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Negotiating University, Fulfilling the Dream: The Case of Black Students

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Abstract: The experiences of Black students in Canadian higher education shed light on the societal and institutional challenges that influence their social and economic aspirations. In today's societal and economic context, obtaining a postsecondary education degree is not just preferred but essential for securing the employment opportunities that most young people desire. For Black communities in particular, a university degree is often seen as the primary pathway to upward social mobility. However, Black students' journeys toward higher education are frequently hindered by systemic barriers and institutional challenges. While there is extensive literature detailing the systemic forces that obstruct access to higher education for Black Canadians, there is limited academic focus on how these forces continue to affect Black students once they enter higher education. This article addresses this gap by investigating the educational experiences of Black students in Canadian universities, emphasizing the challenges posed by systemic racism and institutional barriers. Utilizing data from interviews and focus groups with Black undergraduate and graduate students from a university in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the study explores how historical and contemporary issues of anti-Black racism shape their academic journeys. It discusses the broader implications of these experiences and highlights the need for comprehensive institutional reforms to create genuinely inclusive and equitable educational environments. By centering the voices of Black students, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing dialog on racial equity in higher education.

Keywords: race; anti-blackness; university; education; Canada; higher education; student; postsecondary; systemic racism

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1. Introduction: Being Black in University

In the aftermath of the protests pertaining to anti-Black racism in the summer of 2020, triggered by the tragic murder of George Floyd in the United States, numerous corporations, governmental bodies, and educational institutions pledged to address this fount of anti-Blackness within their respective domains. To this end, institutions such as universities have launched initiatives in areas such as admission, scholarship, and postdoctoral programs to ensure a diverse student body; cluster hires to obtain a diverse composition of faculty members—particularly Black and Indigenous; and implicit/unconscious bias[1] training so that faculty and staff might be sensitized to their attitudes and behaviors that produce the discriminatory problems that need to be addressed (James 2023; Lewis and Shah 2021). But the fact is that the experiences of Black people in Canada are deeply rooted in the legacies of colonialism as represented in slavery, segregation, hostility, and inequities (Backhouse 1999; Henry and Tator 2006; Jean-Pierre and James 2020; Maynard 2017). These deeply ingrained historical legacies have informed—and continue to inform—the kinds of institutional barriers which have an impact on Black life in Canada in particular ways—such as in housing (Haan et al. 2023; Simone and Walks 2019), employment (Teelucksingh and Galabuzi 2005), education (Codjoe 2001; Darchinian et al. 2021; James 2012; Petherick 2018), and the criminal justice system (Owusu-Bempah et al. 2023; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011).

In the area of schooling and education, research has shown that the underfunding of educational institutions (from kindergarten to postsecondary), high school streaming policies and practices, and the construction of students' capacity to be high educational achievers (Howard and Smith 2011; Parekh et al. 2011) have all played a role in creating barriers in the education of Black students and impeded their access to schooling, academic performance, and educational pursuits (Codjoe 2001; James 2012; Sefa Dei and James 1998; Sium 2014). Therefore, in the context of the pledges and initiatives to address anti-Black racism and establish more equitable and inclusive postsecondary environments, it is necessary to devote attention to how the legacy of anti-Blackness—from elementary through secondary to postsecondary—as structured in and perpetuated by the Canadian educational system has contributed to Black students' access to and journeying through educational institutions. In this article, we explore the experiences of Black students as they journey though university, noting how in their pursuit of a postsecondary education degree they view their experiences and navigate the implicit, explicit, and systemic forms of racism they encounter in their bid to achieve the academic goals to which they aspire.

2. Theoretical Scaffolds: Ani-Black Racism and Black Historical Consciousness

At a time when institutions have promised to address the low participation and poor educational success of Black and Indigenous students, this good intention, premised on their neoliberal ethos of individualism, tends to leave untouched the policies, programs, and practices of an institution, thereby promoting, according to King (2020), "a non-controversial, palatable, and whitewashed discourse that maintains the status quo and interferes with truly improving" (p. 335) the education situation of Black students. Such an approach celebrates and furthers Canada's claims to being a multicultural, democratic, inclusive, and egalitarian nation—and hence, its institutions also being such—in which individuals' participation and achievements are perceived to be a result of their own efforts (the individualism ethos) and not a product of systemic inequities. As such, race and racialization are not believed to be inherent in the opportunity structure of society and hence operate to mediate the life situations of all Canadians. It is the case that the legacies of settler colonialism and slavery serve to frame the experiences, and hence the voices, stories, and histories, of Black people in North America—i.e., Canada and the United States (Backhouse 1999; Cabrera 2014; Johnson and Aladejebi 2022; King 2020).

