was committed to addressing and taking action towards the problems of Black women (Franklin & Collier-Thomas, 2001). The organization established the AKA Non-Partisan Lobby for Economic and Democratic Rights to lobby for Black women's concerns and issues. In their overview of the Civil Rights activities of Black women organization from 1915-50, Franklin and Collier-Thomas (2001) explained that the AKAs became the first Black women organization to "hire a full time representative to monitor and lobby for legislation and other governmental actions that reflected the collective interests of the African American Community" (p. 28). This organization lobbied in Washington, D.C., to expand the federal public work programs and the minimum wage extension to women employed in the laundry service industry. These women also lobbied for "the elimination of discrimination in public accommodations, federal housing projects, and medical hospitalization programs and protested lynching and the disfranchisement of the
southern Black population" (Franklin & Collier-Thomas, 2001, p. 29). The AKA Non-Partisan Lobby for Economic and Democratic Rights representatives significantly impacted the Black Community through their lobbying and activism.

Although the women of this sorority and many other sororities and fraternities were impactful in their efforts to uplift the Black community and make social and political change, the establishment of these organizations was a point of unrest on many campuses, especially HBIs (Alford, 2020). As Black students fought with the administration at HBIs to relax campus rules and restrictions, they also demanded the right to freely organize and for self governance as many administrators would disapprove of the establishment of these organizations and other “troublesome” organizations on their campuses (Alford, 2020; Kendi, 2012). Nevertheless, by the 1920s, Black sororities and fraternities were significant contributors to student-led activism and movements (Alford, 2020).

As the demographic shifted and more Black women enrolled in higher education institutions in the early 1900s, more gender-based student organizations became active. This time is often referred to as the New Negro College Movement (Kendi, 2012). During this time, Black women began vocalizing their concerns about racial discrimination on and off campus and took action to erect change. The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) was the first national coalition of Black women organizations (NCNW, 2018). Founded by Mary McLeod Bethune in 1935, this organization brought 29 Black women organizations together to have one collective voice (NCNW, 2018). They lobbied and fought for Black women's advancement, fair employment practices, anti-lynching policies, and racism (NCNW, 2018). Later, with
the rise of the national Civil Rights Movement, collegiate Black women activism took
center stage, as they actively participated in and organized campaigns, helped to
mobilize their community, and led grassroots initiatives (Franklin & Collier-Thomas,
2001). According to Wheatle and Commodore (2019), Black women from Spelman
and Bennett Colleges, both historically Black women's colleges and other historically
Black colleges, were the backbones of the Civil Rights Movement. Their fight against
racial inequality, paternalism, and demands for social change on their campus also
established a chain reaction that is still left within Black women's activism today
(Alford, 2020; Boyce et al., 2020).

**Sista Circles.** As shown throughout the Black Club Movement, collegiate
Black women used innovative and unconventional ways, like establishing and joining
identity-based organizations or Sista Circles, to undermine oppression and survive in
spaces like higher education (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019). Sista Circles,
women of color communities, identity-based organizations, and sororities, like NCNW
and AKA, helped and continue to help Black women resist the hostile environments
they find themselves in on college campuses (Landson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton &
Croom, 2017). Counterspaces are exclusionary identity-conscious and affirming
spaces that allow historically marginalized populations to gather with others from a
similar or same identity to discuss, critique, and validate their experiences (Keels,
2019). These organizations or Sista Circles allow Black women to discuss the
concerns and issues that affect them and their community, organize and plan ways to

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3 The role of Black students in the Civil Rights movement has been widely studied and the
role of Black women in that movement is an important context for this dissertation. While I
have written about this elsewhere, I will not include the vast history in this literature review.
advance the Black community, and lobby and campaign for civil and human rights. It is their involvement in these communities or organizations that drove their participation in activism. Sista Circles will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

**Black Women’s Activism Today**

Students have taken a different approach to activism in recent years with the use of technology and social media. Technology allowed students to coordinate their approach and coalition build by communicating with a large number of students on their campus and at other campuses (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). According to Stornaiuolo & Thomas (2017), student activism has evolved "through popular culture and peer networks, as young people engage in new forms of organizing and coalition building across online and offline communities" (p. 348). Students develop and use new and innovative approaches to activism through their use of technology such as email writing campaigns, blogging, group text messaging, crowdfunding platforms, buycotts, electronic chats, and posting messages, images, and videos (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Although many of these forms of activism are online, they still allow students to speak out, collaborate with others who share the same interest, learn from others, challenge their values, ideas, and beliefs, and motivate them to take action (Barnhardt, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017).

Technology successfully changed activism, and social media has changed the way that students across the nation engage in activism (Boyce et al., 2020; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Social media has become an essential mechanism to modern day activism (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Reddit, allow activists to raise awareness digitally
but also allow other activists to become more educated on social change issues easier and faster (Boyce et al., 2020; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). In 2011, the use of social media hit a stride in activism, with students using digital platforms to organize, protest, and denounce leaders during the Arab Spring protests, a series of anti-government protests that spread across the world due to social media (Boyce et al., 2020). This protest was one of the first protests to use social media as the main communication method to inform, educate, mobilize, and create change (Boyce et al., 2020). Since then, almost all contemporary movements have developed some form of a social media presence (Boyce et al., 2020; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Since then, this period has been seen an increase in student activism, from student athletes protesting the national anthem to “hands up, don’t shoot” marches to protest the killings of Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin; many researchers will argue that the increase in activism seen today reflects the activism of the 1960s (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017).

Social Media. Through the use of social media, activists are able to create a digital space for dialogue, learning, organizing, mobilizing, and facilitating activism, which is different from previous decades of activism (Boyce et al., 2020; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). For example, student activists have developed websites, such as www.thedemands.org-, a nationwide list of college students' demands to address the systemic oppression and racism on their campuses, and used social media hashtags, such as #BlackatHarvard, #ConcernedStudent1950, #NotAgainSU, and #SayHerName, to express their concerns and produce awareness around the issues (Boyce et al., 2020; Malaney Brown, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Rickford,
2016). These forms of activism have become commonly used to ensure the success of contemporary activism but also provided a voice to those who were voiceless (Boyce et al., 2020; Malaney Brown, 2019; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Today, technology and the use of social media is the primary tool for organizing activism as it is used by all segments of the university’s population (Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Boyce et al., 2020).

Rarely are campus-based activism only campus-wide now; with the increased use of technology and social media, student activism draws local and national media (Levine, 1999; Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Technology and social media have made it easier to gain the attention of and access the policymakers, senior administrators, and media (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Email writing campaigns and social media presences have demonstrated the current power of student activists’ impact on campus policies, initiatives, and decisions (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). Altbach (1989) explains that mass media helps in determining the impact of the student movement by helping to stimulate a nationwide increase in many student movements, especially seen in the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar movements in the 1960s.

Social media and other online platforms allow students to engage in, support, and promote a cause or issue they relate to and find interesting (CIRCLE, 2018). Often with social media, many have argued that students are less engaged with political and social issues than decades before. Those who argue that there is a lack of activism believe that social media activism does not count as true activism and are often referred to as "slacktivism" (Cabrera et al., 2017; CIRCLE, 2018). Slacktivism or "armchair activism" refers to the practice or support of political and social issues through the use of online sources, which is viewed as requiring very little energy,
commitment, effort, or risk to participate in verses the traditional forms of social activism, such as protests, marches, rallies, & demonstrations (Cabrera et al., 2017). However, many activism scholars argue that today's online activism often leads to student involvement in traditional forms of activism on college campuses (Boyce et al., 2020; Cabrera et al., 2017; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Researchers explain that activism using technology is less cognitively and emotionally transformative than traditional forms of activism (Miller & Tolliver, 2017). However, a survey conducted by CIRCLE (2018) revealed that those who engage in online activism such as signing petitions and following a campaign on social media are more than three times likely to engage in at least one form of traditional or offline forms of activism. The survey also revealed that 22% of college students enrolled full-time indicated that they participated in at least one form of offline activism (e.g., march, sit-in, occupying a space, walkouts, or participating in a union strike) (CIRCLE, 2018). Students also indicated that their top three forms of activism were signing a petition (56%), following a cause on social media (27%), and attending a demonstration or march (increased from 15% in 2018 to 27% in 2020) (CIRCLE, 2018, CIRCLE, 2020). Despite the change, many students continue to engage in demonstrations, marches, online petitions, and online campaigns while enrolled in college (Miller & Tolliver, 2017).

**Black Lives Matter Movement and Say Her Name Movement.** As a last fundamental context to the activism experiences of the women in this dissertation, I present the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements as a case in point. The Black Lives Matter Movement was started in 2013 by three Black women, Alicia
Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors (Rickford, 2016). It began as a hashtag on social media and became a global wide campaign. The Black Lives Matter Movement was started to protest police brutality and state violence against Black men and boys. Although the movement was not started by collegiate Black women, like the Civil Rights Movement, collegiate Black women have fueled this movement by using their campus networks and social media to bring awareness to the movement and the issues affecting the Black community today (Rickford, 2016; Locke, 2016; Boyce et al., 2020). CIRCLE (2020b) revealed that 73% of the Black women surveyed have been actively involved in or supported the Black Lives Matter Movement (CIRCLE, 2020b).

Employing an array of grassroots initiatives, Black Lives Matter activists have used a host of disruptive techniques to bring awareness to and advance their cause (Boyce et al., 2020; Rickford, 2016). From occupying highways and retail stores to die-ins and vigils, Black Lives Matter activists have galvanized its members across the country and college campuses (Rickford, 2016). To protest the killings of Black people, student activists across the country began to participate in die-ins, a new form of demonstrative protesting where participants simulate being dead to bring awareness to an issue that typically involves the death of an individual or group, animal rights, or gun control (Luxen, 2014).

While the Black Lives Matter Movement was started to protest police brutality and state violence of Black men and boys, Black women also suffer from sexual victimization and exploitation at the hand of law enforcement (Locke, 2016). Law enforcement has killed Black women like Michelle Cusseaux, Natasha McKenna,
Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and Rekia Boyd (to name a few) (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). Although started by Black women, Black women's experience with police brutality was initially left out of the movement (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). To include Black women, Black women activists started the #SayHerName campaign to fight the marginalization of Black women who have faced police assault (Rickford, 2016). The #SayHerName campaign began in 2015 with a mission to support a gender inclusive approach to racial justice that centers the experiences of and gives voice to Black women who have been victims of police violence and absent from the movement and dialogue around police brutality (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). As a result of their absence in this movement and other movements, Black women's experiences remain invisible (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). The need for the #SayHerName campaign is merely another example of how Black women for decades have actively participated in movements but have found themselves and their concerns and contributions left out of the movement (Crenshaw et al., 2015b). As a result of Black women’s invisibility and the need to center the experiences of Black women, the hashtag #HerDreamDeferred surfaced (Arnold et al., 2020). Created by the African American Policy Forum, this hashtag provided a digital space for Black women to share their experiences, knowledge, and uplift each other (Arnold et al., 2020). The virtual dialogue and think tank spaces provided by the hashtag were reimagined in 2015 to include an annual weeklong series of activities that focused on uplifting the voices of Black women and girls (The African American Policy Forum, n.d.).

The Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name Movements have continued to mobilize collegiate Black women to take action against their campus's racial issues. In
2014, three collegiate Black women from the University of Missouri started the hashtag MU4MikeBrown to protest the death of Mike Brown, who was unlawfully killed by law enforcement (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). These women coordinated marches, a "hands up, don't shoot" photoshoot, and developed a call to action list to present to the senior administration. Their activism began a week of protests and demonstrations on campus that gained national attention (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). Additionally, in 2020 at Syracuse University, the students began the hashtag #NotAgainSU to protest the racism they were experiencing on campus (Kilgannon, 2020). After racist and anti-Semitic graffiti was found in a residence hall and around campus, the Black students occupied an administrative building on campus for two weeks waiting for the administration to hear their list of action items for improving the campus climate (Kilgannon, 2020).

Each of these movements and acts of activism was led and organized by Black women. These are only two examples of the work and labor of Black women that have made national attention. It would be impossible to highlight all the many acts of resistance that Black women have helped to initiate on and off college campuses. As exemplified in previous decades, their activism does not just span issues of the Black community. Black women have taken the lead in highlighting gender inequality, sexual violence towards women, silencing of victims, and the invisibility experienced by Black women victims in the United States (Arnold et al., 2020).

**Trump Era (2015-2021).** As a final example and context for this study, I offer this short discussion of the socio-political landscape of activism from 2015-2020. Visual images, social media, and technology continued to play a significant role

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during the Trump Era of activism (Johnston, 2019). In June 2015, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the President of the United States and, in 2016, was voted into office as the 45th president of the United States (Gregory, 2019; Favors, 2017; Johnston, 2019). These announcements not only had a significant impact on the United States governmental system but marked a historical change in activism as it caused the greatest divide amongst the country since the 1960s (Albright & Hurd, 2021; Gregory, 2019; Johnston, 2019). Thomas (2019) explained that Trump’s administration revealed the “widening polarization; more entrenched racial, class, and geographic tribalism; growing economic inequality; proliferating incidents of hate speech and crimes; campaign rhetoric attacking ethnic groups, immigrants, disabled Americans, and women; and the alignment of White nationalist groups with one of the major political parties” (p. 33).

The tone and misogynistic, homophobic, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric set by the 45th president before being inaugurated and while in office resulted in intensified activism across the country and an increase in activism led by college students (Albright & Hurd, 2021; Gregory, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Malaney Brown (2019) explained, “In the fall of 2015, American colleges and universities experienced one of the largest collective uprisings from their students” (p. 168). This uprising was due to the concerns of inclusion on their campuses as the country’s attitudes, behaviors, and dialogue were reflected on college campuses nationwide (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; Malaney Brown, 2019). To protest the Trump administration, students used both social media and traditional forms of activism (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019)
During this time, campuses reported an increase in hate crimes, calls for safe and free speech zones, renaming of buildings once named after racist or slavery supportive leaders, torch burning marches, hate filled demonstrations, racist and homophobic signs or slogans painted on campus buildings, White conservative student groups, and conservative speakers on campus (Agua & Pendakur, 2019; Bauman, 2018; Gregory, 2019). In addition, White nationalist and supremacist groups began to target college campuses as a space for rallies, speeches, and marches which resulted in violent clashes, an increase in activism, and controversial rhetoric on campuses nationwide (Thomas, 2019). For example, in 2017 at the University of Virginia, White supremacists took to campus to protest the removal of a Confederate statue of Robert E. Lee and were met with students’ counter-protesting their presence on campus (Boyce et al., 2020). The 45th president used the controversy over the statue to support the White supremacist and the preservation of the statue (Boyce et al., 2020).

Additionally, student uprising, which focused on racism, police brutality on or off campus, and women’s rights, continued. In 2017, to protest the inauguration and the misogynistic comments of the 45th president, women nationwide flocked to Washington D.C. for the Women’s March (Stein et al., 2017). During the President’s first year in office, a mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida occurred killing 17 students (Johnston, 2019). Students around the nation took social media to protest gun control (Johnston, 2019). Then, in 2020, the world shut down due to the coronavirus global pandemic, which caused a nationwide increase in unemployment and resulted in colleges and universities around the world being shut down (Oriola & Knight, 2020). During this time, student activists used social media to continue to
bring awareness to police brutality. As a result of their activism and continuous
dialogue on social media, the racialized murders of Black Americans by police
resurfaced with the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and
Rayshard Brooks (Oriola & Knight, 2020). Black women, along with many other
protesters, took to the streets during the pandemic to protest the ingrained and
systemic racism, racial violence against Black Americans, and the dismantling of the
police system (Buchanan et al., 2020; Oriola & Knight, 2020).

The Experiences of Black Women Activists

Today, Black women are educated on how to resist mainstream institutions of
oppression from the generations of activists that came before them (Collins, 2000;
Evans-Winters, 2019, Taylor, 2017). Although Black women were and still are at the
forefront of many of the movements this country has experienced, they have been left
out of the story or were viewed and reported as playing a supportive role to their male
counterparts, or White women are provided with the recognition or viewed as the
leaders of a movement that was started by or for Black women (Hosterman et al.,
2018; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Patton & Croom, 2017; Wheatle & Commodore,
2019;).

Black women continue to serve as the backbone of the Black community, and
their efforts to make social change continue to be pushed aside, unrecognized, and
overlooked (Locke, 2016; Patton & Croom, 2017). In the second decade of the 21st
century, the use of social media and technology not only supplied Black women with a
tool to help in their social change efforts, but it also visually allowed Black women
across the nation to rightfully take their place as the leaders of these social movements
Arnold et al., 2020). Arnold, Bass, and Morris (2020) stated, “Visual media and visual protests assist in the fight…in response to Black women being decentered in the movement. Most importantly, women of color have been talking back and taking back, reappropriating their images, pictures, and narratives to protest and advocate for social change” (p. 89). Visual images like photos and videos have also assisted in providing evidence to support the experiences of Black women and the Black community across the United States and within the higher education system for which their activism centers (Arnold et al., 2020). Despite being left out of history, devalued, and consistently silenced at times by other activists, Black women have continued to fight for change for all Black people. As Locke (2016) indicated, Black women's "leadership and voices would continue to lead, organize, strategize, and be on the front lines of shifting the paradigm to ensure their inclusion in political discourse and policymaking" (p. 23). This dissertation will contribute to their story.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the epistemology, methodology, and research design used to inform this study and to analyze the lived experiences of the 10 collegiate Black women used in this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the epistemological underpinning, methodological approach, research design, and procedures used to understand the experiences of collegiate Black women and how they conceptualize their activism experience. This study uses a qualitative research approach to examine collegiate Black women's experiences on predominantly White campuses and how they make meaning of those experiences through their participation in activism. I define student activism as the way students personalize, contextualize and make sense of what it means to work towards social change by actively participating in protests, marches, online campaigns, rallies, demonstrations, and student organizations. Activism focuses on bringing about change in attitudes, understanding, behavior, and systems on college campuses and communities. The following research questions guided this study:

How do collegiate Black women make meaning of their student activism experience?

How do collegiate Black women participating in activism make meaning of their experience during political and social unrest or stress?

a. What reasons do Black women give for wanting to be involved in student activism?

b. What are the perceived benefits and challenges for Black female college students who decide to engage in social activism on their college campus or within their community?
Epistemological Underpinning

This study aims to reclaim the voices of Black women in academia and in social arenas like student activism, where we have prevailed as leaders but are often left out of the conversation, historical context, and academic discourse. Recognizing that knowledge is constructed through a social, political, and cultural worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this study centered the lived experiences, dialogical learning, and self-reflection of Black women. The epistemological underpinning of this study takes a critical constructivist worldview as it seeks to understand or make meaning of the connections between power and knowledge through the experiences of a human population, and more specifically, of Black women (Kincheloe, 1997; Patton, 2015). Therefore, a specific form of critical constructivism that centers the lived experiences and gives voice to Black women will serve as a more compelling position for this research, Black Feminist Epistemology.

Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) challenges how knowledge is understood and contracted within the world, specifically within academia, where Black women’s voices have been historically suppressed. Understanding that knowledge is historically constructed and maintained through a western elite White male viewpoint, Black feminist epistemology positions Black women as the agents of knowledge. Collins (2000) explained, “Black women have long produced knowledge claims that contested those advanced by elite White men… Because Black women have been denied positions of authority, they often relied on alternative knowledge validation processes to generate competing knowledge claims” (p. 254). Furthermore, Black feminist epistemology posits that in order to accommodate the western
structure, knowledge was erased, silenced, and marginalized within academia, causing Black women to be invisible and voices to be suppressed. This epistemology aims to reposition and redefine the Black women’s voice within this space.

Black feminist epistemology also highlights how Black women construct knowledge. Collins (2000) explained that Black women’s knowledge is forged from their interactions with the world, their dialogue and experiences, and how they make meaning (through reflection) of these different interactions. Collins (2000) also identified five contours of Black feminist epistemology:

1. **Lived Experiences**: Black women experience the world differently from other genders or races. The intersectionality of their race, gender, and social class positions within society provide a unique experience and understanding of the world. Collins (2000) explained that societal influences constructed Black women’s knowledge of social structures, such as race, gender, and social class. These social structures had a historical, and still have a daily, impact on the oppression that Black women experience.

2. **Dialogue**: Black women use dialogue and storytelling to share their experiences, especially with other Black women. Dialogue is a way of sharing knowledge and wisdom (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) posits, “Black women’s work…fostered a series of experiences that when shared and passed on become the collective wisdom of a Black women’s standpoint” (p. 256).

3. **Ethics of Care**: Black women engage in the ethics of care through their daily conversations and interaction with each other and community members.
Ethics of care is best described as the natural way of knowing for Black women or their inner voice (Collins, 2000). Rooted in the Black culture, ethics of care comprises three interrelated components: individual uniqueness, appropriateness of emotions, and developing a capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000). Each woman’s personality and individuality add to the understanding and education of other Black women through their connected knowing.

4. Personal Accountability: Individuals must take personal accountability for their experiences and dialogue, understanding that each person’s experience is individualized and cultural. Each woman is responsible for the education and wellbeing of the community.

5. Black Women are Agents of Knowledge: Black women’s narratives are often rendered invisible, disbelieved, erased, or viewed as uncredible witnesses of their own experiences (Collins, 2000). Black women are “legitimate agents of knowledge. No longer passive objects of knowledge manipulated within prevailing knowledge validation processes, African American women aimed to speak for ourselves” (Collins, 2000, p. 266).

In Black women’s interactions, where dialogue and reflection occur and knowledge is shared with each other, it forms a sense of connection amongst the women (Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Epistemology offers an alternative viewpoint for Black women to understand how knowledge is constructed through their lived experiences, dialogue, and self-reflection. With this epistemology, Black women can also question what is true and formulate a new path towards truth (Collins, 2000).
Research Design and Data Collection

To explore the experiences of Black women and activism, it was critical for me to find a research method and methodology that would continue to center the lived experiences of Black women and emphasize the historical context and framework used in this study. In addition, it was vital for me to use an approach that allowed me to interact with participants as well as empower them to rediscover their voices. As a Black woman researching Black women, this authentic experience and the method of the study should highlight and inform the research as well as the race and gender relationship between the researcher and participants. As a result, a qualitative research approach was used to design this study and to collect, examine, and analyze the data.

Qualitative research approaches are used to investigate complex topics and seek to understand the meaning individuals attribute to the problems being addressed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research approach also uses the participants’ viewpoints, voices, and experiences to answer a specific research question. This type of research approach allows for thick, rich, and descriptive data to be collected while examining participants in their natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Frankel et al., 2012). Qualitative researchers tend to be involved in the research process, serving as a key instrument in the data collection process (Frankel et al., 2012).

The data was collected in three phases: demographic surveys, Sista Circles, and face-to-face interviews. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that qualitative research tends to use multiple forms of data collection to ensure the accuracy of the findings and add to the validity of the study. Each Sista Circle and individual
interview was held using a secure cloud-based communication platform. Each method was recorded for transcription through the same platform and securely stored. Only students participating in the study received an email invitation to join the video conference. Each participant was required to log into the video conference system using their university email address. Data was collected during the semester that the students returned to campus after the global pandemic forced the University to close early the previous semester. The data was collected during the first three months of the fall semester.

**Demographic Survey**

The first step of my data collection involved a demographic survey. Participants completed the demographic survey before the first Sista Circle. Demographic information, or research participant characteristics, offer further insight into the participants within the study by providing a deeper description of the sample (Salkind, 2010). Demographic information enhances the data analysis, is critical in accurately interpreting the findings, and is vital in understanding the participants’ narrative (Salkind, 2010). This information is also necessary for determining the representativeness of the larger population (Salkind, 2010). The demographic survey allowed me to collect characteristic information on the participant, the participant’s familial background, residency, and academics. Participants were also asked about their understanding of and participation in activism. The information from the demographic survey was used to highlight areas of follow-up during the Sista Circles and individual interviews. See Appendix D for the demographic survey. The demographic survey was distributed electronically using a form developer application.
Sista Circle

Participants also took part in three 90-minute virtual Sista Circles tailored to understanding these ten women's experiences as Black women on a predominantly White campus engaged in student activism. Sista Circles are informal discussion groups or conversations that allow a supportive sister-to-sister dialogue. Sista Circles are designed to bring a homogenous group from similar backgrounds and experiences together to discuss a significant issue that affects them (Johnson, 2015; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). These groups are designed to bear witness to the participants’ stories and gain an in-depth understanding of a particular issue (Danner et al., 2018).

History of Sista Circles

For over 200 years, Sista Circles have played a vital role in the liberation, education, and daily lives of Black women. Sista Circles are "support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found amongst Black women" (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011, p.267). Sista Circles allow space for healing conversations and knowledge sharing with the intention to empower, liberate, and educate Black women. These counterspaces also provide Black women with community and support to heal from, manage, and counterbalance the oppression, discrimination, and hostile environments they experience daily (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Keels, 2019).

Initially embedded in the Black club movement and church, Sista Circles help to raise awareness and educate Black women on community, health, and political issues (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sista Circles, first used as a research methodology in the fields of psychology and health sciences, was utilized to research and help Black
women cope with their anxiety, promote positive health changes, and reduce risk factors associated with Black women’s health (Gaston et al., 2007; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sista Circles provide Black women with help, support, knowledge, and encouragement (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Recently, Sista Circles have been used as a culturally- and gender-specific research method to examine specific topics associated with Black women’s experiences. Sista Circles are viewed as one of the leading methods for studying Black women as they provide a genuine approach to centering the experiences of and provide a voice to Black women (Johnson, 2015). This can be discerned through the distinguishing features of Sista Circles, which sets this research approach apart from other methods of data collection.

**Distinguishing Features of a Sista Circles**

Sista Circles' unique features, which focus on Black women's lived experience and its use of Black feminist thought, provides a different perspective for this method. Sista Circles have three distinguishing features: 1) communication dynamics, which encourages the participants to engage in social conversations amongst all of the participants, 2) centrality of empowerment, which fosters an environment of support by sharing knowledge and wisdom with each other; and 3) researcher as a participant, which view all participants as experts and the researcher as an active member of the discussion (Johnson, 2015). These features also further reveal how Sista Circles differ from other methods of data collection.

**Communication Dynamics.** Sista Circles are informal and encourage social interaction amongst all participants, moderators, and participants (Danner et al., 2018; Johnson, 2015). Sista Circles are a natural form of social interaction among Black
women as they have been part of their rearing process within the Black culture (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) stated, “For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (p. 260). She continues by explaining that the use of dialogue is deeply rooted in African-based oral traditions and culture and has continued to be a fundamental way of communicating amongst the United States’ Black community.