Therefore, to address the educational conditions of Black students requires recognizing the historical and systemic character of racism toward Black people. As a framework, anti-Black racism (ABR), as James (2024) writes, centers the lived experiences of Black people with attention to the ways in which social constructions (or stereotypes) of them on the basis of race[2]—and its intersection with gender, class, sexuality, color, generational status, and other identity markers—operate to define them and structure their responses. ABR is constitutive of four inter-related levels of racism—individual, group or community, institutional, and societal—which operate systemically, and, as such, shape the ways in which Black people negotiate the structural barriers and hurdles of inequity and racism (operationalized at times through stereotypes). Further, ABR provides a lens by which to recognize and understand the struggles, strength, and resilience of Black people who have consistently resisted the oppressive conditions to which they have been subjected in Western societies (Bell 1995; Goldberg 2002). By extension, it offers insights into the agency Black people exercise, the sacrifices they endure, the optimism they cultivate, the responsibilities they undertake, and the hope they foster in their efforts to prove that they are respectful humans, responsible citizens, and intellectually capable (Crenshaw 1989; Williams 1991).

Taking up these insights necessarily involves prioritizing the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Black people with attention to their history as articulated by King (2020) in terms of Black Historical Consciousness (BHC). Two of the six guiding principles—power, oppression, and racism, as well as Black agency, resistance, and perseverance[3]—put forth by King are particularly useful for consideration here. According to King, power, oppression,

and racism must "be understood as systemic and institutional, not individual or cosmetic" (p. 338).

> Without examining power, we tend to be critical of groups who struggle . . . [and] make value and moral judgments and believe that individual and group decisions are independent of society. In turn, we begin to believe that Black people are naturally deficient compared to white people because we do not understand the systemic oppression that has limited and, in some cases, controlled Black life (King 2020; p. 338).

The principle of Black agency, resistance, and perseverance proffers that even as Black people struggled with the oppressive structures of society, they were "never been *solely* victims (i.e., helpless, defeated, and begging for charity, especially from white people)". Rather, throughout history successive generations have acted "independently, made their own decisions based on their interests, and fought back against oppressive structures" (King 2020, p. 338).

In their investigation of the underperformance and low academic attainment of Black students within Toronto's educational system, Taylor (2020) delineated the manifold ways in which historical legacies and contemporary dynamics intersect to shape the educational trajectory of Black students. Notably, Taylor underscored the symbiotic relationship between coloniality and education, asserting that throughout history and in contemporary contexts Eurocentric educational paradigms have functioned as mechanisms of control and assimilation for Black and Indigenous populations (p. 176). Furthermore, Taylor (2020) posits that the perception of Black students as "lazy", "uneducated", and lacking in ambition stems from "a history of debasement and denigration within a British liberal racial order and a reified positioning of Blackness" (p. 189). Understandably, the resulting racialization is often internalized and contributes to the otherness, alienation, and feeling like an imposter—imposter syndrome (Corkindale 2008; Steele and Aronson 1995)—that individuals experience in institutional settings. Darchinian et al. (2021) used the term "racial ideology" to refer to this phenomenon that they found among immigrant students—mostly of Haitian background—in Montreal. They defined the phenomenon as processes by which educational institutions translate into interiorization students' phenotypic traits and cultural characteristics during day-to-day school interactions (principal–student, teacher–student, and student–student), and which transpire through an educational organization built on the predominance of white teachers in primary and secondary schools (Darchinian et al. 2021, p. 56).

Clearly, there is a significant relationship between historical narratives, institutional structures, and the ways in which the social construction of Black people shape academic perceptions of themselves and their lived experiences in educational settings. Cognizant of coloniality, the discourses of anti-Black racism and Black Historical Consciousness are instructive, as they furnish a lexicon with which to elucidate the entrenched manifestations of anti-Blackness within the educational apparatus (Nichols et al. 2019; Shizha et al. 2020). And referencing cultural analysis and critical race theory, James (2024) wrote that "Critical Cultural Reasoning" is significant to understanding how larger systemic forces influence or shape the actions and experiences of Black youth, as well as in relation to the communities in which they are located and/or with which they identify. Furthermore, while historically in Canada a variety of legal and coercive strategies have operated to deny Black students equitable access to education (Taylor 2020),[4] research shows that, as students, they have exercised their agency, resisted, and persevered with a commitment to hard work, proving that they can be academically successful students, having a strong sense of double consciousness (Du Bois 1903; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020) and showing that they can be "better than" their white peers.

3. Data Collection: The Everyday Experiences of Black Students in a Canadian University

Data for this article came from in-person individual and focus group interviews and conversations with 16 undergraduate and graduate Black students currently enrolled at a university in the Greater Toronto Area. The 6 males and 10 females (as they self-identified)

were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. The programs in which they were enrolled or from which they had graduated were education, mathematics, psychology, business, engineering, kinesiology, and health. Everyone was a member of a program initiated in the fall of 2022. Their familiarity with each other, as a cohort group, and with one of us, as a program facilitator, and the research assistant made it possible for them to share experiences that they otherwise would not done. Some of the students served as mentors to high school students or were participants in a mentorship program. The data are based on 13 focus group interviews conducted by the research team between 2023 and 2024. These interviews were held both virtually and in person.[5]

Our research question was "What are the everyday experiences of Black students in Canadian universities, and how can you be better encouraged and supported for optimal academic success?" Students shared stories about their experiences transitioning through elementary and high school and now university. (No one attended college before university.) Of particular interest here is what participants told us about their experiences and challenges negotiating and navigating university—in terms of the structural and systemic barriers and hurdles they encountered in dealing with their peers, professors, and the university community as a whole. As much as possible we sought to understand the lives of Black students, and, in doing so, we centered their experiences through their stories and words. In the following section, we discuss what the literature tells us about the social, educational, and academic experiences of students, and Black students in particular, as they journey through university.

Although this research is centered on a single university, the data and insights garnered offer significant contributions to understanding the lived experiences of racialized students, a group whose voices are frequently marginalized in academic discourse. The findings resonate with patterns observed in other studies, yet the distinctive contribution of this research lies in its nuanced intervention, which foregrounds the voices of Black students. By doing so, it provides a critical framework for analyzing and understanding the manifestations of structural racism in higher education, with the experiences of these students playing a pivotal role in shaping this discourse.

4. From High School to University: Black Students' Educational Experiences and Trajectories

In the contemporary Canadian educational ecosystem, enduring disparities persist in terms of the differences in achievement between Black students and their White counterparts. These disparities are rooted in historical legacies and compounded by systemic factors within educational institutions bounded by a tapestry of institutional, cultural, economic, and political influences that collectively contribute to existing achievement gaps (James 2021). In a seminal inquiry into the factors underpinning the underachievement of Black students in Alberta schools, Henry Codjoe (2001) found that the primary obstacles that were often cited by students were "differential treatment by race; negative racial stereotyping; the lack of representation of Black/African perspectives, histories, and experiences; low teacher expectations; and what can be characterized as a hostile school environment" (p. 349). A study by Smith et al. (2005) that probed the academic struggles of Black students refuted the prevailing notion of their pessimism toward education and the cultural construct that they devaluate academic pursuits. Instead, they posited that Black students tend to be optimistic and regard education as a predominant mean for attaining social and economic success in society. However, their endeavors are often stymied by institutional barriers or entrenched social inequities (Smith et al. 2005, p. 355; see also James and Taylor 2022).

In Ontario, officially until 2021, streaming—a method of segregating students into Academic, Applied, or Essential streams based on preconceived notions of academic aptitude or scholastic capabilities prior to high school—ostensibly served to set students on paths toward university, college, and work. Research indicated that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students were largely and consistently streamed by guidance counselors and teachers into Applied and Essential programs, which prepared them for college or the

workforce (James and Turner 2017; Parekh et al. 2011). Accordingly, Shizha et al. (2020) observed that, having deemed Black students unsuitable for university education, teachers and counselors often discouraged them from enrolling in advanced-level high school classes and proceed to direct them "towards college education or trade schools that may lead to low-wage work" (p. 75).

Being in the lower educational stream in high school served as a formidable barrier to postsecondary education for Black students, thereby constraining their career prospects (Nichols et al. 2019). Furthermore, apart from its tangible consequences for career trajectories, the lower level of education into which Black students are streamed also has a profound impact on their self-concept and sense of worth. As Shizha et al. (2020) wrote, "streaming affects young people's self-esteem, subjective evaluations, later career choices, and their overall socio-economic success" (p. 73). And according to Nichols et al. (2019), teachers' and guidance counselors' deep-seated racial biases and misconceptions influence their interactions with Black students and perpetuate pernicious stereotypes—such as the "black male troublemaker"—which not only hinder academic success, but also contribute to them feeling compelled to exert extra effort to dispel prejudicial notions (p. 185).

Nevertheless, despite the problems that Black students encounter in their journeying through high school, many of them do enter university with determination, expectations, and optimism that, with a university degree, they will attain the occupations, careers, and social positions—upward social mobility—to which they aspire (James and Taylor 2022; Martis 2020). But studies indicate that Black students' experiences in postsecondary institutions closely resemble those of primary and secondary schools. Specifically, questions about their presence on university campuses indicate that both professors and students had doubts about their intellectual capability. James (2024) quoted one of his study participants as saying: "When I went to University, I felt like the 'other' . . . You walk into the lecture hall, you're finding your way to sit down and people look at you twice . . . It's like they've never seen . . . a Black guy in here . . . It really bothered me. I felt like I was being watched". Experiences like this, according to James, make it difficult for Black students to develop a sense of belonging in university. Indeed, as Mustaffa (2017) argued, "colleges and universities are both a reflection and an engine of racial hierarchy wherein white supremacy is central" (p. 712).