The familiarity and comfort of Sista Circles also allow Black women to communicate in a way that is natural and unique to them. Black women's methods of communication explore how they deal with the sexist, racist, and classist oppression they experience daily (Stanback, 1988). Discussing individual stories with other Black women also serves as a method for self-healing. When communicating in small groups, Black women use a unique communication practice and strategies shared solely amongst Black women (Dorsey, 2003). Stanback (1988) argues that these communication practices help free them from the oppressive forces they experience daily, such as the need to align speech patterns with Western ways of communicating.

Black women often use a call and response pattern in social interactions, where the speaker and listeners participate in spontaneous banter (Collins, 2000; Davis, 2015). During their communal communication practices, Black women imbue a sense of strength that empowers themselves and each other. Their communication practices provide them with refuge from and resistance against oppression at the same time validate and celebrate other Black women (Davis, 2015). Often nonverbal forms of communication are used as a method of expression between Black women. This form
of communication helps to share meaning, provide affirmations, and acknowledge their approval or disapproval\textsuperscript{4}. By encouraging this in my dissertation research method, I was able to collect richer and more authentic data in this community.

**Centrality of Empowerment.** Sista Circles are designed to be supportive by fostering an environment of empowerment and encouragement by sharing knowledge and wisdom between Black women. Collins (2000) posits that Black women develop a group-based, collective standpoint as a result of the historical oppression they experience. It is through their organizational networks that they are able to share their experiences and knowledge to construct a collective understanding or wisdom, which aids in their survival. This collective knowledge sharing challenges their oppression and empowers them to persist (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Lorde, 1984).

Knowledge is empowering. However, for knowledge to empower Black women, a transformation in the social institutions they encounter has to change (Collins, 2000). To begin the transformation process, Black women need to reject the oppressive thought and ideologies that perpetuate racist and sexist thinking (Collins, 2000). To resist oppression, empowerment has to happen in two ways, 1) the unpacking and recognizing of oppressive ideologies, and 2) understanding that knowledge provides an alternative way of thinking and dismantling stereotypes (Collins, 2000). Sista Circles allow Black women to openly discuss the oppression they face to dismantle, repair, and redefine their self-identity by lifting each other. This process in itself is resistance, but it allows the participants the support and

\textsuperscript{4} The participants’ narratives used in this study are often provided in long and convoluted data chunks, which showcases the natural way that the participants communicated and began to process their understanding of their experiences.
encouragement to resist other injustices they, their families, or communities are facing.

**Researcher as a Participant.** Sista Circles allow the researcher to give back to the participants who volunteer their knowledge and wisdom by providing her own wisdom and knowledge (Johnson, 2015). Sista Circles value every participant as an expert, including the researcher (Wilson, 2018). In Sista Circles discussions, the researcher serves as an active participant in the conversation. However, Sista Circles acknowledges the researcher’s role and the researcher's relationship with the participants (Johnson, 2015). The researcher, sharing the same cultural background and female-identified-gender as the participants, can share her personal experience as a resource and source of empowerment for the participant in the circle (Collin, 2000; Johnson, 2015). As a result, the researcher serves as an active participant in the study (Johnson, 2015). This feature often raises questions of positionality. As in many forms of qualitative research, the researcher is a vital part of the study and this must be attended to in the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). As a result, the viewpoint, bias, and perspective of the researcher will enter the study. As the researcher, I am aware of my personal bias and worked to eliminate judgment and reflect upon the ways my role may affect the study (Patton, 2015).

Sista Circles provides a rich, participant-centered method for collecting data that is authentic in valuing the lives of collegiate Black women, is grounded in Black Feminist Thought, and acknowledges the history of counterspace needed and created by Black women. Previous studies on Sista Circles focused on the reaction, perception, and experiences of Black women with the topic of interest (Johnson, 2015;
In this study, the Sista Circles were organized to gain further insight into collegiate Black women’s experience participating in activism, why they chose to participate, and their reflection on their participation. For the protocol and list of questions, see Appendix E. The first Sista Circle aimed to understand why students take part in activism, what kind of activism they are participating in, and when they are likely to engage in activism in the future. These questions are designed to help me gain insight into the participants’ experiences when participating in activism. The last Sista Circle aimed to clarify the students’ interest in student activism by discussing their experience taking part in these activities and their impact on them and their community.

Although there is a designed list of questions, each group discussion did not follow the designed script exactly. Sista Circles are designed to support and empower the participants and provide Black women with a space to share their experiences by enabling conversations that offer their advice and wisdom to each other (Johnson, 2015). Each Sista Circle offered an opportunity for the participants to get to know each other and navigate the discussion based on topics they would like to discuss related to activism. One of the downfalls for holding the Sista Circles virtually is the lack of banter or the call and response between the participants. However, the women were able to communicate effectively through their nonverbal communication patterns. Sista Circle attendance ranged from six to eight participants at each session.

**Individual Interviews**

After the Sista Circles, each participant in this study was asked to participate in a 60-90-minute individual interview. Interviews were scheduled after the Sista Circles
to allow for an established relationship between the interviewee and interviewer to be formed in order for the interviewee to feel comfortable being interviewed, as this is a vital attribute to interviewing (Salkind, 2010). Salkind (2010) explained that for interviewers to obtain rich, informative data, they must show an interest in getting to know their interviewee, and when discussing a sensitive topic, it is important to match the interviewer and interviewee’s personal characteristics such as race, gender, and cultures.

The individual interviews were structured to be informal, and semi-structured conversations. This type of interview technique allows for structured interview questions, and open-ended questions to be asked, and the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee to have a natural flow (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Fraenkel et al., 2012). The interviews help me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants, to clarify how they make meaning of their experience by allowing for more reflective questions, and to address any outstanding observations and questions from the Sista Circle. Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) explained, “Interviewing is an important way for a researcher to check the accuracy of -to verify or refute-the impressions he or she has gained through observations” (p. 450). The interview questions were also designed to aid me in gaining insight into the participants’ experience taking part in activism and allow for reflection based on their experience participating in the Sista Circles and activism activities. These questions highlighted how the students make meaning of their experiences. Eight individual interviews were completed. For a list of the interview questions, see Appendix F.
Observational Fieldnotes

In addition to the demographic survey, the Sista Circles, and the interviews, I also took observational fieldnotes after each Sista Circle and Interview. Observational fieldnotes are the written accounts of what the researcher saw, heard, or experienced reflectively or physically during collecting data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Bogdan and Biklen (2016) revealed that taking brief notes throughout the data collection process helps to support and supplement the data collected during one’s primary method. Both descriptive and reflective notes were collected during this study. By taking observational fieldnotes, I was able to reflect on each interaction with the women, identify areas that I needed to gain more clarification on, note observations of participants’ behaviors, highlight emerging themes in the data, and rework any questions for the next Sista Circle or individual interview. I also analyzed these notes along with the data collected from the Sista Circles and individual interviews. My notes also served as a research journal, as I also used this time to address how the data intersected with my understanding of the foundational and theoretical literature on Black women and activism.

A protocol script was used during each Sista Circle and interview to provide consistency. However, typed questions were only used as a guide for the Sista Circles as the conversations were intended to be fluid. Included in the demographic survey, Sista Circle Protocol, and interview script was an operational definition of student activism. This definition provided the participants with an understanding of the study and helped to establish a common language.
Data Analysis

Recordings of each Sista Circle and the individual interviews were transcribed. After transcribing, the data was analyzed using the constant comparison method, which is often used when analyzing qualitative research (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). This method of analysis assists in identifying patterns in the data by interrogating similarities and differences (Glaser, 1965; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). When using the constant comparison method, data is analyzed in three distinct stages; open, axial, and selective coding stages (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). These three stages were used in this study.

During the first phase of analysis, the data was organized into small groups and provided with descriptors or deductive codes developed based on the literature and theoretical framework (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Zhang &Wildemuth, 2017). I began by identifying key themes or deductive codes from the literature, theoretical framework, and from my observational fieldnotes (e.g., critical consciousness, double consciousness, sense of self, space to connect/counterspace, woke). For consistency, I defined each of these codes based on the definitions from the literature or my understanding of the term from my notes. Each of these codes and definitions were kept in my research journal, so they were accessible during the coding process. An elaborate color chart was used to organize and identify themes while coding. A sample text was coded using the first Sista Circle to ensure the coding scheme worked and the meaning of the themes was used appropriately as it relates to the data. After reading the three Sista Circle transcriptions, several new themes or inductive codes emerged from the data (e.g., silencing, family impact, support, COVID-19). These codes were
defined, added to the color-coded list, and the transcripts were reviewed again to align with the new codes. These codes were also used when coding the individual interviews to ensure consistency with the data analysis process. These themes and codes were consistently compared to confirm they were used the same way throughout the process.

In the second phase of analysis, the codes are organized into larger categories to identify the relationship between the codes (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). During this stage, axial codes are developed (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). I began this phase by reviewing the codes to see which codes could be redefined, combined into one, and if any were unused. For example, the two codes “lack of Black women,” and “double consciousness,” were combined into a larger category called “Black women problems.” This process revealed several large categories that helped to identify an overarching theme of the data, which enabled me to transition into the last coding phase. In the selective coding phase, one or two larger core categories are typically selected to validate the relationship between the data and further reveal the findings (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Based on the larger categories generated in the second phase, I identified three larger categories that were consistent patterns throughout the data. These findings will be further discussed in Chapter Four. See Appendix G for a list of codes.

**Validity of the Study**

Qualitative research is evaluated for quality by measuring its validity and reliability or trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the study’s
accuracy, data, and findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1986) explained that there are four ways to measure trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

First, data was collected using three different methods, which allowed for cross-checking of the data. Each participant was given an opportunity to review the full transcriptions of the Sista Circle and their individual interviews to verify the accuracy of their narratives. Each interview was 60 minutes (or longer), and the Sista Circles were each 90 minutes (or longer). The lengthy and intense contact with the participants provided me with sufficient time to become familiar with the participants and build trust. These steps taken assisted in developing credibility within the study. Korstjens and Moser (2018) explained that credibility measures how the data represents the participants and their experience, or the truth value of the study. Second, participants were provided with the operational definition of student activism to ensure a common language is used when discussing the phenomenon and to provide consistency during the data collection process. Rich definitions for each code were used to ensure consistency, and a consistent review of the codes against the data was conducted while analyzing the data. These definitions are also provided within Appendix A. In addition, rich descriptors were provided for the participants, setting, and throughout the study to provide additional context. Last, each participant received a transcribed copy of their individual interview and each of the Sista Circle to check for accuracy. These steps helped to ensure transferability and dependability within the study. Korstjens and Moser (2018) explained that when credibility, dependability, and
transferability are created within the study, confirmability is also established. In addition, a personal journal was used to record my thoughts and reflections on the research and any additional ideas or assumptions I had about the research. In addition, each participant and the name of the institution were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All these steps served to enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of this study.

Setting, Context, and Participants

Setting

Seaside University (a pseudonym) is a hidden treasure of New England colleges. Rooted in deep New England history, Seaside University is a 4-year religious-affiliated institution. Seaside is classified as a small private predominantly White institution (PWI). Over 76% of Seaside’s undergraduate student population identifies as White and only 1.7% as Black. The University’s founders were considered progressive thinkers for their time, which is exemplified in the university’s mission and values, which serve as the moral compass for the University community. The mission statement encourages the campus community to work for the betterment of others, seek education, and strive to be an active change agent. Seaside was founded to educate a marginalized population for which at that time in history was not expected to attend college or gain a formal education. This sense of activism and betterment of the community is still cultivated within the student population today. As a result of the University’s mission and history, Seaside served as an ideal setting to conduct a study about creating change through activism.
This study was conducted during the 2020 global pandemic, which resulted in unprecedented times for many colleges and universities in the New England area. Seaside University, a traditional residential institution, was no exception. On March 20, 2020, Seaside issued an email to the community to inform them that classes would resume remotely until April 13, 2020. On April 9, 2020, Seaside announced that they would continue remote learning until the end of the year. In July, Seaside announced its plan to return to campus in the Fall 2020, which consisted of enhanced cleaning protocols, mask mandates, testing requirements, and reducing occupancy of residence halls, dining facilities, classrooms, and all social gathering places. Where most colleges and universities in New England were operating fully remote, Seaside offered their students the choice to participate in remote learning or formal in-person classes. As a result, 10% of Seaside’s student population decided to attend classes remotely. The global pandemic also impacted how the study was conducted and who participated in the study, which will be addressed throughout this section.

**Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling strategy. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on the purpose of the research and the criteria of the population (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling is a form of purposeful sampling for which the researcher uses participants to help recruit other participants for the study (Patton, 2015). Participants for the study were recruited by sending an email to the presidents and advisors of student organizations who had a mission of creating social change on campus, which explained the study and participant criteria. The email asked them to share the information with the
memberships of their organization who fit the requirements. A public online database for student organizations was used to retrieve the email addresses of the student organization presidents, and the public campus directory was used to obtain the email addresses of the university employee advisors. Students were also identified through previous in-person interactions. Those students were asked to help identify other students who may be interested and met the criteria for the study. All recruitment communication with the presidents, advisors and potential participants was conducted through email communication due to the global pandemic.

Selection of Participants

After potential participants were identified, each person was sent a recruitment email that contained a qualification survey for them to complete. The qualification survey was a screening survey, to ensure the participants did meet the criteria of the study. It also collected information about the participant’s experience with activism, enrollment status, and their intent for studying at Seaside University in the fall due to the global pandemic restrictions (See Appendix C for the qualification survey). To be eligible to participate in this study, the following factors for inclusion were used: 1) previous participation in student activism; actively participating or organizing at least one form of activism (marches, protests, boycotts, sit-ins, online campaigns, rallies, or demonstrations) and/or at least one year actively participating in an organization on campus or within their community with a mission of social change 2) identify as a Black female as described by the United States Census Bureau 3) be a full-time undergraduate student at the university. If interested participants did not meet these
criteria, they were not eligible to participate in the study. All interested participants met the criteria for the study.

Based on their responses to the qualification survey, participants were sent an email indicating that they met the qualifications to participate in the study. Included in this email were detailed instructions on how to fill out the consent form (See Appendix B) and a link to the demographic survey. Participants were asked to complete the demographic survey prior to the first Sista Circle. All qualified participants consented to their participation in the study and completed the demographic survey. Qualified participants were also asked to recruit other students who met the criteria.

Sample

The sample for this study included 10 participants who each identified a pseudonym. Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated that a small sample size of 3-20 participants is ideal for a qualitative research study as this type of research strives to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences (Danner et al., 2018). Small sample sizes also allow for a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ experience by allowing participants to engage in the group discussion and the conversation to flow easily (Danner et al., 2018). Eight participants completed the entire study, attending at least two Sista Circles and participating in the individual interview.

The participants ranged in age, classification, familial backgrounds, and academic majors. The majority of the participants identified as a sophomore, which aligned with the diversity of Seaside’s class breakdown of Seaside. Table 1 provides
an overview of the participants by their pseudonym with demographic and familial information for each participant in the study.

Three participants reported taking part in over 10 forms of activism since being enrolled at Seaside, and the majority of them spend at least one to four hours per week organizing or participating in some form of activism activities. The majority of the participants indicated that they have participated in a student organization with a mission for social change and marches and nine out of the 10 spent one to four hours a week on organizing or participating in activism activities. It is important to mention that the students in this study attend school in a blue state which provides a number of educational opportunities to access higher education. Although all of the participants are not originally from the same state that the university is located, the location of the institution will still have an effect on how they view activism and their experience as Black women on Seaside’s campus. In addition, of those participants who reported, their family’s gross income is significantly less than the average family gross income of a Seaside student. See Figure 2 for a detailed breakdown of the participants’ experience with activism.

The global pandemic also impacted several of the participant’s ability to participate in the study. All of the participants in the study had access to a computer and internet even though they may not have been physically on campus. For the two participants who did not complete the study, one indicated that they needed to focus on work to assist their family financially. The other participant noted that she had “online fatigue” and no longer wanted to participate in anything virtually outside of her academics.
Due to the global pandemic, the recruitment and selection process for this study was conducted virtually. As a result, all communication with the participants happened through email or a virtual video cloud-based communication platform. As indicated above, Seaside offered their students the option to participate in remote learning classes. Only two out of the 10 participants in the study were attending classes remotely at the time of data collection. As a result, the data collection methods for this study were conducted virtually.

The participants in the study are introduced through the participants’ narratives (listed below), which provides insight into each of the 10 participants. In the next chapter, the participants' narratives will be further used to outline the findings of this study.

Participants’ Narratives

The ten participants in this study add a unique narrative to the data collected and aided in understanding how they make meaning of activism. It is essential to understand the uniqueness of each participant to help support the narratives brought forward in the findings of the study (Chapter 4). Each participant is identified by their pseudonyms which will be used throughout the study to designate their contributions. The following section provides a snapshot of each participant and offers a glimpse into their background and perspective on activism.

Miss Love

Miss Love is a junior biology major. Although she has lived in the New England area for some time, she still has a strong connection to the country she and
her family immigrated from to the United States. Her familial background and immigration experience are topics that she often discussed when reflecting on her activism journey. She would say words and phrases in her native country’s dialect throughout the study.

Miss Love’s parents have played a significant role in her activism and educational experiences. She often discussed seeking her parent’s approval in her life decisions. This is important to understanding Miss Love’s narrative as it shaped how she approached her activism journey. Miss Love is highly involved at Seaside University, holding several key student leadership roles, which she explained helped her further understand the country’s injustices. She explains these leadership roles as “really eye opening… because that’s where I first got interested in social justice and started getting involved in activism.” Miss Love has been involved in many forms of activism, from letter/email writing campaigns to organizing a protest in her hometown for which she was a speaker. She explained that participating in activism for the first time was empowering and powerful.

**Soul Sista**

Soul Sista (her name fits her personality) is a senior biology major. She identified herself as the only Black woman in the senior class at Seaside. Unlike the majority of the other women who participated in this study, Soul Sista is less involved in campus life at Seaside. She is more engaged with community activism in her hometown. Having participated in several protests and demonstrations, she began participating in activism in high school, where she helped to organize and participated in a protest that gained media attention. Soul Sista is the only woman in the study who
identified herself as an activist. When reflecting on her activism experience over the years, Soul Sista explained that she participated in activism because she is “doing this for people's lives. Kind of sort of my life too. [because] It could be me.”

With the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter marches for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, 2020 was a rough year for her. She also explained that seeing Black people dying was an emotional “climax” for her. You could tell this still was an emotional topic for her. As she talked more about the emotional climax she experienced over the summer, I could hear a change in her voice that indicated a different level of emotion. Soul Sista will proudly tell you that she supports Black owned businesses, because she could not participate in the activism this year. She expressed the need to donate to Black causes as much as she financially could.

_Honey_

When I met Honey, I noticed she was a woman of few words, but she had a significant presence in the group. She is outspoken, but very thoughtful and selective about her word choices, which captured my attention and the groups. She had a way of saying things that made everyone stop and listen, because it was relatable. Honey is a sophomore Administrative Justice major. Her goal is to go into international or civil law, which is not a surprise since Honey’s familial background has contributed to how she sees the world and her experience within it. Although she was born and reared in the United States, her trips “home” to her family’s country of origin has shaped her understanding of activism and social justice. Honey began participating in activism in high school and she has not stopped. In her second year of high school, Honey organized a stay-in to protest the termination of a teacher that the student body felt
was fired due to racial issues. After that, she was the president of the student
government for three years. In this role, she organized and planned walkouts, marches,
and protests. At Seaside, she is on the executive board of a student organization with a
mission to create social and political change. She also assisted in planning the Black
Lives Matter March on campus. She attributes her desire to participate in activism to
her mother.

As an Administrative Justice major, politics is a large part of her academic
learning; as a result, it was also a large topic for her in this study. The 2020 election
and the racial tension surrounding Black Lives Matter caused her a lot of anxiety, for
which she used this study as an outlet to express her fears and nerves about Trump and
Biden’s candidacy. Honey displayed throughout the study that she has a great
understanding of critical consciousness. She is very aware of systems that oppress her
and her community. She is also very passionate about changing their oppression. This
seems to be a driving force for her participation in activism. For the 20-21 academic
year, Honey decided to stay at home and attend classes remotely. In order to assist her
family, Honey took on a part-time job at a local restaurant. Her individual interview
was conducted on her phone while she sat in her car after work.

*M. Angelou*

On any college campus, M. Angelou would be considered a shining star, as she
is an active and engaged student leader. She has held almost every prominent student
leadership position at Seaside, which shows her resilience based on her experience at
Seaside her first year. M. Angelou discussed feeling isolated, out of place, silenced,
and not herself as a result of the campus climate she experienced during her first year.
It was clear when discussing her first year at Seaside that it was a challenging time. As she reflected on her first-year experience, the once bubbly M. Angelou slowly disappeared into a person who looked defeated and broken. M. Angelou explained that her first year at Seaside left her feeling “so exhausted and tired and just defeated.”

M. Angelou is a junior political science and sociology major. She began participating in activism in middle school. Throughout high school, she participated in Black Lives Matter marches and organized walkouts and protests to advocate for gun control in the wake of Newtown and Parkland. She also served as the state representative for her high school, where she could be the voice for her peers. Her activism has not stopped since she enrolled at Seaside. While at Seaside, she has helped organize several Black Lives Matter marches on campus, participated in the female empowerment march, and was a speaker at the Walk for Equality. However, in 2020 due to the global pandemic and financial burns of her family, M. Angelou could not participate in activism activities. That did not stop her from leaning her voice to educate others on the issues of the Black community. While participating in this study, she served on several panel discussions on campus that exhibited her resistance and highlighted the problems of the Black community on campus and nationwide. She explains that her driving force to participating in activism and acts of resistance is her desire to make the world better for herself and her family. I describe M. Angelou as a loud activist. Through her experiences and involvement on campus, she has done the work to develop a strong sense of self and understands how to use her voice to activate change.

Cecillia
Cecillia is a mixed raced woman who identifies as Black. She is a sophomore psychology major with a minor in biology. Her goal is to become a pediatric physician's assistant. I was not surprised she would go into a field that would help others because her reason for first participating in activism was to educate and help others learn about racial issues and “just to broaden their knowledge and life and in the world.”

Although she was not active in student life on campus during her first year at Seaside, Cecillia explained that she wanted to get more involved on campus, so she has taken the steps to do just that. She joined two student organizations with a mission for social change at the beginning of the academic year. Cecillia began participating in activism in high school. After a White student brought a confederate flag to school and began to say racial slurs to students, she and several other students organized and participated in an educational demonstration. Growing up with little interactions with her Black family, Cecillia explained that she knew she was different and wanted to learn more about racial issues and took the time to educate herself. Her family also had a significant impact on her participation in activism, however not in a supportive manner. Cecillia realized that her family’s views were different from her own and wanted to help change them. It also through her mixed-race family that she realized there was a difference between the two cultures and “that the problems needed to be addressed.” However, in her reflection, she realized that her family were not the only ones with these views and experiencing these differences and she began trying to educate people through activism.

_Lewisia_
When I met Lewisia, I would not have imagined she would be involved in activism because she is quiet and reserved. For that reason, I describe Lewisia as a quiet force. Lewisia is a sophomore psychology major. She serves on the executive board of a large student organization with a mission for social change at Seaside. She is also actively involved in an academic research project with a professor on campus for which she is immensely proud to be a part of. Lewisia does not typically participate in many of the traditional forms of activism, which makes sense for her quiet demeanor. Since high school, she has been involved in activism-based organizations and has been engaged in several letter writing campaigns. In high school, she was involved in a student organization called students against destructive decisions, which stemmed from the national organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving. She feels strongly that a large part of activism is education.

Lewisia contributes her understanding of the world and activism to her family and cultural background. How she views herself as an activist and the racial injustices that occur daily are directly connected to her interactions with and lessons taught by her parents. As she reflected on several interactions with her father, she realized that he encouraged her to get involved in activism and facilitated her desire to educate herself on racial injustices.

Ke$ha

Ke$ha is a mixed raced woman who identifies as Black. Ke$ha is another outstanding student leader at Seaside. She holds several prominent student leadership positions on campus. She is a sophomore psychology major. Ke$ha has a list of things she wants to do after she graduates from Seaside. However, what is impressive is that
all her career choices include helping others. I describe Ke$ha as an Instagram warrior. A lot of her current activism has been through social media. On campus you will find Ke$ha with her EarPods in enjoying the outside. Struggling this semester with the remote learning and increase in computer usage, as a result she did not complete the study.

**Shernic**

Coming from a large east coast city, Shernic is fearless and fiery when it comes to fighting for what she believes is right. She is also the only student athlete in the study. Her experience as the only Black woman on her team contributes to her perspective. She is a junior Administrative Justice major who identifies as an immigrant. Shernic began participating in activism in high school, where she served as the president of an organization with a mission for social change. At the age of 16, she planned and organized her first march, a women’s march for her high school. Since being at Seaside, Shernic has started to understand that her voice is best used on social media, where she has a large following. She is not afraid to call people out and help to educate them on social and racial justice issues. As she indicated “People are just like, really ignorant these days. And you just have to like, set them straight.”

Although her family supports her in participating in marches and protests, she is very cautious about her activism. Shernic is very career-focused and will not allow anything to stand in the way of her pursuing her career goal of joining the human trafficking division with the FBI. Coming from an area hit hard by the pandemic, Shernic often reflected on how her father’s death affected her during the pandemic. It
was apparent that thinking about her father was an emotional topic for her, but he had a significant impact on how she sees the world and her fight to change it.

Jessie

Jessie is the newest participant to activism. She began participating in activism after she enrolled at Seaside. During the summer of 2020, Jessie participated in her first letter/email writing campaign. She is also a member of a student organization with a mission for social change on campus. Jessie also began to move her money to support Black-owned businesses. When reflecting on her activism, Jessie explained that she felt angry “because I was like this world is so messed up and people are being treated so poorly and unfairly, for virtually no reason at all”, so she began to participate in activism by sending letters and voicing her concerns. She stated that after her first time engaging in activism, she felt good and “It’s kind of relieving…it helps to feel like you did something.” Although she is not a fan of public speaking, Jessie has begun to use her voice on campus. She has served as a facilitator for a conversation on race and has given a presentation on inclusion.