Considering the ways in which racialization mediates Black students' access to and participation in university, in the current context where universities have initiated equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programs, are they experiencing university differently? Are they finding university to be a welcoming space? Or are the EDI pledges and measures merely performative with little to no evidence that universities are prepared to be culturally responsive to their needs, interests, and aspirations? Actually, from research conducted years earlier with racialized university students, Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) concluded that the "responses demonstrate how the institution deploys nonperformative language to assert ill-defined commitments to minoritized populations, center whiteness and other majority cultures, and devalue students and their contributions to the campus environment" (p. 283). In the case of Black students, James (2024) wrote that they "have long been caught in the vortex of institutional inequities at university—something which has not abated even in the wake of summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests contesting anti-Black racism and calls for racial justice".

Furthermore, scholars have observed that universities' EDI measures have inherent limitations in that they do not address the deeply entrenched structural disparities that hinder the academic success of Black students (Applebaum 2019; Lewis and Shah 2021). Based on their research findings, Lewis and Shah (2021) posited that EDI policies were superficial gestures and rhetoric intended to placate Black students through actions such as admitting more Black students, rather than addressing the underlying issues of White supremacy. Sara Ahmed (2006), years earlier, made similar observations regarding comparable declarations by universities in the UK. They argued that "antiracist speech acts

are a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority, which operates through concealing the unfinished work of racism" (Ahmed 2006, p. 2).

And the unconscious or implicit bias training used by institutions of higher learning to tackle race-related issues and assure students, and the university community generally, of their commitment to EDI pledges have been of little to no benefit in the lives of Black students. In fact, Applebaum (2019) noted that universities' embrace of implicit bias training circumvents addressing structural issues that contribute to disparate outcomes for racialized students. Implicit bias training, wrote Tate and Page (2018), provides universities with a convenient "alibi to diminish the recognition, analysis, and salience of white supremacy in order to maintain it" (p. 143). Moreover, the heightened significance attributed to unconscious/implicit bias training within institutional contexts overlooks the various ways in which White supremacy, the legacies of colonization, and the interests of White power structures continue to shape institutions in racially stratified ways (Tate and Bagguley 2017).

Given this context, what precisely are the experiences of Black students? How do they navigate and negotiate these settings and cope with what might be regarded as contradictory messages and the systemic barriers they encounter in their efforts to obtain a university education? In what follows, we explore these questions using what we heard from participants in this study.

5. Being University Students: Belonging, Community, Resistance, and Perseverance

The students who participated in our study expressed immense gratification and excitement that they had made it to university. They agreed that, despite the odds, they were not only realizing their own aspirations, but also that of their parents. So, in relating how they arrived at and are managing to stay in university, they mentioned having to grapple with the feeling that they belonged in university, developing a sense of community, resisting the construct of them as impostors, and being resolute in their perseverance to prove their competence as students. In this section then, we explore the four themes—belonging, community, resistance, and perseverance—that emerged from our conversations with the participants.

5.1. Belonging: "Are You Guys Supposed to Be Here"

Like Black faculty, participants in this study expressed experiencing an exclusionary and marginalizing university climate in which their presence was constantly questioned, which in turn contributed to feelings of inadequacy and isolation[6] (Collins et al. 2020; Mohamed and Beagan 2019). Talking of his experience in a psychology course, one participant recalled the following:

> I definitely have been in a class where even the professor has asked me if I'm in the right spot. I've had to get other students to verify that I'm their classmate.

Another student recollected an interaction at a departmental event where students were dressed in sweaters that identified them as members of the program;

> I remember the head of the program came to us, and she was like: 'Are you guys supposed to be here? And we were wearing the hoodies. You could tell that we're supposed to be here. And I don't know, I just felt hurt.

While questions about participants' presence in their university classes was a common occurrence—especially when they were the "only" Black student in the class—it was more so for those in science classes. One participant described an instance with a teaching assistant who expressed surprise that she scored a perfect grade on an assignment. "I got perfect. And my lab partner got like 95. He [the TA] said he was surprised that we had gotten that mark". Understandably, hearing such doubts caused some students to question their intellectual ability and their legitimacy as students, causing them to become reticent about participating in class as expected. In the words of one participant:

> Every time I walk into my science classes, I do a 'am I even smart enough to be here?' And sometimes when I asked my tenth question, I kind of feel like I'm being judged. Whereas, when other students ask questions, they [the professor] seem happier to give them the answer. Whereas I feel like I'm bothering them whenever I seek clarification . . . So, I feel like I would never ask another question. Not because I don't want to, but I'm scared that I'm gonna sound stupid, and they're gonna go: 'Of course, the Black girl sounding stupid'.