Jessie is very quiet, but she is quiet because she is actively listening to what everyone in the group is saying. Jessie is a sophomore Administrative Justice major with a minor in political science. She identifies as an immigrant and has an interest in immigration law as a career after graduation. Being an immigrant has also shaped how she views the world, especially how she views politics. Jessie’s family has not participated in activism, but her country of origin has a deep history of activism and fighting for liberation. As a result, she says she felt like activism “it's kind of my calling.”
Nina

Serving as the president of a large student organization with a mission for social change, Nina is often called upon to serve on different committees and panel discussions to represent the voices of marginalized students on campus. Nina is an undeclared sophomore from a prominent New England city who identifies as an immigrant. She is currently thinking about pursuing a degree in social work. This year Nina decided to attend classes remotely. Between remote classes and working full-time, Nina’s time is limited. As a result, she could only participate in a few of the Sista Circles and did not complete the study. Her cultural background has played a significant role in how she views the world around her and her activism journey. Before campus closed for the pandemic in 2020, Nina was actively involved with planning the campus’s annual Black Lives Matter march.
Table 1

*Participant Profile Chart*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Remote (R) or In-Person (IP)</th>
<th>What is your college classification?</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian 1 Degree Obtainment</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian 2 Degree Obtainment</th>
<th>How many times have you participated in activism while enrolled @ Seaside?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soul Sista</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>11+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shernic</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Administrative Justice</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Administrative Justice</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewisia</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>Postsecondary school</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Administrative Justice Minor in Political Science</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Psychology minor in Bio</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>High school diploma</td>
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<td>11+</td>
</tr>
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<td>Miss Love</td>
<td>IP</td>
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<td>Biology</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ke$ha</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Angelou</td>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Political Science &amp; Sociology</td>
<td>Postsecondary school</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>5-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data for this table was provided by the participants as part of the demographic survey, for the purpose of this study.*
Figure 2

Participants Student Activism Participation

- Marches: 12.50%
- Rally: 6.25%
- Protests: 12.50%
- Email/ Letter Writing Campaign: 6.25%
- Demonstrations: 15.63%
- Sit-ins/ occupying space: 6.25%
- Boycott/buycott: 6.25%
- Member of Student Organization with a social change mission: 21.88%
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, … is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance (Collins, 2000, p.100).

As I began to analyze the data and carve out the themes represented in the data, I could not help but think about the first Sista Circle I held with the women in this study. Although Seaside had returned to in-person classes for fall 2020, several women opted to take courses remotely for the semester, so we were meeting virtually. As I waited patiently on the virtual platform for the women to log on, I felt anxious and nervous. I wondered if they would come and if the topic was one that they would relate to or care about. I checked my email to make sure the reminder went out to all of the women and see if anyone emailed to say they could not attend. Then the first woman, Honey, logged in. I was relieved and excited but still nervous that she would be the only one. As I thanked her for coming, another woman logged in. It was Shernic. As the other women continued to log on, I explained how thankful and excited I was that they attended. I explained that I was afraid that people would not come. Honey looked at the screen and said, “You know, we got you!” At that point, I understood that this study would not only address their activism but also needed to address the community of support, care, and empowerment that Black women provide
to each other on predominantly White campuses. This community made it possible for us to survive, resist, thrive, persist, and be successful academically and socially.

This chapter, broken into four parts, provides a venue to present and center the voices of collegiate Black women activists. In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged through my observations, individual discussions, and Sista Circle group discussions with the study’s participants. By centering the narratives of the ten collegiate Black women participants, this chapter discusses the findings by allowing the participants’ voices and meaning making process to illuminate the overarching themes. The data analysis revealed several patterns regarding the study participants’ characterizations of their experiences. These patterns suggest that certain key factors have guided their decision to participate in activism, how they conceptualize their experience, how they view themselves as activists, and the challenges and benefits they have experienced participating in activism during political and social unrest.

I have divided this chapter into four sections. In the first part of this chapter (4A), I show how collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) perceived the oppression they experienced, the absence of Black women, and the lack of institutional support on campus, and the issues they face in relation to their interlocking identities while on campus. The oppressive and exclusionary interactions they experience assisted in creating a cold and unwelcoming campus climate for Black women. In the second portion (4B) I discuss how collegiate Black women counterbalance the cold and unwelcoming campus climate by seeking out and building a community or coalition of like-minded women. Their alliance within their Sista Circles often motivated them to participate in activism. The third portion of the
chapter (4C) describes how collegiate Black women perceived, understood, and approached their activism. For many of these women, they did not feel like their actions (“Little A”) aligned with their ideas about Activism (“Big A”). Their families, however, played a key role in helping them find their activist identity and gave them the motivation to make changes. Although, due to the events of 2020, their approach to activism was forced to change. In the last section of this chapter (4D), I examine how social media was used as a strategy for participating in activism during this time. Together these themes provide insight into how collegiate Black women made meaning of their activism experience.

Figure 1 serves as a visual illustration of how each theme from this study intersects. It also serves as a guide to how I conceptualized the findings and addressed the research questions. In this model and within the study, collegiate Black women simultaneously participated in coalition/community building. Through their participation in their coalition/community, their desire to participate in activism can be ignited, or they can be inspired to continue to engage in collective action. However, at the time the study was conducted, there were two significant influences on their participation in these activities, the social and political unrest happening throughout the country and the COVID-19 global pandemic. While they were participating in coalition/community building and activism, they discovered ways to empower each other and were guided by the impact the pandemic had on their families. As a result of these two major influences, Black women turned to social media to build community on campus and participate in activism that impacted the Black community.
Figure 1

*Collegiate Black Women Activist Conceptual Model*
BUT I AM SO OSTRACIZED: COLLEGIATE BLACK WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS NEED A SENSE OF COMMUNITY TO SURVIVE ON CAMPUS

In this portion of Chapter Four, the voices of the participants illustrated – as have many other Black women researchers before me (Bartman, 2015; Croom et al., 2017; Fleming, 1983; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Zamani, 2003;) – that a cold and unwelcoming campus climate is a common experience for collegiate Black women enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). As a result, while enrolled in predominantly White higher education institutions, collegiate Black women have historically struggled to overcome the hostile and toxic campus climates where they experience racism, oppression, isolation, lack of support, and inequality. Griffin, Cunningham, and George Mwangi (2016) stated, “hostile climates and experiences with marginalization, isolation, and racism have detrimental effects on students' sense of belonging, adjustment, achievement, and retention” (p. 34). Unfortunately, when students encounter a hostile campus climate, the experience has a lasting effect on their transition to college and their learning inside and outside the classroom (Collins, 2000; Creighton, 2007; Croom et al., 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). For the women in this study, the hostile and toxic campus climates affected their satisfaction with higher education institutions and contributed to their need to resist the oppressive system they are in.
The collegiate Black women in this study consistently revealed that the oppression, lack of institutional support, and absence of Black women’s voices were evident within the climate of their small, private liberal arts college. By centering the voices of the ten collegiate Black women who shared their stories, I maintained that collegiate Black women enrolled in predominantly White institutions need a sense of community or a coalition to survive the cold and unwelcoming campus climates.

**Oppressive Campus Implications**

To begin our first Sista Circle, gathered one afternoon on Zoom, I asked the women to tell me about their experiences at Seaside. As I waited for someone to unmute and speak, I scanned the screen to see who looked ready to speak and none of them looked eager to talk. They all looked very reluctant. Several women lowered their heads and looked sad, while others shook their heads and stared off into space. I encouraged them to speak by saying everyone has to share; however, I was unprepared for what they would disclose. The participants consistently reported experiencing subtle forms of oppression on campus that contributed to feeling silenced, tokenized, and excluded, which contributed to Seaside's oppressive and unwelcoming campus climate. In the following section, I will present the participants’ stories and show how they used their experiences of silencing, tokenism, and exclusionary interactions to fuel their desire to build community and coalitions on campus.

**Silencing**

I didn't have a lot of like, overt racism on campus. But there would be times where like, I'm in a class, and we'll bring up like, for example, like mostly, social studies, like, sociology and psychology, and topics will be brought up that are kind of racially sensitive. And I'll feel like kind of torn as to whether or not I should speak up about some issues that, you know, are kind of being touched on in an incorrect way, or like facts that should be out there, but just
aren't. And it's hard because, like, especially at Seaside, like most of the time, you're the only person of color in the class.

Honey (sophomore, 19)

Honey’s narrative described her discomfort within the class environment at Seaside. Although Honey did not identify that she was silenced, her discomfort within the classroom setting resulted in her being silenced and contributed to the cold and unwelcoming campus climate. Silencing refers to the conscious or unconscious act of excluding or inhibiting a person or group’s voices to be heard, which prevents their experiences, perspectives, and history from being heard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Honey’s discomfort prohibited her voice, ideas, and knowledge from being heard and shared within academic settings and on campus.

Like Honey, each participant in this study often found themselves being silenced within the classroom and throughout their interactions on campus. Collins (2000) explains that Black women are continuously battling within the academic system that, throughout history, has suppressed their ideas and silenced their voices. It is as Collins (2000) wrote, “Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for the dominant groups...Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas...has been critical in maintaining social inequalities…” Educational institutions have also fostered this pattern of disenfranchisement” (pp. 3-4).

M. Angelou (junior, 21), who I described as a ‘shining star’ at Seaside because of her involvement and ability to eloquently talk about challenging topics, followed up by stating:

I'll just sit in class and just basically block my ears off. They'll be talking and they'll say, like, racially insensitive things. And then you have students who
are supporting that and they're feeding off of it. And I'm just sitting here just not participating, not saying anything, because I felt like, you know, if I do I’m the odd man out, and then also I become a target in saying something.

She reinforced the discomfort that Black women feel within the classroom setting on campus and the concept of “outsider-within.” Collins (1986) uses the term outsider-within, which suggests that Black women have always been on the outside even when they are active participants within the system. She explained that Black women’s social location as an outsider-within is “a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women’s perspective” (p. 11). M. Angelou and Honey’s narratives illustrate how Black women’s presence within the classroom places them as active contributors within academia; however, their voices are suppressed and unheard, placing them on the outside of the educational experience. As a result, they perceived the academic setting at Seaside to be unwelcoming. Their educational experience does not just affect their learning in the classroom, but it also affects their overall educational journey and engagement with the greater campus community (Bartman, 2015; Collins, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1999; Mwangi et al., 2018).

To hear that the participants felt silenced on campus was astonishing to me since my interactions with them in this study were extremely different. Within the Sista Circle and the interview process, each of the participants were very expressive and passionate. I envisioned each of them speaking up and calling out every oppressive situation they found themselves in. When I further inquired about this disconnect, Ms. Love (junior, 21), a reserved and thoughtful junior who identifies as an immigrant, explained:
I feel like a lot of students here also choose not to speak out because they're afraid their grades are going to be affected by what they're saying. And so, a lot of stuff doesn't come out when it should come out.

M. Angelou (junior, 21) followed up with a lot of passion and stated:

Because I feel like once you are, once you say something or speak up, you're a target, then it's like, for future references, you kind of get that that sort of trauma, including everything else.

She continued:

I feel like if I said something, it made me a target… Because it actually made me second guess everything. So, if I got a certain grade, because I spoke up, I'm like, given the thing because I deserved it or because I said something to you the other day.

M. Angelou explained that addressing the oppressive interactions they experience on campus would contribute to making them a target for social isolation and retaliation from others on campus and would continue to add to the trauma they experience.

When asked what being targeted looked like on campus, Ke$ha (sophomore, 19), who identifies as a mixed-raced Black woman, stated:

I feel like being “targeted” can take on many different forms. Always I felt targeted this semester on campus. Um, I don't know if it's from basically, I'm an RA. And, um, over the summer, like I said, I've had some political disagreements with people from campus Seaside. And one of those people lives in my house. And one day, security knocked on my door and I had Jessie [another participant in the Sista Circle] over, and they said that a student filed a noise complaint before quiet hours. And that they said, it sounds like I had too many people in my room. In that moment, I did feel very targeted because was it that student who I got into an argument with there had issues with or was another student because what I stand for are just because of who I am? But in that moment, I don't know if you felt the same. (Looks at Jessie) But I personally did feel like I was a bit targeted. It felt like I was being attacked.

M. Angelou (junior, 21) followed up with:

[It’s] traumatizing too. Like I had run into safety and security, which like they checked me almost every time going into my building. I've had a safety security officer who literally like blocked barricaded himself locked the door,
because he needed to see two forms of identification in order to get into the building at [building’s name]. So it’s like things like that happen.

As Ms. Love, Ke$ha, and M. Angelou’s narratives revealed, the feeling of fear prevented them from speaking up or voicing their concerns. As Collins (2000) wrote, silencing “stems from a larger system of legitimated, routinized violence targeted toward Black women and, via silence, both work to reinscribe social hierarchies” (p. 159). This fear is a form of silencing as it keeps them in a subordinate place. They believed addressing the oppression and marginalization that affect their educational experience on campus would subject them to being a target for retaliation on campus.

I have to speak for my whole race

During one of the Sista Circles, the six participants disclosed experiencing oppressive situations where they felt tokenized within the classroom and around campus. M. Angelou (junior, 21), who chimed in to the conversation after hearing Honey talk about a situation that happened to her on campus, shared:

I'll be in class. And as Honey said, like, the topic will be racially sensitive. And I'm suddenly the only Black person in the room and I'm the only Black person that speaks for every Black person on this earth. Or as a student leader, I will be talking to staff and faculty, and I'm being undermined because either my position or that student faculty hierarchy.

She continued:

There's also like, oh, what do you think about this topic relating to black people? Wow, thank you. I didn't know I spoke for every black person in this entire world.

Lewisia (sophomore, 18), a quiet sophomore who prefers to listen than talk, surprisingly chimed in with:

Seaside is an interesting place. I feel like when I first got here I was obviously always uncomfortable being one of the only Black students in the classroom. And as everyone already said in here, when really sensitive topics come up. It's
like everyone's waiting for me to answer. And I have, I don't know if I should, because I feel uncomfortable. I can't speak for everyone else. But, you know, I'm also just a person trying to learn something new, too.

M. Angelou and Lewisia both explained their experience with tokenism on campus. Within predominantly White systems, collegiate Black women are often asked to represent or speak for their race (Zamani, 2003). Stereotypes that the dominant group developed about Black women, or the entire Black race were assigned to them by their classmates and instructors, causing them to feel tokenized and uncomfortable. The discomfort and tokenization within the classroom only magnified the unwelcoming, unsafe, and hostile environment felt across campus. Collins (2000) contended that Black women do not share a homogeneous experience or standpoint as each woman has her own interactions with oppression. However, they often share common oppressive experiences like the experience shared between M. Angelou and Lewisia, which allowed them to collectively understand each other’s experience, share knowledge, heal, and survive within the oppressive system.

Exclusionary Interactions

The participants discussed experiencing subtle forms of oppression, which they felt excluded them from campus life and contributed to the climate at Seaside. Honey, Jessie, and M. Angelou shared their experience dealing with discriminatory and exclusionary interactions on campus. Honey (sophomore, 19), who looked defeated, began the conversation by continuing to discuss the anxiety and tension she felt on campus. She stated:

And so that's where, like, the tension can kind of come from, and I haven't heard any, like, racist comments to me, but like, at night in my dorm, I'll hear it like, you know, out in the hallway when other people are talking amongst each other or just like in passing, and that's mostly where like, the negative
experience have come from. Like, I'll hear a lot of times, other students like will be saying the N word. And I mean, like hard “R” at the end. Or like within an “A” Either way, it's still kind of sucks. Or I'll hear things like people, people talking about the Black Lives Matter movement. And being like, well, all lives matter. Or we'll have like problems with another student on campus. And for some reason, have to bring in their race for no reason.

M. Angelou (junior, 21), wide-eyed because she knows she is about to add something good to the conversation, chimed in:

I've had conversations in class about this. And it's just like, well, if it's in a song, or you know, I don't mean it in that kind of way. But it's also like I've told them directly. This is not, this word has negative connotations to it, and our power of saying, they're like, well, then why can you say it? Well, our power of saying it, is to flip it around. It's an empowerment. And then people are just like, well, I don't I don't see it that way. But it's just like, it's, you're never going to see it that way period. So just don't say it. And it was like, well, it's in the song, it's completely easy to just, like, skip over the word. I feel like, to me, it's a sense of entitlement in order for saying it or not saying it.

Jessie (sophomore, 19) timidly added:

[I know] I'm gonna be one of the only Black people I expected it. At this point, I expect the questions. So it didn't really surprise me, the atmosphere didn't surprise me. But it was kind of weird hearing the girls next door, like when they were throwing a party or whatever, hearing them sing it in a song and I'm like, it just makes me so uncomfortable. But like, what can I do, I can't tell them to turn it off, they're gonna say, oh, you're being too sensitive, whatever. And it's just not a conversation I want to have all the time.

None of the participants were directly called the N word, which they felt exemplified overt oppression. They identified the discriminatory and exclusionary interactions they experienced as subtle forms of oppression. It was clear that the participants contributed their feelings of exclusion and marginalization to the oppressive interactions they experience, however they minimized the severity these interactions had on them and their experience, by saying “it didn’t really surprise me” or “it kind of sucks.”
The narratives from Honey, Jessie, and M. Angelou also reveal the powerlessness felt by Black women when they encounter exclusionary and oppressive situations. The discriminatory and exclusionary actions and interactions excluded Black women, suppressed their voices, and further placed them on the margins of academia. Marginalization refers to “the practice of excluding a social group from the mainstream of the society, placing that group—legally or socially—on the ‘margins’ of the society” (McGraw-Hill, n.d as cited in Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, there is no way to fully articulate the number of head nods I witnessed in this Sista Circle as these women spoke. I understood those nods and affirmative body language as signs of agreement or the verbal and nonverbal affirmations that validated Honey, M. Angelou, and Jessie’s experiences while they shared their narratives. These affirmations and validations led me as a researcher to understand that all of the women within the Sista Circle on this day had experienced something similar. Honey, Jessie, and M. Angelou’s experiences and responses were each different as they individually lived through these interactions bringing their backgrounds, attitudes, beliefs, and previous experiences with oppression to the situation. However, their narratives showcased a common experience that many collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions encounter.

These situations add a level of trauma for which Black women are required to overcome in order to survive within the oppressive system of higher education. Discriminatory acts or exclusionary interactions experienced by Black women on college campuses had a significant and negative effect on their grades, educational trajectory, psychological adjustment, and left them feeling powerless (Collins, 2000;
Hurtado et al., 1999). These interactions further confirmed their perception of the campus climate and added to their feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

**Lack of Institutional Support**

The collegiate Black women who participated in this study identified specific people and offices that offer them support on campus. This is what Turner (1994) referred to as isolated support, which she defined as “supportive organizational niches that played important welcoming roles for them, alleviating cultural isolating and helping them find a level of comfort within the university” (p. 361). However, even as the women in this study cited isolated spaces of support, they noted that, in general, they do not find campus to be supportive. Rather, they explained that they were more likely to encounter invisibility, hypervisibility, and skepticism about their experience.

**So, You Really Do Not Believe I Experienced This**

when something like that [discriminatory action previously discussed] happens, you get the whole, that happened at Seaside? (waving hands in a stop/cut it out motion) Like, I don't think that teacher would do that, like, so I'm just making this up clearly.

M. Angelou (junior, 21)

M. Angelou’s narrative exemplifies the feelings of frustration that collegiate Black women experience when reporting the negative, discriminatory, and exclusionary encounters they experience on campus which are often unbelieved or viewed as uncredible. In their article on the institution-sanctioned violence of Black women, Patton & Njoku, 2019 explained “Collectively, Black women’s stories were perceived as unremarkable and often undeserving of attention” and they “have not been viewed as credible, nor have they been given the benefit of the doubt” (p. 1166).
Not only did the participants reveal being unbelieved when they reported, but they also expressed not knowing who or where to go to report. The lack of institutional procedures and policies also felt like a lack of support by the University. M. Angelou (junior, 21) explained:

I don't know, I really don't, because if I feel like it's the same thing as the fact that the student has a problem with the faculty member saying something to them, how does the student report it? How does the student go about that? … how do you report that? So I don't I mean, you could bring it to the University President, but what are they gonna do about it? (laughing) See, there's not even there's not even steps, or a policy or a procedure or whatever, to do something about it.

You could hear the frustration in Miss Love’s (junior, 20) voice when she contented:

[SGA] has been trying to fight to get like some sort of officer who overlooked problems that students experienced that, you know, go along with diversity issues. So a student, a student experiences some sort of racism in class, they can go to the officer, and, you know, explain that to them. Where it's that person's job, I don't know what I'm saying makes sense. But I feel like in the current climate we're in. That should be at least the bare minimum, how to give students a safe space where they can go and actually report things that pertain to racism, discrimination on campus.

These participants felt that the University was not providing them with a safe space or person on campus to report their experiences. Both M. Angelou and Miss Love’s narratives explain how the lack of institutional procedures felt like a lack of support and abandonment from the University when they needed them the most.

Do You See Me Struggling?

The Sista Circle process gave space for each participant to explore how they experienced invisibility and hypervisibility while at Seaside. The participants expressed experiencing a lack of support on campus, which made them feel invisible. When discussing a Black Lives Matter sign posted on campus by the University, Miss Love (Junior, 20) stated:
Yeah, I feel like that's the problem with Seaside. They're always offering support. They're like, we're here for you, like, we hear you. And like, you matter. And then it's like, Okay, show me that I matter, like, what are you going to do? If I experienced this? Where should I go? What should I do? How are you going to show me that you actually support me. And it's like, everybody just like, blinks out. And it's like, ahh, we don't know, we don't know. Like, then you can't say you support me if I am going to just go back to my room and cry myself to sleep without having anybody to go to and like, want to leave this place. Like, I'd rather they just say, you know what, we're not ready, we're not going to support this, instead of like lying to people.

Her experience on campus revealed how many of the participants felt invisible on campus. They felt the lack of support offered to them by the university during the times when they needed support felt as if no one cared about their experience and their struggles were unseen. For marginalized and historically excluded populations, like Black women, invisibility presents feelings of not being seen, voiceless, dismissed, devalued, ignored, and delegitimized by the campus community due to their racial identity (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Torres-Harding et al., 2012; Vaccaro et al., 2020).

As Miss Love indicated, the participants often struggled to understand where to go for support when acts of racialized violence or discrimination happened to them. Miss Love felt that the university was lying about their level of care and support which further added to her dissatisfaction with the university and made her feel dismissed and ignored.

Honey (sophomore, 19) questioned if the university really cared about her experience outside of the annual cultural education week offered on campus. She stated:

And I was also wondering,…if all racial tension that's going on right now wasn't so publicized if Seaside would have even like made a statement? That was what I really thought about, because even though one of our missions is race. I feel like there’s not really anything done outside of the cultural education week. That’s what I was curious about.
In Honey’s narrative, she questioned why more attention was not paid to their experience outside of the racial tension occurring and the annual cultural education week that happens on campus, which made her feel devalued. The participants continued to discuss how the lack of support for their experience on campus made them feel invisible until the University needed them for representation at events or campus promotional materials, which made them hypervisible. M. Angelou (Junior, 21) reported:

> At the [diversity event on campus] the other day, I got so many compliments on my speech and how it was great, and it was eloquent. So well-spoken and everything, but nobody actually talked to me about the context of my speech...They're not like listening to the actual things that I'm saying. I think here at Seaside, it's, I don't know, it, it's that has been one of the drivers to keep going because it's like, okay, thank you for complimenting me, but you're still not hearing me talk. I'm gonna keep talking until you actually are listening and understanding the severity of what's happening. But it's also it's hard sometimes, so I'm not gonna lie. I've definitely just sat down with myself and be like, why am I doing this? If they're not if they're not listening to me if they're not taking me seriously?

Jessie (sophomore, 19) shared her agreement: Umhum (shaking her head to agree with M. Angelou along with other women’s nonverbals)

When M. Angelou expressed, “but you are not hearing me,” this statement resonated with everyone in the Sista Circle that day. Her comment revealed her frustration with being unheard and her experience being unsupported and devalued. Jessie’s response was one that the women echoed in their own fashion. It was clear that they all were frustrated by their invisibility and their powerlessness to change their circumstance.

Like M. Angelou, each participant was an active member of a student organization, held a prestigious leadership position, or served as a mentor for incoming students of color. The majority have served on diversity panels, one was a student athlete, and several presented and spoke about their experiences on campus.
These acts of service showcased their hypervisibility on campus. Ironically their hypervisibility helped them to understand their invisibility. When they need educational, career, or financial assistance from the university, their service felt as if it was forgotten or was invisible. In her matrix of domination, Collins (2000) explained that Black women are often challenged to overcome alternating and at times intersecting forms of invisibility and hypervisibility. Each of these things had a lasting impact on Black women’s educational trajectory by creating barriers, burdens, and disadvantages for them to overcome and continues to deny them access, a voice, legitimacy, and recognition within higher education (Vaccaro et al., 2020).

In addition to the traditional social and academic stressors students feel, Black women also have to contend with heightened performance pressure and scrutiny due to their visibility of being one of the few on campus (Bartman, 2015; Kanter, 1977). Lorde (1984) observed that “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism” (p.42). Their invisibility within campus policies and practices heightened levels of scrutiny and the discrediting of their service and experience on campus which led to the participants in this study feeling abandoned and unsupported by the institution. These two forms of oppression affect how Black women engage with the larger campus community and further their feelings of exclusion and lack of support, which contribute to their perception of the campus climate.
This theme hit home for me as a campus administrator for two significant reasons. First, I often ask Black students, especially Black women, to serve on panels, lead discussion groups, and take part in photoshoots for me because I need a diverse student’s voice or image represented. Second, as one of a few Black women on campus myself, I understood their struggle not knowing who or where to turn for support when oppressive situations arise. As an administrator, I found myself in several oppressive situations and struggled with what I should do. The situation left me feeling powerless, uncertain, and angry. I can only imagine how the participants feel having these oppressive situations happen to them daily.

Absence of Black Women on Campus

In addition to the lack of support, several participants felt a lack of belonging and at times felt it was difficult to find their community due to the shortage of collegiate Black women representation on campus. The lack of representation on campus also made them feel unheard regarding issues that affected them and the Black community at Seaside. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) explained that until universities establish a critical mass, Black women will continue to experience retention and recruitment challenges and perceive the campus climate as unwelcoming. A critical mass will assist in alleviating many of the obstacles that collegiate Black women encounter within predominantly White spaces, such as feeling uncomfortable to participate in conversations, unseen, unheard, as if they do not belong, and as the spokesperson for their identity group (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The isolation, alienation, and lack of belonging experienced as a result of the
absence of Black women further added to the cold and unwelcoming campus climate and their need for community.

Overwhelming, each participant discussed feeling isolated or alienated due to the lack of collegiate Black women on campus, especially within the academic settings of campus. Honey (sophomore, 19) explained that the lack of Black women representation in the classroom made her feel alienated, especially when discussing racially sensitive topics. She contended:

I will say it is like it like there's been moments where I'll sit in class, and like, I'll literally feel like panic when it comes to racial subjects. I feel kind of alone and kind of scared because I don't know who's an ally and who's not. And it's, it's nerve-racking when you like, have a lot of other people looking at you. And you don't know if they're friend or foe?

In Honey’s narrative, she explained that she was unsure who she could trust in the classroom, which made her feel alone and unsupported, resulting in her withdrawing from the class discussion. Honey’s withdrawal from the class discussion only has further academic implications but also affected her socially as she expressed a level of distrust for her peers.