A reminder here is the role that gender plays in the experiences of Black students on university campuses, and how gendered stereotyping operates in what is expected of them in terms of the courses in which they are enrolled or their program of study, as well as the ways in which they are expected to participate. So, it is not simply being a "stupid" student, but a young woman who was; her use of "of course" signals her recognition of the prevalence of this stereotype that young women encounter.

Furthermore, participants expressed considerable apprehension and unease about how to respond to situations in which they are misrepresented or mistreated due to perceptions (or stereotypes) of them as Black people—especially as they try to cultivate a sense of belonging. They did not want to be *perceived* as confrontational, which would make for uncomfortable and unhealthy learning experiences. For young women, the concern was not to come across as "an angry Black woman and fit the stereotype that the society perpetuate", as one participant put it. She continued as follows:

> If I stand up, if I say something, then I'm labelled the angry Black women. . . I don't want them to be like: 'Oh yeah, of course, it's the angry Black woman speaking.' So, sometimes I just be quiet . . . But then this is part of the problem, right? It's like white people can get things wrong, Black people can get things wrong, but we're scared to get it wrong. Because we feel like we have to prove that we are smart, and that we're deserving, and that we're meant to be in this program, and that we're not fitting a stereotype, right? Just like, it's totally normal for Black people to be upset if something upsets them. But then you don't want to feed into the stereotype of the angry black woman or the angry black man. So let me not be angry even when your anger is valid.

Having their presence in university spaces or classes questioned, especially being disregarded by professors and instructors (Cameron and Jefferies 2021; Maseti 2018), meant that these participating students struggled with developing a sense of belonging, which is critical for them to successfully navigate university and attain their degrees. In addition to race and gender—of course, all identity characteristics are inter-related—there is also socioeconomic status. An American study on the university experiences of young Black men from low socio-economic backgrounds revealed that in predominantly White middle class university spaces, compared to their White counterparts, they experienced feelings of isolation and seclusion (Patterson 2021). Furthermore, being the "only" Black student in a class would often lead to difficulty forming connections and establishing relationships with other students. The effect of their isolation likely adds pressure to prove that they belong in the academic spaces that they navigate.

5.2. Community: "I Feel Like I Found Community"

Understandably, in an alienating university environment, the feeling of not belonging and perceived incompetence would lead participants to seek community and forge relationships with others like them. To this end, one participant shared the following:

> It's harder to talk to people because they're from different cultural backgrounds. Like I can't really relate to them on a familiar level . . . I feel like it's harder to go up to them and try to be friends. And so, I just tend not to, and that's kind of how it's been for the majority of my university experience . . . You have to prove that you're

> legitimately a student; prove that you're competent and good at the subject, and able to articulate ideas in order for you to make fiends across race lines.

Another participant recalled that she "applied to the Black Students in Psychology Club", and "got an executive position" that she wanted. She saw this as a "positive" move since it enabled her to meet with other Black students and cope with the isolation and otherness she was experiencing in psychology:

> I would say my experience so far has been very positive. I feel like I've met a lot of Black students that I didn't know were in psychology . . . I feel like I have found community. I feel like I've been open to a lot of opportunities that I didn't know were available.

Yet another participant revealed that "You feel safe when you're in a space just surrounded by Black people". But it was not simply "safety in numbers" that motivated these Black students to seek community. It also had to do with the obligation they felt or their understanding of their responsibility to represent Black people or "their community" in a positive light, and, in so doing, conduct themselves in ways that actively challenge the stereotypes and/or the negative perceptions of Black students' academic capabilities.

Ostensibly, community building or being in a network with other Black students was particularly important for participants, since, as Lopez-Littleton et al. (2023) pointed out, it is a major source of healing and a means of survival in academic spaces. And for students in STEM courses (as well as in psychology, as some students indicated), as McGee et al. (2023) maintained, participation in a network or community has important benefits given the unique barriers with which they unavoidably contend as they navigate the alienation and marginalization within the disciplines. Undoubtedly, the lack of racial content in the STEM curriculum has contributed to some students' educational disengagement, which in turn caused some to enroll in non-STEM courses. In response, one student disclosed that she took an elective course on African American history in order to connect with other Black students and be part of an educational experience which centered Blackness. Generally, a common complaint of research participants was the pervasive Eurocentrism of their education which meant that they often did not have access to the histories and contributions of Black peoples in Canadian society.

However, there are drawbacks or worrying consequences to being a part of a community or network that provides one with the learning support and comfort they need, and for which they are expected to take on or execute the responsibility of counteracting the negative constructs of Black students. For instance, thinking of what happens when "a Black student doesn't perform so well in school", as one participant referenced, and continued with the following:

> He's the representation or she's a representation, or they're the representation for everyone. Right? And the pressure that comes with it—to try to represent for a whole people—is insane. So, I just don't think the school environment right now is conducive for us Black students, to be honest.

The fact is there is a cost to dealing with the social realities of being a Black university student and being in a community.

5.3. Resistance: "I Don't Want to Become a Statistic"

Black individuals in predominantly White spaces have always engaged in various forms of resistance. Resistance encompasses a broad range of responses to oppressive conditions that underly their inferior positioning (Hasford 2016). We found that students in this study resisted in one key way that aligns with what Spencer et al. (2022)[7] referred to as the "prove-them-wrong" ethos. This approach "is characterized by emerging unscathed from adversity, attempting to negate the stereotypical perceptions held against Black women, self-monitoring their actions, and concealing their true selves" (p. 133). The added pressure is perceived to compel Black students to excel in order to be taken seriously and deemed deserving to belong in an institution, as pointed out by our participants (Gregory

2017). While this phenomenon is internalized and expressed differently by students, they all emphasized the importance of exceeding expectations and achieving academic success through hard work and dedication.

The idea of resisting existing stereotypes, or engaging in actions that do not conform to their White peers' and professor' perceptions of their academic abilities, was persuasively expressed to us by one student:

> I always have this thought, in the back of my head, if I don't finish this program, I'm just gonna be another statistic of a Black woman that moved from this program to this program to that program; or that dropped out; or that I did it . . . I don't want to become a statistic; I just want to do what I'm passionate about. And even if it's hard, so be it. It's what I love to do. And even though the road's a little rocky; at the end of the day, it's going to be rewarding.

Acutely aware of the obstacles that surround and hamper them, motivated to resist their impact both individually and collectively, and committed to working for the betterment of the Black community, in the words of one participant, "pushes you to do better." He continued as follows:

> I personally kind of just took that and ran with it. I'm just like: 'Okay, I'm gonna do better and be better than you, you, you and you;' and that's fine. Honestly, I'm good with it now; because I feel honestly, that's a strength. I feel like you can use that [the stereotype] and turn it into a strength. That's something that I've always done. I've always been like; 'Okay, well, these are what teachers kind of see of me; and I'm gonna definitely switch that perspective.

Another interesting component worth noting is how students deal with the mental and emotional labor that comes with being Black and facing various stereotypes as well as negative perceptions of them. Aside from their hard work and dedication, some students highlighted the importance of confronting the reality of their minoritized status and not being surprised or shocked by it. They emphasized accepting the persistent anti-Black racism in society while journeying and striving to successfully attain their educational and life goals. As one student put it:

> Well, I'm getting to the point where I just don't care anymore, because that stigma and that stereotype about Black people is just never gonna go away. It's been here for as long as prejudice has existed on the planet . . . Sometimes you're gonna walk into a room and people are just going to stare at you. Why? Because you're the only Black person in there. But you can't let that bother you. You can't let being Black affect your journey. It's something you just have to live with.

Studies examining the role of anti-Black stereotypes in Canadian postsecondary education and the responses of Black students to these stereotypes have found that students either internalize and conform to these stereotypes or resist and challenge them (James 2012; Martis 2020). Evidently, participants in this study embraced the latter strategy, for, despite the societal/structural and institutional racisms they face, and often feeling compelled to counteract the stereotype of academic competence, one could argue that "their presence in university was a form of resistance to these forces" (James and Taylor 2008, p. 579). The fact is, they resist to normalize Black students' presence, their voices, and educational interests in higher education spaces.

5.4. Perseverance: "I Wanted to Do It. And I Also Didn't Have a Choice"

It seems logical that having resisted their racialization and strived to justify their presence in their university classes with the support of communities of Black students, it was up to participants to persevere so that they might finally remove any doubts about their academic capabilities. We found that parental expectation was a strong influence on or support in participants' perseverance processes. And, as many told us, they "didn't

have a choice", since their parents expected them, or "told" them, that this is what they "have to do". One STEM student disclosed that her

> parents have always been really supportive . . . My dad always emphasize how hard and how time consuming STEM was. But they always said that they would always support me no matter what path I chose, just as long as I go into postsecondary . . . That was never a choice in our house, you were going to postsecondary and there's no plan B.