M. Angelou (junior, 21) shared that her peers made her feel isolated on campus. She did not want to participate in campus life and felt alienated. She stated:

It was really hard. I was seriously considering transferring. But um, I know I just I had, I think, what really made it bad was that I would just come home from class and just cry in my room… That's why Also, if you notice freshman year, I, um, the only thing I really had was the job at the library. I didn't like I wasn't in the [Multicultural] office. I wasn't, I was barely in [Student Activities Office]. And the only time I was if [Friend’s name] was working. I wasn't in any student leader positions, nor did I apply for any of them. I just had this such disinterest. And one of my main feelings was like, what, what's the point? I'm a student leader, I hear like, I'm supposed to as a student leader, you're supposed to be non reflective of your student body and have some sort of support of the student body. But I'm so ostracized by my peers, and staff, and
faculty. Like, you understand what I'm saying, like what? I feel like that would be a disservice or a mockery of this student position anyway.

As M. Angelou mentioned in her narrative, her peers made her feel like she did not belong, making her feel alienated on campus. The overt and subtle actions of the dominant peer group forced her into isolation and caused her to have feelings of alienation. These feelings significantly impacted her academic performance, campus involvement, and emotional and psychological health (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Fleming, 1983; Patton & Njoku, 2019). The lack of Black women representation on campus can also result in the absence of social opportunities for Black women, presenting feelings of isolation and ostracization (Fleming, 1983). Hurtado et al. (1999) explained, “no matter how outstanding the academic institutions are, ethnic minority students can feel alienated if their ethnic representation on campus is small” (p. 20). Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) argued that isolation and alienation significantly impacted Black women’s retention and attrition in college. The feeling of isolation and alienation affect their academic performance as failure to participate in campus life, which means they miss out on informal learning opportunities (Fleming, 1983).

M. Angelou continued by discussing how more Black women representation in her classes and around campus her first year would have assisted her in not feeling so ostracized. At one point within the Sista Circle, she began to count how many Black women were in her incoming class and as she approached her junior year how many still remained. The numbers were astonishing. As each of the women counted the women in their incoming class and how many still remained after their first year, I began to understand that Seaside needed more resources dedicated to the success of
Black women and to develop retention strategies to assist in supporting these women on campus.

**Resistance to Assimilation**

Additionally, due to the lack of Black women on campus, the participants felt in order to gain friends, outside of the Black women community, they had to change who they were in order to be accepted. Often Black women are required to assimilate to fit in, find the social opportunities, or find support within predominantly White higher education systems (Fleming, 1983; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The need to assimilate or fit in can often feel ostracizing or isolating as well. Jessie (sophomore, 19) shared that she could empathize with those who felt that they needed to assimilate to fit in. She stated:

…I know not everyone is fully comfortable in their blackness, especially at a White school. Like not everyone meets a black kid right away like I know I did. So I was comfortable, but then if you meet White people from your team, you start hanging out with them. It's like you're adapting to fit in and I don't blame them for that. Like, I guess they don't want to stand out by going to like, a Black Lives Matter march, or like [Black Student Organization] or join these clubs. And I just don't want to exclude those people because it is still for them, even though they're not quite comfortable I guess in this environment.

She understood that it was not easy for every Black woman who comes to Seaside to feel as if they did not have to assimilate because it was hard to find the community on campus. She was fortunate to find a place on campus, her first year, to fit in. Jessie’s narrative also reveals her resistance and persistence to overcome the campus climate, by not assimilating. As a result, Jessie felt comfortable being herself on campus. Hurtado et al. (1999) explained that Black students increase their aspirations towards degree attainment at predominantly White institutions where they
are offered a substantial community of Black students as it is easier for these students to find a peer group that matches their racial identity.

Additionally, Soul Sista (senior, 20) discussed how assimilating aligned with feelings of alienation. She explained how hard it was to build connections her first year at Seaside because she was the only Black woman in her enrollment class. She refused to assimilate to gain friends, and she did not feel comfortable being around her White peers, so she remained by herself. She shared:

The thing with me when I got here, I didn't feel like I had to hang out with somebody. Because I think if I do see this, um like, somebody who is Black hanging around a group of White people, I feel like it is because they feel like they need to have friends on campus to me, like when I got here, I didn't see a lot of Black people. So, I was like, all right. I don't have to. I would rather be with myself and be with a group that I'm not comfortable with that I'm not used to.

In her individual interview, she elaborated on the lack of Black women representation on campus. She mentioned feeling isolated and alienated on campus after her close friends left. She stated:

I'm mostly closest with my boyfriend. When the [Friend’s name] and [Friend’s name] were here, that was it. Those were only people I was really liked to be around that much…And when I came in here, I know there was not much with the class of 2017, I mean, coming in 2017. I mean, I was a class of one, there weren't that many people. So there weren't that many people for me to talk to the people I was the closest with left. I was about to leave to I was about to be gone.

Since Soul Sista refused to assimilate, she felt it contributed to her feelings of alienation and isolation on campus. Her refusal to assimilate, reveals her resistance to the dominant system and predominantly White spaces, which she was participating in.

*The Unheard Voices*
Many of the participants also indicated that the campus needed to increase the enrollment of Black women so their voices could be heard on issues around campus that affect them and that the classroom setting would feel more comfortable if they had someone else who looked like them in the classroom to help support them when racially sensitive topics were raised. When discussing the activism on campus during a Sista Circle, Ke$ha (sophomore, 19) stated:

I'd say like more representation too, um, and the only way I like to get more representation is by growing a larger platform. That is definitely very important. I think we need help from like, um, male counterparts to like, although, like, women can get a lot done, and there is such a small amount of Black women on campus. And I think, um, with male counterparts, and also other students of color, can help kind of strengthen our voice.

Miss Love (junior, 20) continued the conversation by sharing:

I feel like some power in numbers. And maybe it's just my view. But I feel like the reason why a lot of the things don't go in as like don't go through as much is because we're a small minority on purpose. And the majority of the people here don't care enough for things to go through. And so I feel like if we had more students of color on campus, we have more luck passing things that protect us. But I think for now, we just get the bare minimum, like, whatever, like, they're getting that, and that's enough. Like we don't like we don't need it more…We don't have that backup, and I feel like if we were more in numbers, then we would have backup, and they would be more prone to having changed.

The narratives of Ke$ha and Miss Love showcased the need for a larger representation of Black women on campus. They both felt that more Black women would help elevate their voices to be heard on important issues. If the representation increased, they could no longer be invisible, and changes would be made to improve the campus climate. Additionally, an increase in Black women on campus would assist in strengthening their community and providing more social opportunities and networks of support. When discussing her thoughts on the Black women community on campus, Honey (sophomore, 19) reported:
There's not a lot of us. Um, so it's like, hard for me to see outside of like, my own group, because I do have, most of my friends are Black women. The few that are on campus, but outside of that, like I know, there are other Black women on campus who, like I've never spoken to, or who like I've seen I waved up smile that and they just kind of look like I don't even exist. So I definitely think that we're not as divided as we could be I mean as united as we could be. But, um, but it's not like, like I said, it's not like a clear-cut division.

For Ke$ha, Miss Love, and Honey, more Black women could result in more supportive networks and resources that would assist them in navigating the hostile campus climate they experience daily.

**Sense of Belonging**

For Black women who experienced a cold and unwelcoming campus climate, a sense of belonging is extremely vital to their academic success, as a diminishing sense of belonging impacts a student’s motivation, learning, development, engagement in campus life or ordinary life tasks, and academic performance (Strayhorn, 2012). As Soul Sista shared, she did not feel like she belonged or fit in on campus, as a result, she thought of withdrawing from Seaside. She shared:

I was so uncomfortable here. I was just so uncomfortable…I had nobody I could sit down with and be like, do you feel like this when you hear this or when you do this, do you see that? For me, I had nothing. So I end up calling home. That's all I had, so I would be like, Mama, this happened. Like that's all I had, and I would say I want to just go home…

M. Angelou (junior, 21) revealed in several of her narratives, her sense of belonging affected her academic performance, commitment to the University, connections, and motivation. She stated:

So I feel like especially as new students who are new to Seaside, they feel like they don't have or haven't found their sense of community yet, as we do with our inner circles. It's hard …, I feel like it has a ripple effect. In which freshman year I didn't go for SGA, I didn't go for an RA position, I didn't go for any student leader position. It wasn't until my sophomore year that I actually started applying and getting involved.
M. Angelou continued to explain that not only did her feeling of not belonging on campus affect her social adjustment to campus life, but it also had an effect on her mental health and academics as well. Strayhorn (2012) explained that if a student’s sense of belonging increases, they will gain a network of supportive resources that will assist in their academic and social success. Their lack of belonging on campus affected how they perceived the campus climate.

It was not until they each found their community on campus that they found a sense of belonging. As both M. Angelou and Soul Sista conveyed in their narratives, each participant in this study expressed their gratitude for their inner circle of friends, which included other Black women or women of color on campus. They revealed that their circle of friends helped to shape their experience on campus but made them feel as if they belonged at Seaside. As Soul Sista explained in the opening narrative, she felt like she wanted to leave before she met her friends. Her peer network played a significant role in integrating her into the community and ensured her success and retention on campus (Hurtado et al., 1999; Strayhorn, 2012). With a lack of Black women presence on campus, finding their community of like-minded peers can be a challenging task for many collegiate Black women, which means they will never truly feel as if they belong within the campus community, further contributing to the negative campus climate. I will continue to discuss how the participants built and perceived their community on campus in Chapter 4B.

As one of six Black women professionals on campus (including academic and administrative staff), I related to the participants' feelings of loneliness, tokenization, and the need for support that often presents feelings of frustration and alienation. I
have often felt this way at the PWIs for which I worked. I often found myself longing for another Black woman on campus to call up to say, “am I crazy?” – the need for affirmation and validation, or “girl, let me tell what just happened” – the need for support and empowerment. It was hard to understand how I fit into the University setting or how I could change the system. These are the same feelings that the participants discussed in their narratives. I could relate to their experiences trying to navigate the cold and unwelcoming campus climate at Seaside. The isolation, alienation, lack of institutional support, the exclusionary interactions, having to speak for everyone of color in meetings, not fitting into the conversations, or not being invited to outside of work social gatherings contributed to my sense of belonging. I got it. I understood their frustrations. Black women in predominantly White college environments continue to describe their experiences on campus as hostile, isolating, painful and traumatizing, citing the discrimination and exclusion experienced based on their intersecting identities as the cause (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Fleming, 1983; Everett & Croom, 2017; Patton & Njoku, 2019). Porter and Dean (2015) explained, “Educational spaces were initially created around Whiteness; thus, Black women in the collegiate environment are challenged by historical and institutional contexts that are always present as they negotiate potential relationships and interactions with others” (p. 130).

It was not until I established a community of Black women on campus that I truly became comfortable. These women encouraged me, validated my feelings, and empowered me to use my seat at the table to be their advocate. My community of Black women empowered me to have a voice to speak up about the oppressive
behaviors and situations I have found myself in on campus. Within these predominantly White spaces, these women encouraged me to keep going during challenging times and we celebrated each other’s accomplishments. I realized that I had established a Sista Circle without even realizing it. I wanted the collegiate Black women on campus to experience this as well, which is why it was important for me to provide them with space for them to gather, support each other, share knowledge, and empower each other to resist, persist, and thrive at Seaside. Sista Circles allow Black women to gain a sense of belonging, to heal from the exclusionary interactions they faced, to have a presence on campus. Sista Circles empower them to have a voice to resist and demand institutional support and develop coping strategies to continue to survive in the cold and unwelcoming campus climate.
As revealed in the previous portions of this chapter, 4A, collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions experience cold and unwelcoming campus climates that cause them to feel silenced, tokenized, unsupported, isolated, alienated, and excluded. When they encounter a cold and unwelcoming campus climate, they not only experience that climate within their academic settings but also within the social settings of the campus (Shaw, 2017). To help combat the hostile campus climate, collegiate Black women need space on campus that counterbalances their experience within the larger campus community. For those who identify as historically marginalized, identity-conscious support spaces can significantly impact their college success (Keels, 2019). Keels (2019) explained that identity-affirming counterspaces could help counteract the marginalized students' outsider status by providing a space to integrate these students into the campus community. Counterspaces, like Sista Circles, help Black women resist the cold and unwelcoming campus climate by cultivating a natural bond between Black women. Sista Circles empower and support collegiate Black women to succeed academically and socially, aid them in establishing a sense of belonging, and inspire them to engage in student activism (Croom et al., 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter, 2017; Shaw, 2017).
In this portion of the chapter, 4B, I argue that collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions need a community to help combat the cold and unwelcoming climates they face. By establishing a community of like-minded individuals, they begin to build a coalition that ultimately inspires them to take collective action assisting them in their activism journey. By centering the voices of the ten participants in this study, I reveal that Sista Circles provide collegiate Black women with support, empowerment, affirmation, and validation to thrive, survive, and resist within higher education.

Their community building or Sista Circle is a form of resistance. However, their engagement in this community also demonstrates their engagement within a coalition, as their Sista Circles are unknowingly working towards a common cause. For the participants, being a part of a community of like-minded Black women naturally helped them engage in conversations around issues that affected them and their community. These conversations then sparked their desire to resist, change, or improve the negative situation that affected them, their families, and their communities.

**Seeking Spaces for Community**

For several years, we held Sista Circles out of the Office of Student Life at Seaside. Black women would come together once a month just to talk and gather in fellowship. Before the pandemic, up to eight women would stop by to share stories and engage in meaningful conversations. This was one of the few spaces on campus where they could come and not feel like a minority. By the time I started collecting data for this dissertation, the pandemic was raging and there were no longer in-person
Sista Circles. When I solicited participants, I offered them online Sista Circles where they could come together to talk with me and other Black women. Ten women volunteered to come together virtually and share their experiences. As the data below shows, while in these spaces, the participants empowered, supported, validated, and affirmed each other, making these spaces vital to their survival and success on campus.

*Sistahood: Another Name for Community*

These ten women came together for three virtual Sista Circles throughout this study. I was not expecting the participants to discuss how vital a circle or group of like-minded individuals was to their success at Seaside. Each participant discussed how these sistahoods helped the participants counterbalance or resist the oppression, discrimination, and hostile environments they experience daily, which assisted in their retention at Seaside. Collins (2000) explained, “Black women’s relationships with one another in providing a community for Black women’s activism and self-determination” (p. 2). Miss Love (junior, 20), an active and engaged student leader at Seaside, explained that she resisted the adverse campus climate at Seaside because of her friend group. She shared:

I keep to myself and stay in like, my circle of people...I usually stay like with people my skin color, or people who have the same like, that we share a common interest in. And so, I've had a pretty good experience... a lot of us choose to stay in the little circle of like people who do understand what we're fighting for and do understand that there needs to be change.

Miss Love explained that her network of friends understood her experiences on campus because they shared the same experience as her. In addition, M. Angelou (junior, 21) shared that due to the adverse campus climate that vastly affected her
experience at Seaside, she also stayed within her circle of like-minded friends. M. Angelou described her experience as being in a bad movie where the same thing keeps happening every day, and she could not get out of the bad cycle. However, because of her network of friends, she discovered coping strategies to manage the climate. She followed Miss Love and stated:

I'm also like, Miss Love in which I, my close friends in my inner circle, are people who look like me or share like my same values. But it's also like, the whole environment in general. So, whether it's going to class, or talking to staff and faculty, or just being out in Bridgeport in general, it's always like kind of the same things that that are happening.

Both Miss Love and M. Angelou explained that their circle of like-minded friends, who also looked like them and shared the same values and interests as them, helped them resist and thrive at Seaside. They seemed to suggest – both in words and in the affirming way that they responded to one another in the group – that people outside of their “inner circle” might not understand the difficult experiences that they go through as Black women on a predominantly White campus. Researchers (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Porter, 2017; Shaw, 2017) shared that collegiate Black women needed space on campus for authentic connections to occur or establish a sistahood.

According to Shaw (2017) in order for Black women to be successful on predominantly White campuses, they need “to be in communion with one another and to have opportunities to foster relationships with others in the Black community” (p. 205). She continued by explaining that Black women need opportunities to “interact, share experiences and resources, and ultimately aid in each other’s development” (p. 205). These opportunities assist them in establishing a community or sistahood on campus. For Black women, sistahood means being in a circle of like-minded women
bonded together by their shared experiences of being members of a marginalized or oppressed group. Miss Love and M. Angelou both articulate the need for sistahood well within their narratives.

Similarly, Honey (sophomore, 19) explained the value of connecting with other Black women despite the small number of Black women at Seaside. She shared:

There's not a lot of us. Um, so it's like, hard for me to see outside of like, my own group, because I do have, most of my friends are Black women. The few that are on campus, but outside of that, like I know, there are other Black woman on campus who, like I've never spoken to, or who like I've seen, I waved up smiled at.

Smiling and waving at the Black women she saw on campus helped establish a connection between them by signaling to the other women that they were not alone. This slight gesture helped establish a community or sistahood amongst the Black women on campuses. Ke$ha, too, revealed that the community of Black women helped her establish a sense of belonging at Seaside. She explained:

it's kind of hard making friends in the beginning, but I immediately just associated like, Oh, I'm not making friends right now, because I'm not White, which is how I felt until… I met or came to Sista Circle and met everyone here, which is really nice. Um, but I don't know, I just hang out with many people I met … through Sista Circle.

Ke$ha’s narrative revealed the alienation and lack of belonging often felt by collegiate Black women at predominantly White institutions. Establishing a community on a campus where the underrepresented or marginalized population is small assisted the individual students to no longer feel uncomfortable because others share in their experience (Keels, 2019; Hurtado et al., 1999). Ke$ha further explained that once she connected with the Black women through the Sista Circle, she began to feel that she found a place to fit in and was comfortable to be herself on campus. Mentally
negotiating and navigating the campus to find a space where they can or should express their authentic selves is often exhausting (Porter & Dean, 2015). Porter and Dean (2015) explained “educational spaces were initially created around Whiteness; thus Black women in collegiate environments are challenged by historical and institutional contexts that are always present as they negotiate potential relationships and interactions with others” (p. 130). Finding a space where Black women can be their authentic selves increases their sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2012; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015). For the women in this study, the Sista Circle space was essential to that process.

Honey (sophomore, 19) explained that the connection between the Black women at Seaside was essential to her survival on campus because she knew there was a group of people who would always have her back when she needed support and uplifting. She shared:

I think like the programs like Sista Circle are important. Because you need to know like, who's out there and who your your, your sistas are literally. Because at the end of the day, like I said, like, yeah, the women of color on campus are slightly divided. But at the end of the day, any one of the people who I'm not friends with came to me and said, like, this horrible racist thing happened, or just this horrible thing, in general, happened to me, um, I would, you know, expect the entire black community who are women to stick together and to help that person to kind of like, be like it like it takes a village, you know, and be their village.

Honey felt the sistahood that she had established amongst the Black women on campus served as a support system or “village” that helped to encourage and empower her to continue to thrive and survive at Seaside. She further revealed how the connections that she made with Black women at Seaside helped to connect her to other Black women on campus and provided her with support and empowerment to continue
to pursue change at Seaside. Honey continued to explain if there was ever a Black woman who needed help on campus, she would be the first person to help them. For her, it was important to find opportunities to engage with the Black women on campus, even or especially Black women she did not know. These opportunities of engagement helped to establish and cultivate a network of Black women on campus as she realized that her “village” was the key to her success, and she wanted other Black women to be successful at Seaside.

Ke$ha explained that when dealing with oppression on campus, it felt good to know that her network of Black women provided her with support. She proclaimed:

> It felt good. It felt good. Also, as people have your back, because there was one person who were commenting on your posts. And at first one person, two people, and people, we all have each other's back. I felt that's also a community and we all support each other through that.

Ke$ha further revealed that this support encouraged her to continue to fight and deal with the everyday difficulties at Seaside. The empowerment and support offered by their network of Black women provided the participants with the encouragement and nourishment needed to feel confident, heard, accepted, and able to survive, thrive, and live within predominantly White spaces. Hurtado et al. (1999) explained, that underrepresented or historically excluded students tend to cluster in groups on campus to gain support and survive within the larger unsupportive campus environment. The authors continued by explaining that the “students’ social interactions with peers…have a positive influence on persistence, educational aspirations, completion of a bachelor’s degree” (p. 37).

The empowerment and support offered within their Sista Circles further offset the cold and unwelcoming campus climate and made it bearable for them to engage in
the larger campus community. Consistently, each participant indicated that participating in the Sista Circle or community of Black women made them feel supported by the Black women on campus. All but one suggested that the Black women community on campus confirmed their decision to stay at Seaside.

**Survival Through Affirmation and Validation.** The kind of support that the participants reported was nuanced. Above they spoke about finding spaces of belonging and support in challenging times. While others spoke specifically about how their interactions with the other Black women validated their experiences and affirmed their shared experiences at Seaside. Shernic (junior, 20) revealed that she knew all the women before joining the study and knew many of their experiences at Seaside. However, it was still affirming to hear their experiences and interact with them in the Sista Circle. She stated:

> We have already spoken about one on one. Because over the summer, we all had the opportunity to like really talk and like see each other's views…It was just like, a little bit refreshing.

She later elaborated by saying that it was nice to hear that her experience was similar to several other women’s experiences at Seaside. Through sharing their experiences, Shernic was able to validate and understand her experiences and that she was not alone as others shared similar experiences. Over the summer, while the country managed the COVID-19 virus and the social and political unrest, the Black women found a space on social media to come together to continue to build a community and find space for them to talk, support each other, heal, and cope with the events happening across the country. The participants’ community building during this time, is discussed later in the chapter.
Informal spaces that allow Black women the opportunity to safely and supportively have a dialogue about their experience often serve as spaces of affirmation and validation (Collins, 2000; Porter & Dean, 2015; Porter, 2017). As Porter (2017) explained, “Black women are not the same, and thus will need varying levels of support and affirmation. A sister circle…and space for women to discuss their experiences within a safe and supportive environment, offers …a smaller community of peers…to assist along their journey” (p. 98). Soul Sista (senior, 20) also explained that being a part of the Sista Circle and connecting with Black women helped validate her experiences on campus. She said:

like it reinforced what I was saying, like through the summer us talking, it continued on through this experience Um, Sista Circle meetings. um hearing that some thoughts that I had about, about a lot of things and or anything that happened in the school were also being voiced by people I didn't even know if they were thinking the same things. That was really nice to be like, Okay. You are thinking like me, Okay. Like, it was kind of exciting to hear that. Um, but most people on the Sista Circle I did talk to already. I think it's your I didn't know who she is. But she's really nice. Ke$ha. Yeah, I didn't know who she was. She had similar thoughts to me.

Soul Sista revealed in her narrative that the Sista Circle allowed her to meet other like-minded Black women who shared the same views and feelings as her, affirming that she was not alone or, as she later revealed in her narrative, “not crazy because it happened to others too.” This type of space allowed Black women to build a support network, which will help them thrive within the hostile campus climate and feel as if their experiences are heard and validated (Johnson, 2017; Keels, 2019; Porter & Dean, 2015). Jessie (sophomore, 19) explained that she developed a network of Black women, with whom she felt comfortable talking about her experiences and who helped to challenge her. She added:
most of us [Black women] are in the same grade. We all know each other. And now that we have Sista Circle and stuff like this, we kind of get to see each other, if we normally wouldn't, and have that dialogue. And I feel like everyone likes each other so…. But I didn't know that Miss Love was also an immigrant, so that was very good to learn.

Revealing their shared experience affirmed the participants' understanding that they are not battling the system or the hostile campus climate alone, further assisting them in establishing a community of like-minded individuals on campus. As Jessie explained, learning that Miss Love was an immigrant made her excited to know there was someone else on campus who was an immigrant, so she was able to talk with her and learn from her, but it also assisted her in feeling comfortable on campus.

Shenic, Soul Sista, and Jessie’s narratives exposed the need for a safe and supportive space that affirms and validates their experiences but also confirmed that they are not alone. Informal counterspaces, where affirmation and validation are present, provided Black women with reassurance, which allowed them to develop self-awareness and helped them to redefine what it means to be a Black woman (Collins, 2000; Keels, 2019; Porter & Dean, 2015). In these spaces, Black women can conceptualize their experiences so that they can articulate and revise their experiences in order to assist them when presented with a similar situation in the future (Collins, 2000). Furthermore, informal counterspaces can also validate and affirm their experiences within predominantly White spaces by providing them with the confidence and self-assurance needed to survive in these spaces (Keels, 2019; Shaw, 2017).

As the participants showed throughout this section, their community or sistahood helped them thrive at Seaside. It was clear that based on the group dynamic
during each Sista Circle, the group had genuine respect for one another, even those who did not know each other. Even though we were virtual, the group had a way of showing the person who was talking that they acknowledged them and supported what they said. If it was a head nod, a finger point or snap in the camera, writing in the chat function, or unmuting themselves to say “girl” or “uhm,” their support and empowerment of each other were apparent. Their verbal and nonverbal affirmations helped to validate their experiences and revealed that others acknowledged and shared a similar experience, which assisted in building a supportive community amongst the women. The relationship or sistahood established amongst the participants helped empower, support, and uplift one another. As I will show below, their sistahood also provided space for the collegiate Black women in this study to learn from each other as a way to cope with, resist, and survive the campus climate.

**Collective Learning Leads to Coalition Building**

The participants in this study further exhibited how their Sista Circle or community of Black women helped educate and inform them about issues happening on and off campus. Within their community of Black women, knowledge, and information were shared, allowing them to learn lessons about survival and about the issues that affected their community. It was also within these communities that they began to empower and inspire each other to think about ways to collectively improve the circumstances for them and their community.

As the participants shared their experiences, I realized that their narratives were in the form of a story that often began with “girl” or “let me tell you.” These stories were their way of sharing their knowledge, wisdom, and lessons they had
learned. These lessons were their survival stories, and they helped to affirm and validate each other’s experiences and revealed a common connection between the women. Survival stories are accounts or narratives of one’s experience dealing with, surviving, or making meaning of a traumatic situation or an extreme challenge (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019; Lorde, 1984; Porter & Dean, 2015). Oral dialogue is a form of communication and learning rooted in African storytelling (Collins, 2000). This form of knowledge sharing is prominent within the Black culture. According to Collins (2000), “Stories, narratives, and bible principles are selected for their applicability to the lived experiences of African-Americans and become symbolic representations of a whole wealth of experience…often told for the wisdom they express about everyday life, so their interpretation involves no need for scientific historical verification…requires that the story be told, not torn apart in analysis, and trusted as a core belief” (p. 258). This form of communication and education assisted our community and continues to assist us in passing traditions, generational wisdom, and family history, which would have otherwise been deleted through White supremacy (Collins, 2000). It was enlightening to notice this pattern emerged in the stories the participants told as well.

Sharing of Survival Knowledge

The participants in this study shared many survival stores within our Sista Circles about their experiences with academic departments, specific professors, and other students on campus. However, for the participants of this study, their survival stories also consisted of knowledge sharing, designed to explicitly protect other women from having to navigate the same personal, institutional, or political
challenges. When discussing how and why she chooses to engage in online activism, Shernic (junior, 20) informed the group about a current event she discovered concerning the 2020 election. She shared:

Like that, to me, is just crazy for me not to bring awareness to what's happening to the black community... I don't know if you heard about like, what happened in Utah how they just voted. So I don't know if it was to abolish slavery in Utah. I retweeted it, but I'm not sure if it's like still there (scrolling through phone). But it was on like, Oh, no, I don't have it anymore. But like it was on the thingy vote stuff... [ballot? someone asked] Yeah. Okay so here it is. (showing her phone to the screen) over 1000. Like, it was like, 1055 people voted for slavery to still be legal in Utah four days ago!

It was clear that others were unaware of this knowledge by their puzzled and confused expressions and shaking heads in disbelief. Shernic’s narrative revealed how Black women use their survival stories and narratives to share information, current events, and knowledge that pertains to and affects the Black community on and off campus. The sharing of knowledge between Black women helped change their consciousness and transformed their thinking (Jovanovic, 2019; Lorde, 1984). It is as Collins wrote, “a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (p. 30). Honey (sophomore, 19) revealed that every time she interacted with the Black women on campus, she learned something new. She stated:

like if they shared something and it was something I didn't know before, but I probably would not have been exposed to information had they not shared it.

She proclaimed that her interactions with the other Black women helped her think about things happening on and off campus differently. She specifically recalled a time when Soul Sista posted something on social media about a racial topic of which she was unaware. She explained that she had never seen Soul Sista on campus, had never
spoken with her, but they were able to bond and build a coalition through their shared experiences and common interest over racial topics. She stated:

I saw, like, Oh, she posted this, I like this. Let me say something. Or I'm gonna reshare this post and have her comment on it, or something along those lines, like Soul Sista, I never talked to Soul Sista. I never even saw her on campus. But this year, we did do a lot of talking surrounding, like racial topics.

As Honey shared in her narrative, the participants helped educate each other by sharing their knowledge, wisdom, and experiences. A coalition is an alliance of people or two or more social movement organizations working together for a common cause or to achieve a goal (Diani & Bison, 2004; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001). Learning from and teaching one another about Black women’s experiences, struggles, battles, and triumphs with racial oppression assists in their survival (Lorde, 1984). Through their collective learning, Black women at Seaside begin to form an alliance with other Black women to help each other overcome barriers and fight for change. For many of the participants, their involvement within the community or Sista Circle assisted them in feeling empowered to take action.

This kind of knowledge sharing is not merely didactic. There is a level of care involved. Several of the participants made evident their level of care for or the “mothering” of the Black women community on campus through educating one another. Lewisia (sophomore, 18) discussed how she learned about issues that affected the Black community from her father. She would then go back to her circle on campus to further discuss the topic and teach them what she had learned. She stated:

My dad, … he lives in the news. And then once I learned something from him, we have our long discussions, when I go to my friends and talk about it, and then they talk about it with their family. And it's just like, the cycle that keeps going round and round.
Lewisia’s narrative exemplified the lasting effect Black women’s mothering can have on each other and their communities. As her narrative revealed, Lewisia’s knowledge sharing with her circle created a cycle of learning. Lorde (1984) explained that if Black women do not teach each other, they contribute to the oppression of other Black women and themselves. Lorde (2007) explains in her essay, *Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger*, “me and you, me or you. And whose future image have we destroyed — your face or mine — without either how shall I look again at both — lacking either is lacking myself…We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other’s face our own face” (pp. 155-156).

McDonald (1997) argued that Black women are driven to care for other Black women, due to the empathy they have for other Black women who are suffering from or have suffered a similar social disadvantage and from social norms such as solidarity, responsibility, accountability, and moral obligation that have passed down through generations of Black women that has helped to ensure their survival.

As Honey, Shernic, and Lewisia affirmed in their narratives, the participants helped to educate each other by sharing their knowledge, wisdom, and experiences. In this way, Black women can assist in their own and other Black women’s learning and survival (Collins, 2000; Landson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Lorde, 1984). Their collective learning not only helped them to thrive at Seaside, but it assists them in establishing a coalition or an alliance of like-minded people who can assist them in taking collective actions against the issues that they care about. Researchers have argued that collective learning can also assist Black women in making meaning of their experiences existing in and enduring within a system that was not built for them.
Baxter Magolda (2001) posits that college students begin to make meaning by learning from external formulas. As a result, their meaning making is “complex and socially constructed” and the students’ “expertise are shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers” (p.188). Jovanovic (2019) asserted that students develop a common understanding due to collective learning, which helps them to generate a coalition and sparks their motivation to take collective action.

**Seeking Spaces Resulted in Community/Coalition Building and Activism**

Spaces like Sista Circles or other communities of Black women, where they can educate each other or where collective learning can occur, can assist collegiate Black women in building connections with one another and establishing a community of support and coalition. Thus, I argue that Sista Circles are also a form of coalition building for collegiate Black women and tend to serve as a catalyst for the participants’ involvement in activism. Through their community and coalition building, collegiate Black women are able to share their knowledge about the issues that impact their community, which motivates them to challenge the oppressive system by participating in activism. Their community and coalition encouraged them to participate in activism and helped them to understand that their actions were activism.

**Community/Coalition Encouragement**

Honey (sophomore, 19) is a perfect example of how the participants’ engagement in communities or coalitions, where collective learning occurred, inspired their participation in activism. She shared:
I think I've started doing it [activism] a lot more often. Um, and, in my opinion, like doing a lot more like before this [Sista Circle], I had never gone to like a protest or a rally. But like, I created a group in my high school called Sister for Sister, which is kind of like Sista Circle where women of color come together, we discuss current problems that we face. At the time, again, I didn't even see that as activism, but I would definitely think it's a lot different and a lot more, I guess, dangerous in a way. Because now I definitely feel like I'll say whatever I feel to almost anyone. So, But definitely, it definitely wasn't like that in in high school.

Honey explained that she did not view her participation in these coalitions or communities of women as activism when she was in high school; however, these communities helped empower her and helped her gain confidence to speak up about issues that she experienced within her community and on campus. Honey also acknowledged that these communities or coalitions helped educate her on issues that she was unaware of and helped her understand how to address situations she experienced. Barnhardt (2019) explained that student activists collectively learn from each other by sharing their experiences, impressions, and critiques. They tend to “draw energy from collective resources by making sense with one another” (p. 7). Through their collective learning or knowledge sharing and the transformation of their thinking, they sought ways to change the issues they saw within their community and on campus. Honey’s narrative further revealed how collective learning can lead to collective action or collegiate Black women’s engagement in activism.

Additionally, Soul Sista (senior, 20) revealed that due to her activism and the Black women community, she discovered that there are more like-minded people at Seaside with whom she can have a conversation about the issues that affect her community. She shared:

It opened up conversations with some like minded people …You know, I've had a few, one big conversation with like some people. It made me talk more
to people than I ever had at Seaside. More the people agreed with me. And now we're on the same page. And we're cool. I'm just like, Okay, I know you [when she sees them on campus]. I could have an educated conversation with you we don't have to argue or anything like that.

She continued to explain that these like-minded folks with whom she shared a common understanding helped educate each other on topics that they can bring awareness to in the future through their activism. Jovanovic (2019) argues that collective action or organizing through relationship building shows students that other people are on their side to support them and stand with them. Collective action also helps students develop a network of like-minded people, which allows them to feel as if they are not battling alone and assisted them in building a community or coalition for those who are seeking a space to connect with others around issues that are important to them (Jovanovic, 2019; Keels & Offidani-Bertrand, 2019).

The participants also explained that their circle at Seaside encouraged them to be active on campus and participate in resistance and activism activities. In the below narrative from Miss Love (junior, 20), she shared that her circle of friends encouraged and supported her to do more activism. She shared:

I try to stick with … like people who know what affects me, people who understand like that, who show me that I matter. Type of thing. And, yeah, people from whom I can discuss, like issues that are happening right now. Like, the Black Lives Matter movement, people who show support to me when it comes to those things, …Are the people I hang out with? … My friends, …, organized a protest in our town, and I ended up joining and helping, you know, like, talk at the protest. And that was, that was like, the first time I've ever felt empowered. I was like, yay, I'm here.

Miss Love discussed how her circle encouraged her to help organize the protest in her hometown and to speak at the event. She shared this was the first time she felt empowered and supported to participate in activism. Miss Love disclosed that she
would not have participated if it were not for her circle. Her circle continues to encourage her to fight for change. Jessie (sophomore, 19) also shared that her circle encouraged her to get involved on campus by taking her to events and student organization meetings. She started, “I'm not that involved on campus…I typically go because my friends are going.” Jessie’s friends also encouraged her to connect with other Black women on campus, which helped her become comfortable and thrive at Seaside. By having friends who encouraged and supported her involvement on campus, Jessie’s circle enabled her to develop a sense of belonging on campus but also encouraged her to become actively involved with a student organization with a mission for social change on campus. As a result, Jessie was able to find a coalition or community that shared a common interest, which helped her get involved with activism.

**Community/Coalition Helped to Define Their Activism.**

I discovered that often the participants did not realize what they were doing was activism until another person addressed it as activism. In our conversation about their activism, Soul Sista (senior, 20) explained that one of the forms of activism she engaged in was advocating for Black-owned businesses by “Buying Black.” She said that she “has participated in boycotts, rallies, protests, and transitioning where my money goes to black businesses solely.” Soul Sista named these as activist activities. However, Jessie saw it differently. Jessie (sophomore, 19), explained “Oh, I've also been trying to spend money more on like black businesses,” and explained later that she did not think of that as activism, but it was “just something I am trying to do.” By Soul Sista identifying her action of transferring money to a Black business as activism,
Jessie was exposed to a new way of thinking and could reframe this as a form of resistance. She began to recognize her actions as activism. Shernic (junior, 20), also explained that she did not see herself as an activist when she described her actions addressing several harmful and racist posts that she saw on social media. When asked why she did not perceive her actions as activism, she paused, laughed, and said:

True. yeah (laughing) I feel like to be an activist…It's, it's like something you really need to sleep on because you're putting your life at risk. I feel like I feel like woman activists. It's so hard these days, especially if you're a woman of color or just like a person of color. Because you're literally putting your life at risk every single day.

Shernic’s response showed that she did not perceive her actions as a form of activism until she was required to think about her actions differently. Once she stopped and thought about her actions, she quickly realized that she engaged in activism without thinking about it. For the participants, their community involvement helped them begin to make meaning of their activism experience by allowing them to learn that and define their action as activism. For Black women, their resistance and activism are often considered part of their everyday activities, and they usually do not view their actions as engaging in activism (Collins, 2000; Lacy & Stewart, 2019). I have come to see, throughout this project, that reframing these collective or individual acts as “activists” can be empowering for Black women.

The more we discussed their experiences on campus and their activism, the more I saw how the community they built helped them resist the campus climate at Seaside and helped them understand their activism further. As a researcher and Black woman, I wanted to host more Sista Circles as it was clear that this space and our time together was assisting them in establishing community but in resisting the dominant
spaces of campus. The community or coalition we established supported, empowered, validated, and challenged each woman, including myself, to think differently. In our Sista Circle, we supported each other through the complex and challenging times of being Black and a woman on campus. We laughed, challenged each other to redefine and reimagine our ideologies, shared our campus knowledge, joked about campus gossip, and encouraged each other to thrive while at the same time helping each other to resist, persist, and learn more about the issues that affect us, as Black women, at Seaside. These women challenged me to think about how community building and activism connected and helped me understand the collegiate Black women's experience at Seaside, which was not much different from my experience as a female Black administrator. As I mentioned in 4A, I was able to find a community amongst the Black women faculty and staff which helped me develop my voice on campus. However, this group of collegiate women taught me why I need to use my voice to advocate for their needs.

Counterspaces, consisting of Black women interacting together, foster an environment of support, empowerment, validation, affirmation, and collective learning. These communities, or Sista Circles, also helped Black women to heal from, manage, and counterbalance the unwelcoming and hostile environments they experience daily while on campus. The relationships or sistahood developed by the Black women within these counterspaces often inspired them to engage in resistance and activism.

In this portion of Chapter Four, I revealed why Black women at predominantly White institutions need a community to help combat the cold and unwelcoming
climate they experience on campus and how their community of like-minded individuals often inspires them to engage in and understand their activism experience. In the next part of this chapter, 4C, I will discuss how collegiate Black women perceive and make meaning of their activism experience.
I AM NOT AN ACTIVIST: COLLEGIATE BLACK WOMEN’S PERCEPTION VS REALITY REGARDING THEIR ACTIVISM

In chapter 4A, I discussed the hostile climate that many Black women face on predominantly White college campuses. In chapter 4B, I showed how these same women found allies in communal spaces like Sista Circles to help them manage the cold and unwelcoming campus climate. Throughout this study, I have seen Black women rely on a variety of creative sources to help them cope, resist, and survive, one of which is their participation in activism. In this chapter, I will look at how the collegiate Black women in this study came together to support one another in their activist practices. Inspired first by their families and then by one another, these women still found themselves torn between their lofty ideas about activism (Big A) and the day-to-day activism that they participated in throughout their lives (Little A). Ultimately, activism proved to be one of the key tools that helped these women sustain themselves through the rough terrain of 2020.

As many Black women researchers and feminist scholars suggest (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Hope et al., 2016; Lorde, 1984; Wheatle & Commodore, 2019), activism is a way for Black women to live in, resist, and dismantle White supremacy and the systems of oppression. Collins (2000) explained “U.S. Black women’s collective historical experiences with oppression may stimulate a self-defined Black women’s standpoint that in turn can foster Black women’s activism” (p. 47). It is not a
surprise that many Black women start or increase their participation in activism while in college, especially while enrolled in predominantly White institutions, as the education system is one of the largest systems of oppression. Decades of research have shown how Black women are overlooked and left out of educational spaces, conversations, research, and curriculum (Collins, 2000). As a result, they developed creative solutions to resist and maintain their positions within this oppressive system. One of the ways they do this is through the development of a community.

Counterspaces, like Sista Circles, allow Black women to connect with other Black women, build a sense of community and share their knowledge about issues that affect the Black community (L. S. Johnson, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 4B, these spaces can also serve as a form of coalition building and a space for coping and healing. Shaw (2017) posited that Black women need spaces and opportunities to build a community with one another on campus in order to survive and succeed in higher education. Building community amongst Black women is vital for their personal growth and identity development (Porter & Dean, 2015), but most importantly, it affords them a sense of belonging. Additionally, counterspaces allow for Black women to share their stories or experiences. Jovanovic (2019) explained that collective action occurs when students have space to share and listen to stories connected to and partake in deep conversation and dialogue around community issues. Often in these counterspaces or informal spaces where Black women gather, community issues are discussed, alliances dedicated to improving these issues are formed, and goals and action plans are developed to move the community forward through activism (Collins, 2000; L. S. Johnson, 2015). Collins (2000) stated, “Black
women have generated alternative practices and knowledge that have been designed to foster U.S. Black women’s group empowerment...a dialogical relationship characterizes Black women’s collective experiences and group knowledge…, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may, in turn, stimulate a changed consciousness” (p. 47). As a result, these spaces tend to serve as the catalysis for Black women’s resistance and activism (Croom et al., 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017).

Historically, during times of unrest on and off campus, these counterspaces allow collegiate Black women to gather a collective voice, discuss their oppressive experiences, support and validate each other, heal, and empower one another to resist the larger oppressive system. In 2020, when the country was experiencing the largest political and social unrest it has ever seen and a global pandemic that shut down the government, traditional gathering spaces were inaccessible. The ten collegiate Black women who participated in this study revealed that they used their virtual network of Black women peers to develop a plan to take collective action against the issues that affect them during this time even though they felt that their voices often went unheard.

In what follows, I argue that for Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) during the tumultuous times in 2020, their activism is complex, complicated, and often confusing. I refer to the conceptualization of their activism experience as Little A and Big A activism. I also look at their reasons for participating in activism, the impact their families have on their activist choices, and the lessons that activism taught them.
Big A verses Little A

In order to participate in this study, the participants self-identified as having taken part in a traditional form of activism before beginning the study. Each one of the participants fulfilled this requirement. Although their participation range on the scale of very involved (I have participated in 11 or more protests, marches, demonstrations, etc.) to I am just starting to get involved (I have participated in one to two), each participant was able to articulate their experience, why they chose to participate in activism, and what activism means to them. I was not surprised by this, given the racial unrest that occurred over the summer of 2020 within the Black community nationally and within Seaside’s community.

Despite their self-proclaimed active involvement in traditional forms of activism, all but two participants explained that they did not believe they were activists. When examining the data, I discovered a disconnect between the way the participants viewed their activism and their actions. I coded this disconnection as Big A verse Little A. The Big A describes how some women in this study view Activism as a large-scale, organized plan for social change. The Big A also highlights how the participants perceived and discussed themselves as activists or how they made meaning or conceptualized their activism experience. Women who used the Big A could articulate how their activist identity and identity as a Black woman aligns with their sense of self and critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is measured by one’s ability to understand and articulate how their sense of self aligns with the social change for which they are advocating (Hope et al., 2016; Keels, 2019). Hope, Keels, and Durkee (2019) asserted that critical consciousness is “the process by which
marginalized people understand the nature of their oppression through critical
reflection and take individual or collective action to address structural inequalities” (p.
205). At the same time, the participants understood their activism as Little A. Little A
discloses how they perceive the resistance and activism that they are engaging in on a
smaller scale and insignificant. Living between the Little A and Big A, the activists in
this study revealed that their activism was complex- as the conventional forms of
activism felt too lofty and inaccessible, complicated-as they often had to negotiate
their family responsibility and expectations, and confusing-as they navigated their
identity development and emotions.

_Are you Woke?: The Big A_

Definitely not. I still have a lot to learn. I would never, ever classify myself as woke because how do you know when you're done learning? So I just personally wouldn't ever say I'm woke fully because there's just so many aspects of every topic that could be covered. I don't know anything, and I'm not gonna pretend I know everything. I will continue to listen to other people, read and like, try to educate myself, but I won't ever claim the label woke.

Jessie (sophomore, 19)

I begin this section with Jessie’s answer to the question, “Are you woke?” as it encompasses the sentiments of several participants. It also emphasized their understanding or conceptualization of their activism. I asked each participant what it meant to be woke and if they identified as woke. The participants in this study revealed that they felt in order to be called an activist or woke, one needs to be educated on all oppressive topics. Each participant also indicated that they did not identify as woke or an activist because they felt they needed more education. This is the BIG A kind of activism that many of the women in this study were unable to embrace. Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) described woke as the "critical
consciousness to intersecting systems of oppression…to hold an unretractable embodied consciousness and political identity acknowledging the oppression that exists in individual and collective experiences" (p.90). For this study, the participants’ understanding of woke aligns with the following description of the term – the awareness of issues that concern social justice or racial justice or to continue to gain awareness on issues in pursuit of change (Halewood, 2019). Jessie (sophomore, 19), who is new to activism, shared that she would "definitely not” refer to herself as woke as she still has more that she needs to learn about other cultures and how others experience oppression here in the United States.

Ke$ha (sophomore, 19) also explained that she would not define herself as woke because she needed more education to be on the level of those she considered to be woke. Ke$ha, in a very thoughtful demeanor, explained:

Yeah, I think everyone has an opinion, but I don't think I think very few people are entirely woke like, I'd say like, I don't know. Like, ancient philosophers, like they were, they were woke like they knew it was up. I feel like you got to be on that level. To actually um, be completely woke like yes, I educate myself but …, I don't think I'm 100% woke like there's definitely room to learn and kind of form opinions based on different I don't know, literature and everything else. But you got to be on like that Socrates level to be woke, woke.

She continued by explaining what woke meant to her:

I think in order to be woke in one subject you must be woke in another Um, for example, like, I feel like if, say you're woke on, um, I don't know feminism, but you're not on black issues. I feel like you have to be in both. Because in order to be woke in black issues, you also have to be well, in feminism in gender in religion in order to be woke on the full spectrum of things. Because I don't know woke. I just feel like it's a your whole mind, you know, around everything. Just being aware, reading between the lines.

Ke$ha felt that for one to be woke, one needed to be educated on the different forms of oppression. She jokingly argued that one needs to have Socrates's education,
wisdom, and knowledge to be woke. Lastly, Miss Love added to the conversations by explaining what woke meant to her:

> I think to me being woke is just realizing that there's more information than what has been put out there, especially like, in history, like history-wise, realizing that what you see is not the reality...(If you say something like) I've learned everything and like, I know everything about Black history, and I know everything that has to do with racism in America, then you will never learn because there's so much. There's so much information. And I don't know, I feel like defining woke is more of like, some like realizing that there is more than what you see. And working to learn.

Miss Love's response revealed her understanding of the system of oppression that affects the Black community and how the systems continue to change and adapt in order to keep the oppressed communities oppressed. Her narrative further revealed that she could acknowledge, define, and articulate how the dominant systems within society continue to oppress Black women revealing her critical consciousness and understanding of woke. Given everything that I have argued above and in the previous chapter, I would say their critical consciousness defined them as “activists.” However, for Miss Love, or Jessie, or Ke$ha, when being woke feels this big (like Socrates-big,), none of these smart, reflective Black women could own that word for themselves.

Although each participant successfully articulated a definition for being woke that directly aligns with the literature, both Jessie, Miss Love, and Ke$ha felt that more education was an essential part of them identifying as being woke. Ashlee et al. (2017) professed that there is a connection between wokeness and critical consciousness obtained by women of color who have to navigate systems of domination like higher education. They suggest that a woke woman does not have to obtain the language or education to identify the oppression occurring; they just need to
acknowledge the oppression and resist it. It is the development of one’s critical consciousness that often leads to them taking action and participating in activism (Ashlee et al., 2017; Linder, et al., 2020). But for Jessie, Ke$ha, and Miss Love, that sense of critical consciousness did not feel like enough to claim the Big A of activist identity.

Each of the participant’s narratives shared showcased that they can identify, articulate, and resist their environments, which further revealed their self-awareness, critical consciousness, and meaning making. Ashlee et al. (2017) argued that for women of color to be woke, they must "hold capital against an oppressive system by articulating the system's existence" (p. 90), and each of the participants in this study has done just that. They were able to acknowledge and articulate their experiences participating in activism and why they participated. However, not viewing themselves as woke also contributed to how they perceived themselves as activists with a Little A.

I Am Not an Activist. The construction of the participant’s activist identity became a theme that emerged in the Sista Circles and continued in their individual interviews. I quickly discovered that the term activist had an ambiguous and complex meaning for each participant. Each of the participants in the study illustrated their awareness and could articulate their understanding of resistance and what it means to be woke; however, each participant indicated that they would not identify as woke. Each participant who felt that they were not woke also stated that they would not describe themselves as activists. At some point in the study, each of the participants articulated their consciousness and awareness of their experience living and learning
within the higher education system and the oppression, as Black women, they experienced racially and socially. However, collectively they felt that describing themselves as an activist was a lofty label to describe themselves, that social change was unattainable, and the title as an activist was unreachable as they compared their action to another well-known activist. As Honey (sophomore, 19) explained, activism is “standing up for an injustice physically and mentally to make a change that is beneficial to you or a group of people that you see as ethically right.” But she does not view her activism as true activism but more as a responsibility to care for those she loves. She added:

I feel like, when I was doing it, I wasn't doing it because I was thinking of, like, the greater good. I was doing it more because I felt like this is something that affects me or the people that I love. So, it's something that needs to be spoken on. And to me, I guess, like, I don't really see that as activism, I just see it as like doing the right thing.

**It Is Just Too Big.** Several participants felt that the term activist was "too big" of a label for them despite their everyday resistance and active participation in activism. M. Angelou (junior, 21), who has participated in several forms of activism on and off campus, explained activism as "a movement that brings forth political or social change. Fighting the good fight not only for the betterment of yourself but for those who don't have a voice." However, when asked if she was an activist, she said "no." She explained:

I think it's hard to consider yourself an activist if you don't really see the change that you're making. Until for personally, I would say, yes, I'm involved in. And yeah, I have done things to sort of kind of further the conversation, but I don't consider myself an activist because... as a junior, and we're like, graduating next year ..., I don't see the change that's happening. So, I personally don't think I've done anything, or I've done enough.
M. Angelou did not view her involvement in some of Seaside's most prestigious leadership positions as resistance or activism. To her, they were just things that she did on campus or part of her everyday activity. According to Lacy and Stewart (2019) students who participate in traditional forms of activism “may not prefer to call themselves activists…these students may be merely acting out of their quest for survival for dignity, and for the right to an education” (p. 158). The activist label could be seen as a privilege, whereas for Black women, their engagement in resistance is not. It is a form of everyday living (Lacy & Stewart, 2019; Linder et al., 2020).

In addition, Jessie (sophomore, 19), who is new to participating in activism, explained, "Activism to me means to spread the word and share your knowledge with other people in order to create social changes and make the world a better place for everyone. Of course, starting with the main recurring problems in society, though." She argued that she was not an activist because she felt the term was too powerful for her. She stated:

I personally would say no, because I feel like the term activist comes with a lot of like, I don't know responsibility, or it makes it seem like it's bigger than it is. Like, I never organized a protest or like, like, big acts to help further social change. So, I don't like saying that activist. Like, I say, support activism and stuff like that. But yeah, I personally wouldn't just say I'm an activist. Um, I don't know.

Jessie continued by saying:

I feel to be an activist. You have to be more involved than I am. And I'm just I've done some stuff, but I'm not as involved as I could be.

Unlike Jessie, Shernic (junior, 20) was highly active in bringing awareness to issues on social media and participating in activism. She explained, “To me, the word activism means taking action to bring political and social change.” Shernic insisted:
For me, I feel like, activist is like, such a strong word. And I feel like you need to be out there all the time doing stuff, or like, meeting and bringing awareness. And me, I just never claimed to be one just because like, I was like, younger when I was doing that. And it was just like, such a small group. I never thought like, Oh, yeah, I'm doing such a big movement.

Although M. Angelou, Jessie, and Shernic’s level of participation in activism ranged, they each could articulate what activism meant to them and acknowledge what it means to be an activist. Even though each of the participants was able to articulate a definition for activism that seemed reasonable and obtainable, they all felt the title of activist was too powerful and lofty for them. It seemed that their understanding of the term did not align with how they perceived themselves or their actions, which affected how they used their voices on campus to enact change.