So, along with the influence and support of their parents, participants preserved in their studies. An interesting component of our data is that many of our participants were either first-generation Canadians or children of immigrants (i.e., second-generation Canadians). The literature about these Canadians suggests that they attain postsecondary education at a higher rate than their non-immigrant counterparts (Childs et al. 2017; Finnie and Mueller 2014; James and Taylor 2022; Kučera 2008). One of the motivating factors is the aspirations that their immigrant parents have for them (Childs et al. 2017; James and Taylor 2022). The first- and second-generation students who participated in our study related to the parental pressure and related message that university was a means of gaining financial independence and social mobility; hence, a necessary stepping stone to obtaining stable employment and achieving success. This factor may be attributed to the higher levels of education typically held by immigrants to Canada (Hum and Simpson 2007; Kučera 2008), a consequence of immigration policies that prioritize highly skilled labor and individuals with education and training that align with labor market demands (Statistics Canada 2021) (although face challenges in attaining professional credentialization once in Canada (Guo and Andersson 2005)). This dynamic may contribute to a value system that places a premium on education, viewing it as a crucial pathway to upward social mobility. Consequently, children of immigrant parents are often raised in households and communities that regard higher education as a fundamental priority (Finnie and Mueller 2014).

Another interesting strategy that participants used in their perseverance to surmount the social challenges stemming from their racial identity was "code-switching", which can be defined as the conscious or unconscious modification of their behaviors to disassociate themselves from negative stereotypes held about them because of their race (Spencer et al. 2022, p. 131).[8] Code switching, such as using less colloquial language or slangs which are often associated with Blackness[9]—i.e., speaking more formally—and displaying mannerism and behaviors (Koch et al. 2001) that are in keeping with the culture of universities is just one of the ways that, as one participant explained, they navigate their educational spaces:

> . . .Every time we walk into a room, we have to code switch. When we leave the group with our Black friends who know us, we have to code switch. There's just a lot of things you have to navigate other than just the studies.

Participants emphasized that they code-switched in order "not to slip up and say something that makes them [peers] uncomfortable" and to shield themselves from the negative stereotypes which are often associated with their Blackness. They also did so as a way to counter the perceptions of incompetence and a lack of intelligence that often hurt and bring about their fears. For instance, one participant remembered using slang which made her classmates refer to her as "ghetto." She reflected on the following:

> It hurts a lot. I didn't even come across that way. But it kind of proves that fear. Like: 'Oh, they're gonna treat me a certain way, [and] that I fit the stereotype.' Those moments actually prove it [the need to code switch]. Like, you are ghetto because you use these words . . . What you're doing is ghetto, and especially when it comes out of a white person's mouth. Personally, I just feel uncomfortable.

To avoid the hurt, fears, and discomfort emerging from their encounters, some participants have mentioned that they remained silent, but most actively policed their behaviors and, more importantly, their language, during their everyday activities on campus. So, it might be said that the strategies of the participants helped to nurture a resilience that

enabled them to persevere in their efforts to obtain their postsecondary education. Essentially, these Black students' perseverance came at a cost, or what Melaku and Beeman (2023) refer to as an "inclusion tax" paid through the extra labor that Black people perform, or are expected to perform, in order to fit into predominantly White spaces. This tax is thought to be the additional resources—for example, money, time, and emotional as well as mental energies—that individuals expend in their bid "to be included in white spaces and the labour spent adhering to or resisting white norms" (Melaku and Beeman 2023, p. 1161). But code switching can have adverse impact on individual users (Spencer et al. 2022), for, as one participant shared, "It's mentally and emotionally draining to feel like you have to talk to certain people in a certain way; instead of just talking how you would like to, and I have to, not talk the way I talk".

6. Conclusions

According to Statistics Canada, only 16% of Black individuals of Canadian origin—defined as those whose parents were both born in Canada—hold a bachelor's degree. This contrasts sharply with the 28% of their White and some other non-racialized counterparts who hold the same level of education (Wall and Woods 2023). The disparity becomes even more pronounced when compared to the educational attainment of other racialized groups. Statistics Canada reports that over half of the Korean, Chinese, South Asian, and West Asian populations, as well as over 40% of the Arab, Japanese, and Filipino populations, hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Statistics Canada 2021). Numerous barriers contribute to the achievement gap for Black students, not least of which is the long historical residues of discrimination, both de jure and de facto (Cooper 2016; Ibrahim and Abdi 2016), which still permeate the access to education for Black Canadians (Howard and Smith 2011; Johnstone and Lee 2022; Sium 2014). But even though education operates as a means by which racial categorization occurs, it also serves as a resource that individuals might use to escape the inferior status attributed to them because of their lack of higher levels of education, including postsecondary education. The perception of education, especially postsecondary education, as providing the cultural capital for social mobility is not unique to racialized or immigrant communities; it is deeply embedded in the Canadian cultural ethos (Serna and Woulfe 2017).