**My Actions Do Not Match Well Known Activists.** Participants also revealed that they made meaning of their experience by comparing their actions to other activists to determine if they were actually activists themselves. Baxter Magolda (2001) explained that college students make meaning through shared realities or external sources such as their peers and external knowledge gathered. Both M. Angelou, Jessie, and Shernic also thought the label was too big and powerful for them because of their previous knowledge and socialization of what an activist does and those who are activists. Their socialization and understanding of what it means to be an activist helped them establish their individual meaning of being an activist. Shernic (junior, 20) continued by stating that her activism was not the same caliber as a well-known activist. She contended:
To me, I feel like activism is, is like Shaun King. I feel like you need like a really big crowd of something you're like, I'm not saying like, I'm not like, embracing the entire like, situation and culture. But like, to me, that's an act of like someone who's known, around, like, not only his community but like, maybe the country I feel like everyone knows who this guy is. And to me, that's activists.

Jessie (sophomore, 19) articulated that compared to those who have suffered physically and gave up more of their time and energy, her activism was unworthy of the title:

so I can't be an activist when people are out here getting beat up in the street. Fighting against police brutality. While I'm just like sitting at Seaside.

M. Angelou (junior, 21) felt that she should not have that label because her activism did not compare to the well-known activists. She felt to be an activist; you needed to make big and loud changes. She shared:

I'm constantly doubting myself and my abilities. So I think, um, I don't know, I think that's just where it comes from...when you think of when I think of activists, I think of like, great, you know, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou. Like, all those great big leaders. And then there's me (chuckle).

Like M. Angelou, Jessie, and Shernic, several participants explained that they were not activists like several well-known activists such as Shaun King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parkers, Tarana Burke, or Dr. Martin Luther King. Their comparison to well-known activists and their perceptions around the level of change needed to be called an activist dictated how they viewed themselves and their engagement in activism. The participants felt their activism would not qualify them to be activists despite several of them having organized and led protests, marches, rallies, etc. on and off campus.

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Shaun King is a civil rights activist and co-founder of Real Justice PAC (Political Action Committee), who uses his social media to promote social justice, identity police brutality cases, and bring awareness to issues of mass incarceration.
Jessie, who indicated, “I’m just sitting at Seaside,” did not perceive that her presence in predominantly White spaces was a form of resistance and activism or disruption to an oppressive system.

**Imposter Syndrome.** When listening to M. Angelou’s above narrative, it seemed she was experiencing what others have called “imposter syndrome” as her self-doubt did not allow her to see that her activism and resistance helped to improve Seaside. She explained “I'm constantly doubting myself and my abilities… all those great big leaders. And then there's me.” The self-doubt felt by M. Angelou appeared frequently in her narrative as well as in several other participants when discussing their activism and ability to create change. Edwards (2019) explained that women who suffer from imposter syndrome “do not feel worthy of the praise they receive on the basis of their academic or professional accomplishments. Instead of acknowledging their accomplishments…women...perceive these achievements as overestimations of their gifts and talents… comparing themselves to who they deem as authentic” (p.19). Several participants actively participated in acts of resistance and activism but would not refer to themselves as an activist. Like M. Angelou, Miss Love (junior, 20) did not view her leadership position at Seaside as an act of resistance nor herself as an activist even though she was asked to speak at a Black Lives Matter march in her hometown. Miss Love also was an active student leader at Seaside, where she advocated for Black students’ needs and has created ways to resist the campus climate for which she has helped others to do the same. She articulated:

> So I I don't know if I would like you said consider myself an activist. Because I guess I would because I fight for change, and I want to see a better world. And it's hard when you don't see the change, and it's hard when you feel like you're working in vain. Um, but I try to have discussions with people that I try
to, you know, be the little speaker that plants doubt or like that makes someone rethink what their thoughts are or opinions are on something that deserves to be shifted. And here on campus, I would say like I would consider myself an activist of change. Because there's like; obviously we're fighting to get, um, you know, the way people or people of color are treated here on campus. But in general, like, I don't know, if I would give myself the title activist. Because I feel like it's much heavier and like people who actually have that title do much so much more than I do. I don't know.

The unreachable standards the participants placed on their engagement in activism resulted in each participant feeling unworthy of the title of activist. Despite their continuous engagement in activism activities and resistance on campus, they felt their participation was small scale and undeserving of recognition. Based on the definitions they each provided, I argued that they already achieved their definition of the word activism as each of them used their voices to bring awareness and have taken action to create social change on and off campus.

**I Do Not See the Results of My Actions.** Like Miss Love just indicated in her narrative, she also would not call herself an activist because she did not see the changes on campus and within society due to her activism. After Miss Love finished, a number of the participants shook their heads in agreement and pointed at the screen to indicate they agreed. Several of the participants in their narratives also shared that they would not refer to themselves as an activist because they could not see the results of their actions, and several even questioned if they had done enough to create change. Honey (sophomore, 19), who has helped to organize and has taken part in several activism activities and leadership positions on and off campus, followed and revealed:

I feel kind of conflicted with that because like, personally, like, I have done things with like, I, you know, organize protests, and I attended a lot of protests. I have helped other organizations within, you know, my community to further, you know, push for change. But, like M. Angelou and Miss Love were saying, like, it's hard to feel like an activist if you haven't seen any real change.
She also stated that she would not call herself an activist due to not seeing any results due to their efforts. For Miss Love, Honey, and several other participants, it was hard for them to feel successful engaging in activism because nothing on campus or with their community was changing. They felt that their actions were in vain. As a result, they were often uninspired to speak up about the oppression that they experienced on campus. They did not realize that their collective voices had power and had assisted in changing Seaside already.

**Little A: The Act of Resistance**

As highlighted in the above section, the participants struggled to conceptualize themselves as Big A activists. In this section, the Little A, reveals how the participants’ actions, comprehension of why they participate in activism, and the articulation of their learning from their activism defined them as activists. The Little A concept reveals the confusion and emotions Black women often experience when deciding to or while participating in activism. It is also important to understand how Black women’s perceptions and definition of themselves and their activism influence their actual actions. Therefore, Little A precedes Big A as their self-definition, socialization, and their peer influences (Big A understanding) play significantly into their actual actions (Little A actions). Horowitz (2017) argued that activist identity is socially constructed and always evolving as the activist’s learning and development evolves.

Collins explained that for Black women, their resistance to the system that oppressed them is a form of activism (Collins, 2000). Jessie (sophomore, 19), who had not participated in activism before her enrollment at Seaside, recalled her experience
as an immigrant and not fully understanding what she was experiencing was oppression. Through her frustrations, she articulated how she learned to resist the racism and oppression she was experiencing by using her voice to bring awareness to the issues that affected her and the Black community on campus. She explained:

I'm not really from here. So I came to America, in you know, land of opportunity, whatever. I'm like, Oh, well, it makes sense that I'm the only black person in the room. And until the 2016 election, I didn't really understand the division. And like how they actually saw me, I was like, Oh, these are my classmates. But then once Trump got elected, and people felt more comfortable, speaking openly about their politics and what they viewed and whatever, I was like, Oh, this is absolutely not right. Because everything he's saying all this racist stuff. It's, it's going against me, I'm black. That means you're against me. I guess I didn't really understand, even though I was educated. So then I just was growing from that to the point that I am now where I can fully understand. And I'm like, Okay, this is definitely not right now. I feel comfortable calling all that stuff out.

Jessie also was able to articulate her growth and learning as she explained how she learned to resist the oppressive environments she was in by calling out the oppression she saw. She used her voice to create change. This reveals Jessie’s Little A. Although each participant’s resistance on campus spoke louder than any of them realized, they viewed their activism as small, or minor compared to the larger scale activism happening throughout the country at that time. It was apparent that the participants did not understand that their collective voices were the most powerful tool that they could use to enact change at Seaside or in their communities as they individually used their voices to resist different campus oppression they experienced.

**Why Do You Do It?: Influences to Their Activism**

However, as I listened to each of them talk about their resistance and activism during the Sista Circles, I kept asking the question, “why are they doing this?” It was not until I interviewed the participants individually that I fully understood the answer.
to this question. The participants’ interview narratives highlighted two overarching themes that revealed why they participated in activism: their immediate family and their need to care for their larger community. The Combahee River Collective in 1977 explains that Black women were taught to be activists by the “sacrifices, militancy, and work” of the generations of Black women before them (Taylor, 2017, p.16). Through their interviews, I came to understand that the social, educational, and familial structures in which these women have taken part, grew up, and were immersed helped to shape their emotions, understanding, reactions, and response to activism.

**Family Influence.**

I, at the time, didn't even see it as activism. I just kind of grew up in a household where my mom is very outspoken, and she believes in speaking on things that you feel passionate about, that you believe are the right thing. Um, so when I was speaking on behalf of the student body, I wasn't doing it on behalf of activism; I was just doing it because I felt like it needed to be done and nobody else was going to do it.

Honey (sophomore, 19)

The quote from Honey exemplifies the influence that family members have on Black women’s understanding of why they participate in activism. The participants in this study were able to connect their activism experience to their desire to change or improve the circumstances for others within their family. When asked who influenced them to participate in activism, most of the participants indicated a family member, more specifically their mothers or Black women guardians and role models. Honey credits her mother for influencing her to participate in activism. She continued by saying that her family taught her about resistance and activism. She recalled her tour of Seaside. She articulated:
I know for a fact that if it wasn't for my family, like teaching me to, like speak up and my passion for activism…um, I definitely wouldn't have come to Seaside.

[When I decided to come to college at Seaside,] I wasn't like intending to, like actively change anything. But like, I knew that probably like, you know, there's a lot of White people here who don't know what it's like to see a person of color, even be a person of color. So, I was just more like filling space for black bodies at that point… I wasn't thinking of it as like a form of activism.

She explained that because she grew up in a household where she saw her mother speak up for and advocate for others, she did not realize that what she was doing was engaging in activism or resistance. Evans-Winters (2019) revealed that Black women naturally develop an awareness of their identity, resistance, and Black feminism through hearing family and community members share stories of struggle and triumphs against oppression. Additionally, M. Angelou (junior, 21) also shared that Black women role models, like her aunt and even the poet Maya Angelou, helped to influence her in participating in activism. She proclaimed:

the motivation is from obviously, those beautiful leaders, like when I say Maya Angelou was my woman that was, since day one, I've always loved her poems, her teachings, her activism, and then also just being around powerful women as well in my life. So, my aunt is definitely one of my big drivers. She's one of the strongest women I know. And then also, pretty much all of the women in my family… So it just motivates me to be like them.

The participants in this study revealed that their mothers or Black women role models influenced their ability to advocate and speak up for themselves and what was right. Porter and Dean (2015) posit that Black mothers assist in the socialization process of Black women as they help expose them to faith, teach them strategies for survival, and set standards of success. Their Black mother’s strengths are “embedded in their identities” (Porter & Dean, 2015, p.132). Collins (2000) stated, “the relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which
cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned” (p.51).

Furthermore, Black women are able to make meaning of their experiences through their connections and interactions with other Black women, which allowed them to recognize, express, and communicate what it means to be a Black woman (Porter & Dean, 2015).

Although Miss Love (junior, 20) did not explicitly indicate her mother or a Black woman, she explained that her parents sent her to college to learn to speak up and support herself. To her, that meant learning to speak up about the things that affected her. She shared:

I mean, I think that for me, the reason why I was sent to college, or my parents expect me to go to college, is for my own benefit. Don't think in their mind; they're thinking, Oh, like, that's where you're going to learn to stand up for yourself. Like, in a way I know like, it's for them to provide me a space for me too, you know, support myself…I think when my parents sent me, their motive was for me to learn to speak for myself, I don't know.

With this in mind, Miss Love explained that her families’ educational aspirations are why she chose to speak at the Black Lives Matter March in her hometown and why she continues to participate in activism.

Miss Love, Honey, and M. Angelou were able to link their desire to participate in activism to their families’ commitment to the Black communities, educational aspirations, and activism. Yosso (2005) explained that historically underrepresented students have “familial capital,” which helps to shape their understanding of college and their education, social mobility, and success. Familial capital consists of the knowledge one gains from their interactions with their immediate (living and dead) and extended (e.g., aunts, grandparents, and friends who are considered part of their family) family members (Yosso, 2005).
Lewisia (sophomore, 18), who has a strong relationship with her father, indicated that he influenced and motivated her to participate in activism through his survival stories of resistance. She added:

I think their [her parent's] stories have more impact on my life, because I feel like, you know, they didn't come from much either. My dad didn't grow up with much money. He came to America when he was 19. He didn't speak any English had to work and try to take care of his parents in different countries. So, I just feel like he's gone through so much as a black person. And it just, I don't know, it just influences me to want more for more people that think they can't do it, because of him.

Lewisia explains that her interactions with her father and hearing about his struggles growing up, immigrating to the United States, and providing for his family, had a significant influence on her desire to educate others and to fight for change. Yosso (2005) posits that through their familial interactions, historically underrepresented students are able to foster educational success, survival, critical consciousness, a sense of community, and cultural intuition by listening to stories of their family’s history and life lessons.

Still, collegiate Black women like Lewisia or M. Angelou did not see their actions as activism but as protecting and advocating for their community's needs and survival within a system that continues to disadvantage them and their community. M. Angelou (junior, 21) disclosed that she participated in activism to improve the circumstances and experiences for her family. She explained:

Wanting better for myself, for my peers, and also more specifically for my family. Just wanting better for them. And I don't know, …I have like, the bravery and the courage to do it. And then also maybe, I have less to lose than they do.
Similar to M. Angelou, Cecilia (sophomore, 19) explained that she participated in activism to help her family learn about the issues that affect her, which will change the way they think.

I don't know, it was just like, I, I kind of like standing out and being different in my family. So, I've just like, I like talking to my family as well, and just seeing their opinions on things. And there's a lot of things that we don't agree on. So I was just like, Okay, well, I try to explain to them my side, and I listened to their side, and it kind of just like, brought me to this point where I was like, Well, if they're thinking like this, and there's definitely other people thinking like this, so let me raise my voice, so everyone can hear my opinion, and maybe learn something.

M. Angelou and Cecilia each verified that their motivation to participate in activism was due to their care for their immediate family. Collins (2000) revealed, “that Black women see the unpaid work that they do for their families more as a form of resistance to oppression” (p. 46). However, both Shernic (junior, 20) and Miss Love (junior, 20) confirmed that they participated in activism to help change the campus community (their extended family) and to bring awareness to the issues that affect the Black students on campus. Shernic stated:

I just really wanted to, like, bring awareness and stuff, and I'm seeing, so many younger girls who are has this huge impact on like, activism and an awareness of stuff. I'm like, okay, like, maybe I could do this for like my school. It's a small step, but at least I did something.

Miss Love proclaimed with mixed emotions:

I'm so, this might sound like giving up. But I feel like on the student side, we done as much as we can, ... I don't see anything else that we can possibly come out with that would, you know, would change what I think at this point, it's like, hey, like, are you actually willing to do this? Because we can fight and we can like we've been fighting since freshman year, ... I feel like it's just a fight. And then we'll graduate, and other people will come and keep fighting and maybe like,... hopefully not more than 20 years from now, like we'll actually have changed in this school, like, show students of color that they actually mattered by having policies that protect them... is just like us repeating the cycle of doing these like, putting together information and
presenting why we need the change and why this is important and why why why. And then eventually, like, someone will get it, and someone will say, Okay, we have done it for too long. We need to change now.

Miss Love and Shernic’s care for the Seaside community pushes them to fight for change on campus. Their actions further revealed their Little A. They both desired to see the campus climate improve for the Black students on campus. Miss Love’s narrative also exemplifies the emotional rollercoaster or cycle of emotions that Black women often experience as a result of their participation in activism. She began by explaining her disappointment for the lack of change happening. She continued by explaining her fear that things will remain the same. She then moved to hope and positivity for the future, which led her to continue to fight for change on campus. These are typical emotions that activists tend to experience while participating in activism (DeVitis & Sasso, 2019; Mendes & Chang, 2019; Stokes & Miller, 2019).

Honey, M. Angelou, Shernic, and Miss Love, along with several other participants, revealed that they felt it was their responsibility to speak up and to help advance the conversations about issues that affect their community, often placing their family and community needs before their own. Keels (2019) professed that Black students can “cope with the challenges they face when they understand how these challenges are part of a larger struggle against racial-ethnic discrimination” (p. 91). Once they have this understanding, they feel able to advocate for themselves and others and dismantle and change the systems that oppress them.

Learning from Activism. Although the reason that they participated in activism was selfless as their motivation was to care for and improve campus and society for their community, I began to wonder what the participants individually
gained from their experience? To fully conceptualize their experience, the participants needed to understand and articulate what they learned from their experience. During the individual interviews, I asked them what they learned from their activism experience? While each participant gave a different answer, they each learned something about themselves or the process of creating change.

For the participants who indicated that they learned something about themselves, their experience created opportunities for reflection and cognitive dissonance. Their experience also transformed how they thought about the issue, their activism, and themselves as Black women. As M. Angelou (junior, 21) reflected on her experience organizing a protest and being asked to speak at a town hall with her state legislators, she realized that her activism had provided her with several opportunities to do some self-reflection. She asserted:

So I would say you learn a lot about yourself, and I don’t know. I feel like you also go through stages in it too. So if it's like, for example, I do in a protest, at first, like, oh, like, Black Lives Matter. Like you're there, you're participating, you're a little timid. And then in the middle of it, you're like screaming, just screaming, you're shouting, bullhorn, that sort of thing? Totally. It's self-learning progress. And then you also meet new people, and new connections and new resources.

She also revealed that her activism helped her overcome some of her self-doubts as an organizer and taught her how to advocate for herself. Barnhardt (2019) explained that activism is a transformative learning experience as students who participate in activism develop cognitive dissonance, which transforms their way of thinking, allowing them to learn. She asserted “transformative learning is routinely tied to civic virtues, commitments, and actions, as students make sense of rights, freedoms, and responsibilities…students’ activism connects to their collegiate learning experiences
During her individual interview, Cecilia (sophomore, 19) also explained that she learned to redefine her perception of who can be an ally for her and the issues she is fighting to change. She shared:

I learned that you can't necessarily judge a book by its cover because you don't know who agrees with you and who doesn't. And you may think like, Oh, you know, these, these White girls definitely don't agree with what I think because of their privilege, and they don't know. But that may not be the case. They may not understand but be with you and stand with you through everything that You think and fight for change right beside you.

Lastly, Miss Love (junior, 20) explained that her activism taught her about herself as a change agent or advocate. She disclosed that her activism also helped her to learn how to define and comprehend the oppression that she was experiencing. She stated:

I think my decision to participate in activism has opened my eyes more. Because when I was going through high school, it was kind of just like, I was just going through it, and I didn't really hear or catch what people were saying that was not right. And then, when I started getting more involved in activism and talking to people and, you know, listening to their experiences, I started realizing that I was also experiencing some things that were not right. But I couldn't tell because nobody had ever said, Hey, you shouldn't have to experience this. Like, you shouldn't have to take these microaggressions. You shouldn't have to have someone come at you for not speaking, like, Oh my god, like you speak English, and you're from Africa type of thing. Um, so when I came here, I was able to learn more and understand more about what was right and what was not right. … participating in activism, I get so much more informed about the cultures of the world and things that I can say and how to respect other cultures, aside from mine.

Miss Love’s activism experience exposed her to the experiences of those who are from different backgrounds and cultures than hers. These experiences challenged her understanding and created opportunities to learn and grow as a student activist and as a Black woman. Student activists should be able to engage in the process of reflection, critical thinking, and deliberation as they consider multiple perspectives, challenge
one another to think differently, and help them develop new ideas and envision change (Barnhardt, 2019).

In this portion of the chapter, I discussed the collegiate Black women’s perceptions of their activism experience, which I refer to as Big A and Little A. In the next part of this chapter, 4D, I will discuss how collegiate Black women were focused to alter their approaches to activism due to the social unrest and pandemic occurring throughout the nation in 2020.
All of the women in this study talked about their activism as a form of connection, as they were inspired by one another to stand up for change. It was clear the participants were able to make meaning of their experience as they could illustrate how their identity or sense of self connected to their activism, their interpersonal relationships, and their understanding of activism connected with their activism experience. Activism was about identity and community, and as I discussed in the previous parts of this chapter. However, that was all tested when they were forced to rethink how they approach activism in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest of 2020 had a significant impact on how collegiate Black women conceptualized and engaged in activism during this year. The pandemic became a central theme of this study, as the participants discussed navigating the unusual times that 2020 bought. With the unexpected surge of the COVID-19 virus, the civil unrest throughout the country, and the presidential elections, 2020 was an unprecedented year for everyone across the nation. The pandemic caused everyone to change their way of living due to government shutdowns, financial hardships from the increasing unemployment rate, and restrictions that limited social gathering, required spacing, and mandated mask wearing.
Colleges and universities across the nation were also forced to close as the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe, which significantly affected how students participated in activism. Collegiate Black women had to navigate the social unrest and their family responsibilities during this time, which resulted in them changing their approach to activism. Their approach to activism is what I refer to as “pandemic activism,” as collegiate Black women had to manage the health concerns associated with the pandemic, regulate their emotions surrounding the social unrest occurring across the nation, and discover new ways to engage in community and coalition building.

Navigating the Social Unrest

As participants tried to navigate all the changes happening around them due to the COVID-19 virus, racial tensions in the United States hit their all-time high. Although the country was divided along racial lines prior to 2020, it was not until a video surfaced of the killing of George Floyd at the hands of several Minneapolis police officers, followed by a stream of the social media posts and conversations about the unlawful killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery that initiated a wave of protests and marches around the country. These protests and marches took center stage in this study as these were the most recent displays of activism that each participant had taken part in. As we began our second Sista Circle over zoom, the news coverage around the murder of Breonna Taylor had increased again as the grand jury released recordings from their investigation within her case. This year produced a lot of emotions for the participants. As the racial tension on and off campus continued to build, it also continued to cause the participants stress and discomfort. Miss Love
(junior, 20) explained with a lot of emotion, as we all talked about our reaction to the new Breonna Taylor news and the racial tension felt on and off campus:

I think I'm in the media a lot of times, like, they, I don't know, like, a lot of things that are done are kind of like, oh, like, here, we're doing something for you. And, you know, we're, you should know that we care. And then when it comes to the things that actually do matter, like our lives being risked, like everyone backs off, and it's like, wait, but you said you cared. And so I personally for her case, was like, the way it happened around like, like with what happened with George Floyd and it just like, it was heartbreaking because George Floyd was the way he was killed was, it was terrifying too. But the way everything was dismissed, it was kind of dismissed for Breonna, even though it was still unfair and unjust the way she was killed, and no one really paid attention to it. Until like people like black women, like started realizing that really no one cares. And they started, you know, people started making posts on the internet saying, hey, like, we really don't have anybody who cares. And like we should stand up for beyond Breonna and like, kind of back off because nobody else is caring for this. And so I don't know. But it was very discouraging. And I feel like just from the beginning of everything, I didn't in my heart. I felt like nothing was going to happen because it's just the way it is. And no one really cares.

While this quote is long, I include it all because it reveals the struggle for words and meaning that so many of these women experienced. Miss Love’s comment “no one really cares” was filled with pain that all of the women in the circle felt. Several women shook their heads in agreement, and others lowered their heads as if they were thinking. Her sentiments were felt by everyone within our virtual community that day.

As the participants reflected on their experiences from over the summer, Honey (sophomore, 19) chimed in with:

I think like, so I went to some of the protests over the summer. And I do have a compromised immune system. But I saw a video of a woman…she was saying that, like, she's not ready to die. But if she has to die behind her skin, she will. And so like that kind of kind of like driven me, because I'm like, I mean, I have to show up because yeah, comprise me and stuff. But like at the end of the day, if I don't show up for myself, who will. And I feel the same way about the election protest.
She revealed that she was willing to risk her health to protest the racial injustice she and her community was experiencing. This was a new kind of life-or-death decision making around activism. If we do not show up, who will? Honey felt like no one else cared enough about the issue of police brutality to fight for the change.

_I Am Not Okay: The Emotional Rollercoaster_

Despite the health concerns protesting presented, she justified attending the protests as something she needed to do for herself. Within their narratives, both Honey and Miss Love experienced several emotions. Still, they both displayed frustration and disappointment as they felt no one cared about them, their race, or their community. Soul Sista (senior, 20) also shared Honey and Miss Love’s frustration. She reflected on the emotional rollercoaster she experienced during the summer when dealing with the racial tension, COVID-19, and all of the unlawful killings of Black Americans.

She shared that she cried – something she insisted she never does – because she felt everything was just too much for her to deal with emotionally. Soul Sista disclosed:

I think looking towards my future makes me feel like I'm moving towards being an activist more than I am now. I have to say, from my own personal experience, like when George Floyd was happening, I just felt like it was just so much on me.

I think when things kind of, like, kind of, like, upward slope, and then we got to that climax, where things were like, boom, ...And we're still at the climax where things just were dying. And it's [lowering her head]; I remember telling my boyfriend. And I remember I was just talking to him about everything going down because I was like, That's crazy. Like, why am I talking about people that look like me? And people hating me [and] how I look? ...I've known what's been going on with police brutality, but I never, [shaking her head] it wasn't anything that big until recently, I guess, getting to that climax of just seeing so many names. For me, people. Um, it was too much almost, [inaudible as she lowered her head again] I couldn't continue to see, continue to hashtag names anymore, you know, I'm saying I have to do what I can do, I'm not rich, I can't, you know, donate 1000s of dollars but I can you know,
Soul Sista explained feelings that many Black women felt as they watched the news or scrolled through social media platforms. Black women were not only managing the social tension and stress occurring as a result of the social unrest, but also the effects that the pandemic had on the Black community. Black communities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic more than any other race (APM, 2021; Edward & Lopez, 2021). Black Americans were three times more likely to die of COVID-19 than White Americans (APM, 2021). The pandemic also revealed and escalated the economic, educational, and health care inequalities that disadvantaged the Black community. All the women in this second Sista Circle were feeling the weight of this sadness, grief, anger, and fear.

M. Angelou (junior, 21) revealed experiencing nervousness while deciding if she would take part in the protests during the summer. She was unsure of the consequences if she participated in a protest or march. She shared:

And the beginning, just nerve racking. So nerve racking,... But I was like, I was like, Yes, like, let's do this, like, we're gonna do whatever we're doing. And my heart which is like, because, just okay, I feel like the first thing is law enforcement, because everything that's happening, so you'd never know, like, how it's gonna go and how it's gonna flip. And then also, from like, ..., when you go to school,...like, pre K to 12th grade, you're always learning about the civil rights movement, you're always learning back when they spoke up, like people tried to shut them down, and obviously extreme, I feel Like, if somebody's gonna bring out a fire hose on me, ya'll getting out the dogs like, that sort of thing. And you're just like, yes, that happened in the 60s. But now, growing up, it's much more of a possibility for us to regress that way. So I think with that I was just nervous and like, what's gonna happen to me?
Honey (sophomore, 19) also explained that she, too, was nervous about participating in activism due to COVID-19. She reflected on her experience deciding to go protest. She proclaimed:

I am very worried about COVID. But I feel strongly about doing things surrounding the black movement. And so, like, I remember, like, the night before, we were deciding if we were going to do that protest or not. I was nervous, but I was going back and forth with her, we were talking about it, and I guess, like, we kind of like, pumped each other up to do it. So, like, if she hadn't done it, I don't think I would have done it. So.

Each participant’s narratives shared revealed the level of emotions that Black women had to navigate during this time. The participants felt anger, nervousness, sadness, frustration, and fear as they discussed their experiences deciding to engage or disengage in activism while managing their concerns about COVID-19. Their emotional reactions are rooted in the historical and cultural contexts like M. Angelou explained in her narrative – fire hoses, getting out the dogs – and their current perceptions. However, for collegiate Black women who are accustomed to having a community of support on campus (as I discuss in 4B and 4C), this was an even more difficult journey as they were away from campus and away from their community of like-minded peers who could help them process their emotions and validate their feelings. Ke$ha (sophomore, 19) indicated throughout the shutdown, she “found it kind of challenging to feel like a sense of community simply because we were in isolation.” Several of the participants agreed with Ke$ha as they revealed that even though they were home with their families they missed the support of their peers on campus.

*Negotiating Their Family Impact*
The pandemic also presented additional family responsibilities, obligations, and expectations for the collegiate Black women in this study. Each participant also had to find a way to negotiate their families' expectations, commitment, and responsibilities in order to participate in activism as the COVID-19 virus significantly affected the way families operated. Due to the increase in unemployment, financial difficulties many families faced, and college shutdowns, college students were required to help out with more family responsibilities. For collegiate Black women, they had to govern their conflicting feelings around their decision to participate in activism and their need to care for their families or community with their desire to participate in activism, which often resulted in the participants feeling guilty because they viewed their inability to participate as not doing enough activism.

Ke$ha (sophomore, 19) explained that she was unable to participate in the activities happening in her hometown over the summer due to her work responsibilities. She shared:

For me, like with my situation over the summer, I wasn't able to go to anything outside, just because of COVID. And I mentioned before, like, I was taking care of an elderly woman, but I'm, like, prior to the summer prior COVID. I did like participate in marches throughout [New England City] because like the youth activism scene in [my city] is pretty hot. So I would do my best to try to kind of get out there, um, and support, but for the summer, I kind of wasn't like this or that it was just COVID just impacted a lot. I really would have loved to have been out there and supported everyone…, but I just couldn't.

Ke$ha’s narrative showcased the feelings of guilt that are often felt by participants who cannot or choose not to participate in activism. Expectations and assumptions placed upon themselves resulted in the participants feeling guilty about their engagement, especially when they perceive themselves as underperforming or not doing enough to advance the cause they are fighting for. Craddock (2019) post that
activist identity is constructed through a gendered lens which has emotional effects on women activists. She wrote that “negative emotional effects are implicitly gendered. It is argued that the ‘ideal activist’ is male, given how the identity is narrowly defined by doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ type of activism (direct action), which results in women feeling guilt and blaming themselves for their perceived failure to achieve the identity” (p. 138).

M. Angelou (junior, 21) previously discussed her responsibilities and commitment to her family, so getting arrested at the protest was also part of the fear of participating. She laughed as she anticipated her mother’s reaction if she were to get arrested. She shared:

Like, am I gonna get arrested? Like, my mom's not gonna be happy if she has to come down to the station pick me up... No matter if I'm protesting, my mom will leave me there!

M. Angelou explained that she came from a strict household and her mother would not approve of her getting arrested because of her activism. Her commitment to her family made her think twice before participating in activism. Similarly, Shernic (junior, 20), who was thinking about her future, decided not to participate in the traditional forms of activism. She explained that getting arrested was not a consequence she was unwilling to take. Getting arrested would affect her career goals and aspirations of being a part of the FBI. She asserted:

Um, one of the things that held me back this year was that I didn’t want to get arrested. Because, like, I saw videos of them, like arresting people for absolutely no reason. And like, with me being ADJ, I did not want that on my record.
Shernic viewed her career aspirations as a way to assist her family and to continue to make her father, who had passed away, proud. A Black woman’s college experience is not individualistic; it is collective. Since Black women tend to be the caregivers and providers for their family and community, their families and communities have a vested interest in their college success (Collins, 2000b; McDonald, 1997). Getting arrested or any consequence that would impact their family commitments was an option they were not willing to take. Their families' aspirations for them and their future career aspirations, which would assist them in providing for their families, forced many of them to contemplate if they would engage in activism. This was especially true in the summer of 2020.

Additionally, the health and wellness of their family members also caused several of the participants to reconsider their participation in activism. Since Black Americans have the second-highest mortality rate from COVID-19 (APM, 2021), the participants were concerned about catching the virus and passing it to a family or community members with whom they interacted or lived. Soul Sista (senior, 20) explained that she did not participate in any activism over the summer for fear of transmitting COVID-19 to her grandmother, with whom she lived. She stated:

Even though we're in COVID, I only went to two, me and my best friend, just because I live with my grandmother, so I can't do as much as I wanted to. I couldn't go to as many protests...But yeah, it was the climax, it was too much for my mind to just continue to just virtually do things. So I wanted to get out as much as I could.

Now that I'm here in [City of School], I think I would go to more protests because when I'm home, I live with my grandmother, and she's in her 80s. And I like slowed down on protests and didn't go to as many, but I think I would now, and I'm not saying I don't care about my health. But I mean, I think I'd be more present, I think now than I would when I was back home.
M. Angelou (junior, 21) and Jessie (sophomore, 19) also shared that they could not participate in the activism happening over the summer. Not only was M. Angelou fearful of contracting the virus, but due to her financial obligation to her family, she was unable to participate. She shared:

Um, no, I did not. There was some. I think there was like two in Hartford and stuff like that. But because, like, obviously COVID. And everything happening; I had to actually be like the sole breadwinner of my family, so I was working as well because of jobs and everything like that. And then also, I have high risk people in my family.

Jessie also stated that due to her financial obligations to her family that summer, she could not participate as all of the marches and protests seemed to occur while she was working. She stated:

Well, this summer, I was emailing my senators a lot. And my local representatives. It's about COVID. And like, people losing their jobs, stuff like that. And then also about the race issues that were going on. I don't know what else I really did. I couldn't really protest at all this summer. Because I was working every time, it happened.

Like, Jessie and M. Angelou’s several participants discussed their financial commitment to their families during the pandemic. The pandemic was a difficult time financially for most Americans, with the increase in unemployment rates due to shutdowns and stay-at-home orders issued as a result of the spread of the virus. This was an exceptionally hard time for Black Americans as 40% of the low waged position in the United States are held by Black Americans, and these positions were greatly affected by the pandemic (Edwards & Lopez, 2021). According to Edwards and Lopez (2021), since the start of the pandemic, four in ten Black Americans lived in a household where individuals lost a job or their wages.
The majority of the participants in this study indicated that their family responsibilities and commitments caused them to reconsider participating in activism over the summer, which often caused them to feel guilty or that they were not doing enough to support the cause. Although their families were the largest influence in pushing them to participate in activism as I discussed in chapter 4C, they were also the largest factor in deciding if they wanted to or could engage in activism during 2020. A major theme throughout the study was navigating familial relationships and opinions with their fears of disappointing and sacrificing their familial responsibilities and commitments in order to participate in activism.

Social Media: An Oldie But Timely Necessity

Even my mom was like, Oh, no, you're not gonna do it. Even then, I'd like peace out. (laughter) Yeah, my mom, I was like no, I'm like, okay, well, if I can't go, then I am going to use my platform.

Shernic (junior, 20)

This quote from Shernic reveals a key tension that is one of the central findings in this study. The role of the family is absolutely essential to these young, Black women’s understandings of activism and also central to some women’s decisions to abandon or reinvent their participation in activism as well. For Shernic, her obligation to her family pulled her to use an alternative approach to activism. She decided to use her social media platforms to bring awareness to the issues she experienced on and off campus. During the pandemic, social media became a useful and valuable resource for the participants as it provided them with an outlet to express their emotions, helped them develop a sense of belonging amongst their campus community despite their distance, and helped them bring awareness to the social issues that affected their community. Each participant discussed using social media as another form of activism.
or as an alternative to being able to engage in the traditional form of activism due to their fear of contracting COVID-19. I quickly discovered that each participant viewed and used their social media activism differently. Several of the participants used their social media as a way to build community and coalition building with like-minded peers others as a form of resistance. However, the majority used their social media to bring awareness to the issues they were fighting to change.

Ke$ha (sophomore, 19), who was fearful of contracting the virus due to her work commitments, explained that she did not feel a sense of belonging at the beginning of the pandemic since everyone was in isolation. However, she explained that once she started interacting with people over social media, she began to feel more connected. She explained:

But I do feel like, in some ways, I advocate on a more personal level, one on one with other people. And I have incredibly meaningful conversations. And I feel like in that sense, I kind of advocate for myself and for the community, um, through more like one on one or smaller, like group conversations. And I think I can sometimes go along with people telling other people.

Through her social media conversation, Ke$ha built a sense of community by interacting with like-minded peers and activists and was able to see that she was doing something to advance others' awareness despite being unable to physically attend a protest or march. Social media also provided her with an alternative way to engage with the Seaside community and Black community to advocate for the issues she believed in. Halpern (2019) explained, “Social media changed the way we communicated with one another…and the way we maintain relationships” (p. 35). Although social media is not a new tool or approach to activism, in 2020, it was one of the only ways for the participants, who did not feel that they could participate in
activism due to the pandemic, to learn more about the issues happening across the nation and engage with other activists. According to Stornaiuolo & Thomas (2017), student activism has evolved through popular culture and peer networks as students engage in new approaches to activism and coalition building across online and in-person communities. Halpern (2019) argued that social media “altered everything about the way we protest- from how we organize, to the issues we choose to rally around, to the protests themselves” (p. 36).

Like Ke$ha, Shernic and Jessie also revealed that they used social media to gain a sense of community and coalition build; however, they also used it to educate others and themselves and bring awareness to the issues they were experiencing on and off campus. Stornaiuolo & Thomas (2017) explained that students use “digital media in myriad ways to connect with each other, promote social change, and counternarate the world from their perspective” (p. 338). Both Shernic and Jessie discussed using social media to reach their peers at Seaside, especially since they knew they would be using social media as a way for their peers to stay connected to one another while away from campus. Shernic (junior, 20) shared:

Oh, yeah, let me like repost this to bring awareness on social media. Because I know for a fact, these people [Seaside peers] are going to see these things. But to say that I've planned like, a march here, like really, like dug deep into it, I would say that no.

Jessie (sophomore, 19) discussed using social media to build a coalition of like-minded peers during this time; however, she insisted that she was surprised by the lack of support from her peers at Seaside. She expressed her disappointment and frustration in stating:
Well, I was really surprised about how many people didn't speak up, like, over the summer. Like, I know you're seeing the news through social media, because so am I. And they just didn't care about and went about their daily lives….I mean, I didn't like talk to the people. But I was still posting about it, ... I just I don't know; maybe it made me feel stronger, I guess. People did unfollow me. I was really surprised about that, too. I was like, so when I talk about active issues, you don't care. But if I post something stupid, like my food, you'll like it. Like, I don't really understand that. So I guess my viewpoint changed about, I guess, being more conscious of what I post.

Although Ke$ha, Shernic, and Jessie all expressed losing social media followers because of their comments and posts, they all indicated that it did not stop them from posting about the issues that affected them and their community. This displayed their continuous resistance and dedication to fighting for change on and off campus. Their ability to continuously speak up and find creative ways to discuss their issues despite the circumstances also showcases their resiliency. Ke$ha (sophomore, 19) explained that while social media helped her build community, it was also draining to maintain an activist presence all the time, especially in light of so many “haters.” She passionately stated:

I also called out some people over the summer. I got very frustrated over the summer, and a lot of people were posting “rioters are disgusting,” “George Floyd doesn't want this MLK quote”.... although I try to not post too much because, like, my social media, I feel like it's a place for activism. But it's also like a place where I can get away, which is kind of hard to balance out. I'm, I'm constantly posting, and it kind of brings me down

Ke$ha explained that she engaged in conversations with people that she would not have engaged in face-to-face conversation on campus. Even though they were online conversations, they still were often frustrating and contributed to her desire to participate in traditional forms of activism where she could feel closer to like-minded people.
Instead of engaging in conversations, Miss Love (junior, 20) explained that her form of resistance was to *unfollow* people on social media. She explained that social media showed her “who was real.” She stated:

I think where I saw it the most was on blackout Tuesday, where everybody posted like the black screen, like at first. When I heard about it, I was like, okay, like, that's fine. But then everyone, and even people who have never posted about Black Lives Matter, just like started having a black screen on there, you know, Instagram and I was like, Wait, hold on, this does not feel right. You just like, all of a sudden, are going to post this thing. And just say, like, how had passed that blackout Tuesday, hashtag Black Lives Matter. And that like, overtook like, the whole, like Black Lives Matter. And like the, like people are making posts about the protests, like telling people to be careful. And I was like, You really are not even paying attention. You're just doing this because other people are doing it. Otherwise, you would know to post correctly. And so it just like, it was very heartbreaking. And I had to unfollow a lot of people because of that. So I was like now I see where you stand. And maybe I was judging them too much. But I just had the feeling, and I just unfollowed them

Each participant indicated that what they viewed on social media through videos, posts, and conversations compelled them to further engage in traditional forms of activism. According to Stornaiuolo & Thomas (2017), student's participation in online activism often leads to their participation in traditional forms of social activism, such as protests, marches, rallies, & demonstrations on their college campuses.

Additionally, the participants' frustrations, sadness, and disappointment due to their social media activism also contributed to the emotional rollercoaster that activists experience due to their engagement in activism.

The use of social media played a significant role in how collegiate Black women built a community and coalition during the year 2020. Social media allowed them to discover a community of like-minded individuals to fight for change with, have supportive dialogues, and feel as if they were not dealing with the social unrest
and pandemic alone. This virtual space also allowed them to individually discover new and creative ways to approach activism, cope with, and resist the oppression, discrimination, and unwelcoming feelings they felt at Seaside. Although the use of social media to approach activism was not a new concept, the data obtained in this study revealed that the use of social media is a valuable and safe approach to building a community, coalition, and participating in activism during the pandemic.

As a Black woman living in 2020 and working on a college campus, I understood the conflicting feelings many of the participants felt during this time. As I watched things unfold on social media and news outlets, the police brutality, being stuck in quarantine and watching the COVID-19 death numbers increase daily. It just became too much to process, understand, and digest. I found myself needing and yearning to be around people who understood me and the issues affecting my community, those who looked like me and could relate to my feelings of anger, frustrations, sadness, fear, and determination to improve this country. I needed to be around my community; despite my fear of contracting COVID-19 and my family expressing their concern, I went to a Black Lives Matter (BLM) rally. When reflecting on my time at the rally and as I drove home, it felt like my soul began to heal.

Although I took a chance to attend a protest, many collegiate Black women across the country did not feel they could take such a risk. Despite the social unrest occurring across the nation, the participants in this study revealed that the pandemic shaped how they engaged in activism this summer. Many of the participants felt that sacrificing their family commitment, personal and family health, and future aspirations were too great of a risk to take in order to engage in activism. As a result, they turned
to social media as a form of activism and a way to bring awareness to the issues affecting them. Although online activism is viewed by some researchers as requiring little energy, commitment, effort, or risk on behalf of those who engage in the activity (Cabrera et al., 2017; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017), for many Black women activist during 2020, this was the safest and easiest way to organize, build a community or coalition, and bring awareness to the issues they fought to change on and off campus. As a result, many participants reported that their engagement in online activism compelled their desire to participate in the traditional forms of activism happening throughout the summer.

Despite their active engagement in activism on and offline, the participants still felt their activism was small and insignificant compared to well-known activists and were unworthy of the title activist as I discussed in the previous section. Regardless of the size of, how many times they engaged, or the result of their activism, each participant found little way to use their voice to create change at Seaside.
This chapter will discuss the findings presented in Chapter Four (A, B, C, and D) and their implications for practice in higher education. I will also make recommendations for future research and provide the limitations of this study. By using a Sista Circle approach that is dedicated to examining the experiences of Black women, this study was designed to explore the lived experiences of collegiate Black women who engaged in activism. Through the in-depth narratives of 10 women who had actively participated in a traditional form of activism or a student organization with a mission for social change, this study provided insight into these women’s experiences in higher education and their meaning making process. Specifically, this study sought to explore the following overarching research question: How do collegiate Black women make meaning of their student activism experience?

From the participants’ narratives, several themes emerged about the experiences of collegiate Black women, which allowed me to understand the data and further understand how they conceptualize their experiences. The themes presented in Chapter Four allowed me to answer my research questions by discussing the multiple ways in which collegiate Black women experience and respond to oppressive situations, engage in community and coalition building, and perceive their activism experience. The participants made meaning of their activism in college in several distinct ways, which are captured in four main concepts in Chapter Four, including:
1. The cold and unwelcoming campus climate that they experienced significantly affected their experience on campus.

2. They established communities or coalitions on campus to counterbalance the cold and unwelcoming campus climate.

3. Their perception of their activism is different from their actions.

4. The political and sociocultural contexts of 2020 challenged both their perception and reality as activist Black women.

In the following pages, I discuss the research questions and how each of the concepts helped to resolve the questions. Additionally, I compare my findings to prior literature.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In chapter 4A, I show how the experience of pursuing an undergraduate degree can be a challenging experience, especially since collegiate Black women often face campus environments that are toxic, hostile, and unwelcoming (Patton & Croom, 2017; Croom et al., 2017; Bartman, 2015; Fleming, 1983; Zamani, 2003; Porter & Dean, 2015; Hughes & Howard Hamilton, 2003). These environments often made it hard for collegiate Black women to thrive socially and academically. The cold and unwelcoming campus environment also influences their decision to participate in activism (Shaw, 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Croom et al., 2017). The participants of this study experienced the world through their interlocking identities, race, gender, and class.

*Research Question: Meaning Making*
The findings of this study revealed that collegiate Black women made meaning of their experience in several ways, through their sense of self, comparison of their experiences to others, and the reasons they participated in activism. For the Black women in this study, I discovered that their sense of self directly aligned with their understanding of their critical consciousness or double consciousness. The participants revealed that their understanding of themselves could not be achieved without an understanding of how their identity as a Black woman played into their understanding of the inequalities, oppression, and discrimination within the systems they lived in and how this aligned with their need to fight for change. Their double consciousness helped them to understand themselves in relation to others within their communities and family, but also their desire to help change and improve their circumstances. Through their double consciousness, participants understood why they felt they need to participate in activism.

Despite displaying their comprehension of a definition for activism that is achievable for them to obtain, each participant viewed activism as a complex and at times complicated and unachievable task. They viewed their activism as small scale in comparison to others, felt that the label was too powerful as they compared their action to well-known activists, and their activism had not resulted in the large changes they had seen from other activists. Although each of the participants had to engage in activism in order to be a part of the study, they were very adamant that their actions were not worthy of the title activists. As a result of their narratives, I realized that how they perceived themselves and their actions were inconsistent. The inconsistency between their perception and actions, lead me to understand that the participants
conceptualized their activism through a wider and larger lens of activism, which they used to compare their actions to other activists. As a result, the participants deemed being called an activist to be an unachievable title. The juxtaposition between their actions and how they perceived their actions helped to further reveal that collegiate Black women made meaning by comparing themselves to others. This finding is consistent with research that revealed that college students and Black women make meaning through external sources and shared realities (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Porter & Dean, 2015).

**Sub-Question: Articulating the Reasons for Involvement in Activism.**

Furthermore, the participants understood that their reasons for participating in activism directly aligned to their identity as a Black woman and their role within their families and communities. Their understanding also provides further insight into the supplemental question: What reasons do Black women give for wanting to be involved in student activism? Although the participants described the cold and unwelcoming campus climate as being a push for them to engage in activism on campus, they articulated that the largest influence is their need to care for and improve the circumstances for their community on and off campus. Their understanding of why they participate in and their meaning making about their activism aligns with earlier research on Black women and Black women activists that explain that the more Black women witness institutional discrimination and racism against the Black community, the more they engage in activism (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Hope et al., 2016; Lacy & Stewart, 2019; Linder et al., 2020; Lorde, 1984; McDonald, 1997). Many of the participants viewed their activism as caring for their families and communities,
however, they often did not see their actions as activism, but just a tool to survive the
daily oppression that they and their communities faced. This also had a significant
impact on how they perceived themselves as an activist.

Sub-Question: Perceived benefits and challenges for engaging in activism.

The participants’ dissatisfaction with the campus climate and frustrations with their
experience on campus revealed that they sought a community or coalition which led
them to participate in activism. Similar to the literature on campus climates, this
research confirmed that the cold campus climate that Black women experience,
highlighted their need for a community of support, healing, and empowerment, which
is often provided within Sista Circles (Croom et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 1999; Keels,
2019; Porter, 2017; Shaw, 2017). The participants highlighted that their engagement
within the Black women community at Seaside inspired them to continue to
participate in activism, by affirming their voices, and supporting, empowering,
teaching, and inspiring them to use their voice for change on campus.

The participants’ experiences also emphasized their need for and the benefits
of counterspaces on campus that assist them in building a community or coalition
amongst Black women activists. Their Sista Circles allow them to connect to other
Black women on campus and build a sense of community and belonging, but also
allowed them to share their knowledge about the issues that affect the Black
community. Having space on campus for Black women to interact with other Black
women continued to help the participants to articulate and make meaning of their
experiences as college students and as someone engaging in activism.
The findings of this study also provided evidence that the participants described challenges and barriers to engaging in activism. The most significant barrier to their activism was navigating their familial relationships and responsibilities. The participants feared disappointing their families and being unable to contribute to their family’s needs in the future. Additionally, their family’s physical and financial health during the pandemic also impacted their decision to engage in activism during this time. Their familial obligations challenged the participants to reconsider their engagement in activism despite their desire to engage. The conflict between their desire to engage and their family responsibilities often left them feeling guilty that they were not participating.

Their feeling of guilt provides evidence to the second barrier, the global pandemic, which prohibited many of the participants from engaging in activism during the time of the study. The pandemic not only contributed to their feelings of guilt, but also to a number of other feelings. The participants described feeling a rollercoaster of emotions from frustration and disappointment to fear and anger. The participants were able to articulate and acknowledge the benefits and challenges associated with their engagement in activism, which showcased that they had reflected on and made meaning of their experience. Their ability to articulate and understand their engagement in activism, helped to resolve the supplemental question: What are the perceived benefits and challenges for Black female college students who decide to engage in social activism on their college campus or within their community?

**Research Question: Make Meaning During Political and Social Unrest**
Although the question, how do collegiate Black women, participating in activism, make meaning of their experience during political and social unrest or stress, is a supplemental question of this study, it became a central question as it highlighted the state of the nation during the time this study was conducted. This question also further exposed how collegiate Black women understood their activism experience during a time of unrest. The findings of this study suggest that the pandemic changed the way the collegiate Black women who participated in this study engaged in activism during a time of social and political unrest. Due to the health concerns and financial obligations to their families during the pandemic, the participants felt that engaging in online activism was the only way they could safely organize, build a community or coalition, and bring awareness to the issues they fought to change.

Earlier research on student activism suggested that students’ engagement in online activism led to their engagement in traditional forms of activism (Cabrera et al., 2017; Miller & Tolliver, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). This was the case for the participants as the pandemic changed their approach but did not change their desire to engage in activism. Each participant developed new and creative ways to engage in activism during the pandemic, such as email writing and calling campaigns, buy Black initiatives, social media posts, and direct message conversations. However, the findings revealed that even though the participants understood the health concerns the pandemic presented, it caused them to question their involvement in activism. They continued to feel a need and responsibility to participate in the social and political unrest occurring and their desire to participate in activism led several of them to engage in traditional forms of activism. The self-awareness, consciousness,
acknowledgment, and reflections that each participant exuded revealed they had processed their decision, and understood and interpreted the consequences, reasoning, and assumed benefits to engaging in activism during this time.

**The Question of Class Oppression**

The findings of this study centered on racial and gender oppression as these were the two main focuses of the participants. As the chart on page 99 revealed, the participants came from different social economic backgrounds, which helped to shape how they viewed and saw the world and higher education. However, when they attended the Sista Circles and gathered as a group, their social class was no longer a focal point for them as everyone within the space were the “same” -- Black women. No matter what social class they were a part of, they all experienced the racial and gender oppression, injustices, and discrimination of being Black and a woman within the society and at Seaside. This commonality is what bought them together to share survival stories, empower each other to persist, and support one another to resist the hostile campus climate. Collins (2000) stated, “diversity among U.S. Blacks in the historical and contemporary contours of intersecting oppressions of race and class does not erase the fundamental relationship of injustice. This unjust context has affected U.S. Blacks as a group” (p.48-49).

Although the structure of Sista Circles has an anti-capitalist approach and their resistance to dismantling systems is also an anti-capitalist standpoint, the participants did not directly discuss their efforts as anti-capitalist. They discussed wanting to change the circumstances for their families. These circumstances were the racial injustice, discrimination, inequality, financial situations, or feeling of comfort and
safety while operating within sociality. However, as they continue to discuss their experiences, the participants also shared that they just wanted to be treated the same as their White peers and to feel a part of the Seaside community. Their desire to be a part of the system revealed that they were not fully committed to anti-capitalism as they wanted to be a part of society, the system of higher education, and treated and viewed as their White counterparts. This may reveal that Black women are multifaceted in their standpoint or that these collegiate Black women are still learning and developing their views and ideologies on society, systems, and oppression as college is ideal space for identity exploration. However, a few things were certain: these women understood they were being treated differently based on their race and gender and they wanted it to change; they want to be active participants within the higher education system as their education would assist in changing the circumstances of their family; and they want the Seaside community to accept and treat them the same as everyone else.

**Limitations**

Although this study adds to a gap within the research about racial and gender differences associated with student activism and provides Black women activists a voice within academic scholarship, this research is not without limitations. The first limitation is transferability. As in most qualitative studies, the data generally depicts the student experience at a predominantly White institution in New England. Based on the data in this study, it is hard to determine if the findings will be transferable to other college campuses, such as community colleges, minority-serving institutions, or schools in other geographical regions. In addition to the type of university and location, it is unclear if the findings are transferable to different genders and/or races.
While the site of this study provides insight into the experiences of Black women students who are enrolled in a campus with a small population of Black students, a college with a more diverse study body may produce different results. This is also an area for future research.