In recent years, institutions of higher learning have initiated various programs aimed at ameliorating the problems experienced by racialized and Indigenous students, and in response promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (Lewis and Shah 2021; Tamtik and Guenter 2019). However, such efforts fall short of addressing the well-imbedded systemic racism which helps to inform institutions' policies and practices—in effect, their culture. Hence, Black students continue to encounter discriminatory and unwelcoming campus environments (Henry et al. 2017; Lawson 2020). Despite these inclusion and diversity policies failing to translate into positive outcomes for racialized students, they nonetheless serve institutional purposes (Lewis and Shah 2021). And, as Lopez-Littleton et al. (2023) posited, the prevalence of racism in spaces of higher education cannot simply be ameliorated with a few statements and actions from university administrators but requires a more fundamental set of actions which recognizes the injuries of anti-Black racism, and, among other things, they must work to address inequitable conditions by incorporating diverse voices and making spaces for as well as normalizing Blackness in higher education.

Black students within predominantly White institutions of higher learning demonstrate persistence and resilience in their effort to navigate and counteract systemic racial barriers and pervasive stereotypes. This study elucidates how these students, motivated by personal ambitions, familial expectations, and a collective sense of responsibility, strive to achieve academic excellence despite the multifaceted challenges that they encounter. The findings reveal that Black students often adopt a "prove-them-wrong" (Spencer et al. 2022) mindset and engage in code switching as strategic responses to navigate the complexities of their academic and social environments. Additionally, the formation and reliance of supportive communities emerge as critical factors that provide indispensable emotional,

social, and academic sustenance. These networks serve not only as a buffer against the psychological toll of racial aggressions but also as a source of empowerment and solidarity.

However, this phenomenon also highlights the disproportionate burden placed on Black students, who must exert additional effort to navigate systemic racism and targeted discrimination. This extra labor, which is not demanded of other students to the same extent, can have significant implications for their educational outcomes and may also have enduring effects on their future aspirations and career trajectories. Further research is warranted to explore these issues in greater depth and to fully understand their long-term impact.

The academic success and resilience exhibited by Black students serve as a powerful form of resistance, challenging and gradually transforming the entrenched oppressive structures within academia. For instance, while the university education rate for Canadian-born Black students stands at approximately 16%, first- and second-generation Black immigrants report significantly higher levels of university degree attainment. Notably, over 46.3% of Black children of African immigrants possess at least a bachelor's degree (Statistics Canada 2021), in contrast to 28% of the non-racialized population (Wall and Woods 2023).

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate experiences of these students, calling for a concerted effort towards institutional reforms that acknowledge and address their unique challenges. By fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments, universities can better support Black students in achieving their full potential, thereby enriching the academic community as a whole. As we continue to document and analyze these critical narratives, it becomes imperative to advocate for systemic changes that not only celebrate the resilience of Black students but also dismantle the barriers that necessitate such resilience.

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Notes

1 De Houwer (2019) writes the following: an unconscious bias refers to "an unobservable structure in the mind of an individual that drives behavior in an unconscious manner" (p. 835). In terms of race, Greenwald and Banaji (1995) suggest that this bias manifests as the unconscious association of Black and other racialized groups with stereotypes that subsequently influence social and interpersonal behaviors.

2 Also, race is often the basis upon which groups are affirmed, social roles are assigned, status is conferred, and agency is attained (James 2010, p. 285).

3 Six principles into our curriculum and pedagogies: systemic power, oppression, and racism; agency, resistance, and perseverance; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black joy and love; Black identities; and Black historical contention.

4 For instance, in the 1800s, Ontario (1849) and Nova Scotia (1865) established legislation by which schools were segregated by race. As such, compared to White students, Black students attended schools which often lacked adequate infrastructure, resources, and capacity to provide quality education compared to schools for White students (Backhouse 1999). As McLaren (2004) observed, school segregation was based on White people's concerns and fears that admitting Black students to "their" schools would have a negative impact on White students—since many Black children had recently escaped from slavery, they likely lacked adequate moral and behavioral socialization or training compared to White counterparts.

5 This research has been granted ethical approval by the York University Ethics Review Board.

[6] Mohamed and Beagan's (2019) research report that Black faculty members encountered an unfavorable racializing environment where colleagues and staff perceived them and their work as lacking objectivity and academic rigor (p. 350).

[7] Black women were the subject of Spencer and colleagues' study.

[8] Spencer et al. (2022) were referring to their study on Black women who were enrolled in engineering and computing doctoral programs, noting that their disassociation was "from the negative stereotypes held against their intersectional identities across gender and race" (p. 131).

[9] In a telling example, one student recalled being called "ghetto" by her white peers, and she vowed to change the way she spoke so that she is never seen as someone who is "ghetto". Another participant noted that he often refrained from slang with his colleagues a means of distancing himself from negative stereotypes.

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