Due to COVID-19, I was limited to using virtual modes of communication to recruit participants and hold Sista Circle sessions which provided different limitations to the study. In the recruitment process, I sent several emails to request participants. However, during this time, the primary source of communication between the various institutional entities and the students was email. Unfortunately, several participants did not receive my email about the study, and I am unsure if student organization presidents pass along the information to their members. This revealed a limitation within the recruitment process. The recruitment was limited by others' willingness to share the information and being restricted to one mode of communication to disseminate information about the study. This limitation further reduces the transferability of the findings.

The following limitation is related to data collection. Virtual platforms were the prominent method of gathering and learning during this time and were the venue for the Sista Circles. Despite the many technical difficulties that occurred with virtual platforms when collecting data, zoom fatigue was a huge threat to the study and reveals another area for future research. Although only one participant indicated that they did not finish the study due to their zoom fatigue, other participants, who missed a session, discussed being “over it” when referencing virtual learning. The use of the virtual platform to host the Sista Circles further reveals a limitation during the data
collection phase of the study. A Sista Circle aims to provide a space for Black women to gather in a comfortable and natural setting. The virtual platform provides them with a space to gather; however, it does not allow true fellowship. Unfortunately, the natural mode of communication (e.g., back and forward banter, nonverbal communication, and call and response) that occurred between Black women was limited within the sessions causing the sessions, at times, to feel forced and inauthentic in comparison to in-person gatherings.

The last limitation relates to the application of Sista Circle as the methodology and method in this study. Sista Circle methodology is a new methodological approach that allows Black women researchers a tool to study Black women subjects. It also serves as an instrument for thinking about Black women as their own unique group that should be researched and how womanism and critical race perspectives intersect to develop their experiences within research. However, since this methodology is new, there is not a blueprint or formal approach for applying Sista Circle methodology in research. The lack of consensus impacted my study in several ways. First, the design of my study was impacted as there is not a clear separation between Sista Circles as both the methodology and method.

Additionally, it is unclear if Sista Circles is the correct or preferred method to use with the methodology. When developing protocols and processes for the Sista Circle sessions, I used focus group protocols, as this method closely resembles a Sista Circle. My research questions align more with a phenomenological approach, however, Sista Circle methodology or method does not seem to align with phenomenological practices. It was unclear when using this research approach how
questions should be tailored. Lastly, when analyzing data, Sista Circle methodology fails to provide an appropriate method for analyzing data. After much research, I chose to use a constant comparison method as this is a commonly used method for analyzing qualitative research. It is unclear if another method would have resulted in different results from the data. The development of the Sista Circle methodological approach is an area for continued research as identity-based research approaches such as this one is needed.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Related to the findings of this study, I make the following additional recommendations to institutions of higher education that would contribute to a more inclusive campus environment and ensure that support is provided to collegiate Black women who engage in activism and resistance.

**Policies**

As the demographics of higher education change, political opinions continue to develop, and unwelcoming campus climates perpetuate the oppression of Black women, higher education will continue to see an increase in student activism on their campus. Policymakers, practitioners, and administration will be forced to transform their policies and practices to ensure all their students’ success, especially for those underrepresented on their campus. Often college policymakers, practitioners, and administrators fail to understand the complex realities of collegiate Black women and why they engage in forms of resistance and activism, which leaves Black collegiate women at a disadvantage and feeling as if their experiences are invisible, and voices are unheard. When developing student speech and protest policies on their campus,
policymakers, practitioners, and administrators should be aware of the implications and restrictions that these policies could have on collegiate Black women’s retention but most importantly their engagement in activism. As this study revealed, their fear of damaging future educational and career opportunities that could assist their families often prevented collegiate Black women from engaging in activism. However, they view their engagement in activism as an obligation and form of survival. As a result, the speech and protest policies on campus should support their engagement in activism, teach them about the appropriate methods of activism, and not deter their activism on campus for fear of arrest or code of conduct violations.

Additionally, as this study revealed, collegiate Black women in predominantly White institutions tend to feel unheard and unsupported. Policymakers, practitioners, and administration should develop student centered approaches to developing policies where students have a voice, and their issues are taken seriously and into consideration. To accomplish this, policymakers, practitioners, and administration need to actively engage in dialogue with these students by listening, being open to change, and receiving feedback from students about their experience with marginalization and oppression on campuses. This will be the first step in developing an inclusive campus climate that feels welcoming, supportive, and warm for Black women, which will assist in their retention and engagement on campus.

Equally, faculty members must change their curriculum to provide opportunities for learning about how social change happens within society (both historically and presently). Instead of continuing to focus on the teachings of elite White men activists, faculty should develop a curriculum that also centers on the
experiences and history of Black women activists. By providing opportunities for learning about those who created social change, collegiate Black women will be able to see themselves as change agents and will be encouraged to take action with their community.

**Practice**

In addition to policies, programs and spaces that attend to the unique concerns and needs of Black women are essential to the retention of this population. The results of this study revealed that programs and counterspaces that allow Black women to gather and be their authentic selves are beneficial to their success on campus and allow them to further engage in resistance and activism. Formal and informal spaces, like Sista Circles, are needed on predominantly White campuses to counterbalance the cold and unwelcoming campus climate. Counterspaces allow Black women the opportunity to talk about their experience with oppression and discrimination on campus, reflect on their experiences, and combat their feelings of isolation, marginalization, invisibility, and devaluing are needed to assist in their retention and engagement.

Additionally, space that allows students to build relationships, develop a mutual understanding, and take collective action on topics of interest is also needed on campus. As this study disclosed, for Black women, these spaces can be the same as they tend to coalition build within their communities or Sista Circles. These spaces are also an ideal setting for Black women activists to begin to understand and explore their activist identity. By developing and maintaining programs that attend to the needs of Black women on campus, predominantly White campuses can begin to create
a substantive presence for Black women and help in creating an environment that is inclusive for all.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study will add to the vast and growing bodies of scholarship centering the lived experiences of collegiate Black women and continue to position Sista Circle methodology as a prominent research tool for researching Black women. Although the scholarship on collegiate Black women has grown over the last decade, more research is needed to understand the lived experiences of collegiate Black women and their participation in student activism.

Collegiate Black women, throughout history, have used student-led activism as a way to raise awareness on issues that affect the Black community on and off campus. However, the literature on activism has centered the experiences of White collegiate students. The literature failed to understand how racial and gender identity shapes and influences a students’ decision to engage in activism and how these facets of their identity affect the outcomes of their activism experience. Additionally, previous research on activism, that centered the experiences of White collegiate students, has discussed the leadership outcomes and educational benefits associated with their engagement with activism. However, little has been documented in existing literature regarding the leadership outcomes for collegiate Black women activists or whether the skills they obtain through their leadership within their coalition or activism prepared them for life after college. Further research that investigates the leadership skills obtained by collegiate Black women activists and how these skills have assisted with their educational and career aspirations is needed.
Although this study aims to address a gap in the scholarship surrounding collegiate Black women’s involvement in activism, further research is needed on how this form of student engagement contributes to their social and academic success and retention while in college. Specifically, further research could explore how generational trauma, their understanding of wellness, and battle fatigue contribute to their educational success and mental health. Given that this study focused on collegiate Black women, it would also be interesting to further investigate how Black women administrators deal with battle fatigue after having to assist or manage student activism at predominantly White institutions.

Lastly, this study revealed the significant impact that the events of 2020 had on activism. The year 2020 was filled with trauma, fatigue, financial hardship, and health concerns that collegiate Black women were forced to negotiate while managing their academic requirements. Further exploration is needed on the impact that the events of 2020 had on learning, engagement, and the success of collegiate Black women. Additionally, due to the events of 2020, this study further confirmed the use of social media as a platform for activism. As the future and facets of activism is continuing to change and social media is being used as a form of activism, additional investigation is needed to redefine and examine the title of activist, what constitutes student-led activism, and how social movements are created.

**Conclusion**

Although the findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the experiences of collegiate Black women at predominantly White Institutions, it confirmed the unique challenges that Black women experience deciding to and while
engaging in student-led activism. Improving our knowledge about why collegiate Black women engage in activism and the complexities of their campus experience is important to developing a comprehensive strategy to increase their retention and engagement on campus. Given the range of reasons that Black women participate in activism, this study also revealed that Black women who enroll in predominantly White institutions need a space on campus to develop a coalition and to take collective action.

By conducting the Sista Circles, I created a space for Black women to gather as a community and engage in supportive, affirming, and empowering dialogue. Using Sista Circle as the methodological approach allowed me to engage within this study as both a researcher and participant. As a sista within the circle, I engaged in individual reflections about my experiences, I was pushed to question my ideologies, and engage in critical thinking about what it means to be Black women and activists. This space also allowed me to continue to forge meaningful relationships with my participants and created a space for each of us to come together, share our stories, and listen as we examined and redefined our experiences as Black women within the system of higher education. This space allowed us to retain each other.

In conclusion, while there are many factors that impact collegiate Black women’s engagement in activism, there is still much that higher education institutions need to learn and devote attention toward when considering the climate and engagement on their campuses and Black women’s engagement in activism. Despite their challenges, while enrolled in institutions of higher education, for centuries Black women have resisted, persisted, and overcame the challenges that the higher education
system presented them. Through their activism journey, they have been able to positively create change and continue to fight to dismantle the systems that oppress them and their community.

bell hooks (2015) ended her book, *Ain’t I a Women*, with a quote that sums up the journey of Black women and their goal for liberation. She writes, “We, Black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are clearing a path for ourselves and our sisters” (p. 196). I end this dissertation with that same quote. I hope this body of work continues to clear paths for Black women activists and scholars. May this scholarship ignite other Black women to continue their fight for change and liberation and that they continue to understand that their collective voices help to create change. Your work, scholarship, efforts, and the fight will not go unvalued, unheard, or unseen because I See You!
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Definition of Terms

Due to the numerous definitions and perspectives on terms used to inform this research, the context behind the term and constructs used in this study are provided. All terms are defined according to their application in the study.

Black Feminist Thought- a critical social theory that documents the lived experiences of Black women by encompassing bodies of knowledge and practices that Black women face when placed within situations of injustice; “encompasses general knowledge that helps Black women survive in, cope with, and resist” their injustices and differences (Collins, 2000, p. 31)

Black women- a person of color in the United States who identifies as Black, African American, African, Caribbean or mixed race and who also identifies as female, as a result of their identities experience oppression and discrimination

Critical consciousness- the process that individuals understand their oppression and take individual or collective action to address inequalities (Hope et al., 2016), measured by one’s ability to understand and articulate how their sense of self-aligns with the social change for which they are advocating

Coalition- an alliance of people or two or more social movement organizations working together for a common cause or to achieve a goal (Diani & Bison, 2004; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001)
Community- the fellowship amongst a group of people living in the same place or having the same characteristics in common (Strayhorn, 2012; Keels & Velez, 2019)

Counterspace- exclusionary spaces where those of a similar social identity gather to validate and critique their experiences with the larger institution (Keels, 2019)

Double consciousness- the notion that Blacks in the United States have to navigating two selves; 1) in reference to the White American norms and 2) in reference to being Black (DuBois); Black women live in a constant of moving between the 2 norms (Winkle-Wanger, 2009)

Interlocking identities- when two identities function mutually dependent or engage with each other by fitting together so that they act as synchronized; to interweave or interlace (hooks, 2015)

Oppression- “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Collins, 2000)

Outsider Within- the boundaries between groups of unequal power; individuals who found themselves in marginalized locations between groups of varying power (Collins, 1998)

Resistance- a black women’s refusal to accept, comply with or withstand oppression; the power of resisting

Sense of self- the development of a greater understanding of one’s beliefs about one’s
self in relation to social groups and the way one interacts within this group, measured by one’s ability to articulate how their identity, perspective, and values fit into activism (Baxter Magolda, 2001)

Sista Circles- spaces that have been constructed by Black women to help them respond to the racist and sexist discrimination, alienation, and isolation they experience on campus and within society

Student Activism- the way students personalize, contextualize, and make sense of what it means to work towards social change by actively participating in protests, marches, online campaigns, rallies, demonstrations & student organizations with an activist mission and focus on bringing about change in attitudes, understanding, behavior, and systems on campus

Woke- to be aware of issues that concern social justice or racial justice or to continue to gain awareness on issues in pursuit of change (Halewood, 2019)
CONSENT DOCUMENT
Rhode Island College

I See You!: The Experiences and Liberation of Black Women Engaged in Student Activism

You are invited to be part of the study entitled I See You!: The Experiences and Liberation of Black Women Engaged in Student Activism. This research hopes to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of collegiate Black women who participate in activism. I am asking you to participate in this research because you fit the criteria. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary.

Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you critical information about the study to aid you in deciding whether or not you would like to participate. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Chiquita Baylor, a graduate student in the Department of Education at Rhode Island College, is conducting this research in collaboration with the faculty advisor Dr. Lesley Bogad, a professor at Rhode Island College.

Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose(s))

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of collegiate Black women participating in activism the benefits and challenges of their participation, and how they make meaning of their college goals. For this study you must identify as an undergraduate Black women who has actively participated in or organized at least one form of activism (march, protest, boycotts, sit-ins, rally or demonstration) and/or at least one year actively participating in an organization on campus or within their community with a mission of social change. This study could also help the university make changes that assist in the recruitment, retention and engagement of Black women. With this goal in mind, the results of this study, with pseudonyms and aforementioned confidentiality measures in place, will be shared with the university administration to assist in the development of campus wide initiatives.

What You Will Have to Do (Procedures)
If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to:

- First, answer several survey questions. The questions ask for basic information about yourself, your family, and your level of participation in activism. This will take about 10-15 minutes.
- Participate in three bi-weekly audiotaped and videotaped 60-90 minute group talks (called Sista Circles), which focuses on your experience participating in activism.
- Take part in a 60-90 minute audiotaped follow up interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- Last, students will be asked to review the information they provided during the study to ensure accuracy.

**Risks and Discomforts**

The study does not have any explicit known or potential risks to you. However, if any information reported that violates the student code of conduct (e.g. self-harm, harm to others, harassment, hate incidents, & sexual misconduct), it is my duty as a mandated reporter to report this information which would break the confidentiality implied otherwise. Any information revealed in the Sista Circles that does not explicitly violate the Code of Conduct will be confidential. Any subsequent documentation of the research will use pseudonyms to further protect your confidentiality. While participants are asked not to share others’ experiences or stories with individuals who were not a part of the circle, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because there is always a chance that a participant would violate this expectation.

At any time during the interviews or group talks, you may choose not to answer any questions that you are uncomfortable addressing, or you may find upsetting. We think it would be similar to the kinds of things you talk about with family and friends. You may stop or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences. Your decision to participate or not will in no way affect your student organization’s standing, ability to procure funding, conduct a protest, etc. on campus. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings or about problems that you’re having, you can contact [salve_regina_university_counseling_services](mailto:counselingservies@salve.edu).

**Benefits of Being in the Study**

Being in this study will not benefit you directly.

**Alternative Procedures**

This study does not involve any experimental treatment, therapy, or intervention.

**You Will Be Paid (Compensation)**

As a way to thank you for your time, you will receive a $15 gift card upon completion of the study.
Deciding Whether to Be in the Study

Being in the study is your choice to make. Nobody can force you to be in the study. You can choose not to be in the study, and nobody will hold it against you. You can change your mind and quit the study at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to quit later, nobody will hold it against you.

How Your Information will be Protected

The data collected in this study will be coded to protect your confidentiality. The researcher will utilize pseudonyms to describe participants and the school in which you attend in order to maintain confidentiality. Participant’s privacy will be protected by the use of coding in the data collection and transcription phases. Additionally, data collected will be stored on a password protected computer until it can be transferred to an external storage device (i.e. USB drive, external hard drive). Once transferred, these external storage devices will remain locked and in the possession of the researcher. The information will only be seen by myself and other researchers who work with me. The only time I would have to share information from the study is if it is subpoenaed by a court, if you are suspected of harming yourself or others, or if you violate the student code of conduct (e.g. harassment, hate incidents, & sexual misconduct.) In these cases, I would have to report it to the appropriate authorities because I am deemed a mandated reporter as a result of my campus position. Otherwise, all data will be used in ways that protect your confidentiality. Also, if there are problems with the study, the records may be viewed by the Rhode Island College review board responsible for protecting the rights and safety of people who participate in research. The information will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study is over, after which it will be destroyed.

Audio/Video Recording

The researcher will audio-record the interview and video-record the group talks for the purposes of later transcription and use in documenting results of the study. All recorded and written data will be secured in the researcher’s locked office and will be password protected on her computer. Upon completion of the research, the data will be coded to avoid any individually identifiable information. The recordings will be archived after transcription and destroyed within a minimum of three years after the study is over.

Please provide initials below if you agree to be audiotaped/videotaped during meetings. Information from these recordings may be used in future publications. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to be recorded during meetings.

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<thead>
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<th>Audio Recorded</th>
<th>How I prefer to meet in the fall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to be ___ during the interview and group talks.</td>
<td></td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I am willing to be ___ during the interview and group talks.

| On Webex |

**Who to Contact**

You can ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you can contact Chiquita Baylor at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Lesley Bogad at [redacted] or [redacted].

If you think you were treated badly in this study, have complaints, or would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about your rights or safety as a research participant, please contact the IRB Chair at IRB@ric.edu.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the information above. I am choosing to be in the study I See You!: The Experiences and Liberation of Black Women Engaged in Student Activism. I can change my mind and quit at any time, and I don’t have to give a reason. I have been given answers to the questions I asked, or I will contact the researcher with any questions that come up later. I am at least 18 years of age.

Print Name of Participant: ____________________________________________

Signature of Participant: ___________________________ Date: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: __________________________________
APPENDIX C

Qualification Survey

Q1 Thank you for your interest in participating in the I See You!: The Experiences and Liberation of Black Women Engaged in Student Activism study. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study that investigates the experiences of collegiate Black women who participate in activism, the benefits and challenges of their participation, and how they make meaning of their college goals.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will include answering a 5-10 minute survey about yourself, family background and your involvement in activism, three 60-90 minute Sista Circles with other Black women that focuses on your experiences in activism, a 60-90 minute follow up interview and a transcript review and review of the findings. As a way to thank you for your time, you will receive a $15 gift card upon completion of the study.

To be eligible, you must identify as a Black woman be an undergraduate student at Salve Regina University have actively participated in or organized at least one form of activism (protests, sit-ins, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, writing campaign, & rallies) and/or at least one year actively participating in an organization (on or off campus) with a mission of social change (example, but not limited to, BSU, FEO, MSO, NAACP, Youth Activism Project, ARISE, PrYSM, PSU, Black Lives Matter committees, etc.)

To see if you are eligible to participate, please indicate below that you are interested and complete the 5-question online survey. If you are eligible after completing these questions, you will be contacted via your Seaside email address with more information about the study.

Click the circle below to acknowledge you are interested in participating in the study.

☐ Yes, I am interested in participating in the I See You!: The Experiences and Liberation of Black Women Engaged in Student Activism research study. (1)

Q2 Name: (First and Last Name)
Q3 Preferred Email Address

Q4 Are you currently employed as a student employee by the Office of Student Engagement?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5 Do you identify as a Black Women?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q6 Are you enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at Seaside?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q7 Have you actively participated in or organized at least one form of activism (protests, sit ins, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, writing campaign, & rallies) and/or at least one year actively participating in an organization (on or off campus) with a mission of social change?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Other (3)
Q8 This fall, I will be

○ On campus taking classes in person (In [redacted]) (1)

○ Taking classes virtually from home (Not in [redacted]) (2)
Q1 The information in this survey is used to provide background information about you and your experience. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of collegiate Black women who participate in activism the benefits and challenges of their participation, and how they make meaning of their college goals.

This survey will take you 5-10 minutes to complete. All the information you provided is completely confidential and will be used only for this research. Thank you for your participation in this study.

*Student activism for this survey includes protests, sit ins, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, rallies, or a student organization with a mission of social change. You must have actively participated or organized at least one form of activism (march, protest, rally or demonstration) and/or at least 1 years actively participating in an organization on campus or within their community with a mission of social change to be part of this study.

If you have question after completing the survey, please contact Chiquita Baylor, who is the primary researcher, at chiquita.baylor@salve.edu or 401.341.2915 or Dr. Lesley Bogad at lbogad@ric.edu or 401.456.8018.

I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older, have read and understand the information contain on this page and am voluntarily in the study.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q2 Name: *(First and Last Name)*

Q3 What is your college classification?

☐ First Year (1)
Q4 Please indicate your age

Q5 What is the highest level of education obtained by your parents/guardians? (College degree must be obtained within a United States system)

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Some graduate school (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6 What does the word activism mean to you?
Q7 Which have you participated in: (check all that apply)

☐ Marches (1)
☐ Rally (2)
☐ Protests (3)
☐ Email/ Letter Writing Campaign (4)
☐ Demonstrations (5)
☐ Sit-ins/ occupying space (6)
☐ Boycott/buycott (7)
☐ Member of Student Organization with a social change mission (8)
Q8 How many times have you participated in one of the above forms of activism (on or off campus) while enrolled at Seaside?

- 0 (1)
- 1-2 (2)
- 3-4 (3)
- 5-6 (4)
- 7-8 (5)
- 9-10 (6)
- 11+ (7)

Q9 How many hours per week do you spend on organizing or participating in student activism activities?

- 0 (1)
- 1-4 (2)
- 5-9 (3)
- 10-14 (4)
- 15+ (5)
Q10 How would you best identify your family’s annual income?

- Under $25,000 (1)
- $25,000 - $49,999 (2)
- $50,000 - $74,999 (3)
- $75,000 - $99,999 (4)
- $100,000 - $124,999 (5)
- $125,000 - $149,999 (6)
- $150,000 - $174,999 (7)
- $175,000 - $199,999 (8)
- $200,000 - $249,999 (9)
- $250,000 - $299,999 (10)
- $300,000 or more (11)
- prefer not to disclose (12)
APPENDIX E

Sista Circle Protocol & Questions

Introductions

Why I am doing this study

Sista Circle Questions and Protocol
Thank you for participating in the Sista Circles. The purpose of this study is to explore Black women’s experiences participating in student activism. To keep these sessions as confidential as possible, I ask that you do not share other people’s experiences or stories with individuals who are not a part of the circle. When speaking, please use your own experiences. I would also like to remind you that I am a university employee and issues of concern raised during these sessions, I will have to report to the university.

I expect that each Sista Circle will last roughly 90 minutes. It should be a good time. As these sessions are designed for us to learn from each other and to talk openly about our experiences as Black women.

I have received your consent to audiotape and videotape these session, but I wanted to remind you that I will be recording each session. The information will only be heard by myself and other researchers who work with me. If at any time you decide you do not want to continue with the study, please let me know. If you would not prefer to answer a question or feel uncomfortable addressing a question, you may choose not to answer.

Reminder that student activism for this survey includes protests, sit ins, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, rallies, or a student organization with a mission of social change.

Opening Questions

1. Discuss your experiences at Seaside thus far?

2. Describe how your experiences thus far has inspired your involvement on campus?

3. Have you experienced any discrimination or racism on campus? What happened?

4. How would you describe the racial climate on your campus?

Activism
5. Discuss your experiences with activism prior to coming to Seaside.

6. Discuss your experience with activism while at Seaside.

7. Do you consider yourself an activist?

8. What influenced you to become an activist?

9. Describe what you have learned from your experience participating in activism?

10. Describe how your experience participating in activism has changed since your first time participating?

   **Sista Circle #2**

1. Brianna Taylor- say her name

2. Tell me about your participation in marches on and off campus

3. What influenced you to participate in the march/protest/boycott/demonstration/student organization?

4. How did you feel while participating

5. How did you feel after participating

6. Describe what you have learned from your experience participating in activism?

7. All of you last time indicated that you wouldn’t define yourself as an activist, do you feel society or other influences say they aren’t?

8. Can you define activism

9. Describe how your experience participating in activism has changed since your first time participating?

10. What do you feel an activist needs to be successful?

11. What is it that they need from admin on campus to continue to participate in activism and to be successful in college?
12. Many of your mentioned posting on social media, do you believe this is a form of activism?

13. What are your thoughts on why you post on social media?

**Sista Circle #3 Questions**

Opening questions

1. Let’s start by discussing the Newspaper article: How did you feel about the article and what [Student’s name] had to say?

2. Last session we talked about being woke? Do you have to be woke to be an activist?

3. The election is approaching what do you think about Kamala Harris?

4. If I say November 3, 2020, what does that mean to you?


Educational Goals

11. Has your identity shaped your experience in the classroom?

12. Has your involvement in activism influenced your academic choices?

13. Has activism played a role in your college experience in the classroom? How?

14. Has your activism helped you to become a successful student? Why or why not?

15. Do you think your educational experiences would be different if you were not involved in activism?

General Questions

16. Are there any influences that shape your identity outside of your family?

17. Are there organizations or particular experiences that sparked your interest in being an activist?

18. Has this experience been beneficial to you?
19. Have these experiences shaped your relationship with other women in the group?

Will it be helpful to have a Sista Circle after the election?
APPENDIX F

Interview Questions & Protocol

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to explore Black women’s experiences participating in student activism. The information that you provide today is confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in the study. I would also like to remind you that I am a university employee and issues of concern raised during this session, I will have to report to the university.

I expect today’s interview to last for about an hour, however, please do not feel you have to rush. I have received your consent to audiotape this interview, but I wanted to remind you that I am recording this interview. The information will only be seen by myself and other researchers who work with me. If at any time you decide you do not want to continue with the interview or if you would not prefer to answer a question, please let me know.

Reminder that student activism for this survey includes protests, sit ins, boycotts, demonstrations, marches, rallies, or a student organization with a mission of social change.

Do you have any questions before we get started with the interview?

Name:
Major:
Class Year:

Interview:

1. Tell me about a time you participated in activism (protests, demonstrations, marches or a student organization with a mission of social change).

2. Describe what lead you to participate in activism?

3. Does your family participate in activism? If so, how has that impacted your experience with activism?

4. What is your first activism experience?

5. Discuss your understanding of activism.

6. Describe your thoughts on the 2020 election.

7. Tell me how your decision to participate in student activism has impacted your experience at Seaside University?
8. Tell me how you were feeling and what you were thinking during your activism experience and later, when you look back on the experience?

9. Describe what you have learned from your experience participating in activism?

10. Are there any factors or experiences throughout your life that influenced your activism?

11. Describe how your experience participating in activism has changed since your first time participating.

12. Is there anything else that I did not ask you that would like to add?

13. Is there anything that held you back or restricted your participation in activism?

14. Black Skin tone in the Black women community
## Appendix G

### Coding Guide

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Descriptors: deductive codes</th>
<th>Main Themes: axial codes</th>
<th>Categories: selective code</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stay on Group</td>
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<td>Black Women Problems</td>
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