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What is This?
“Making Space” for Ourselves: African American Student Responses to Their Marginalization

Terah T. Venzant Chambers¹ and Lance T. McCready²

Abstract
Drawing from two separate case studies, one on lower track African American students and another on gay and gender nonconforming African American male students, this article explores how students with multiple stigmatized identities make sense of and respond to their marginalization, a process we term making space. In particular, we consider how making space can support students’ psychosocial needs and at the same time work against school engagement and academic striving. We describe types of “making space” strategies: sociospatial, performative, and political/institutional, and use these categories to describe the ways students in our projects responded to their perceived marginalization. Institutional processes that make these responses necessary are addressed as well as how schools can either mediate or intensify students’ feelings of marginalization and therefore their perceived need to “make space.”

Keywords
achievement gap, African American students, race

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Recent research across various fields has documented the salience of the school environment in mediating student experiences, particularly for students of color. Schools are driven by middle class, White, heterosexual norms that determine definitions of success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2003; Nash, 1990; Giroux, 1983). Lisa Delpit (1988) terms this dominant culture the *culture of power*.

Students who are more familiar or aligned with this dominant culture are more likely to be seen as academically successful as the school environment caters to this orientation. These processes often occur covertly, with little conscious awareness among teachers and administrators, even when students of color speak to its existence. Lewis (2003) found that parents, teachers, and administrators in a predominantly White suburban school maintained a “color-blind” orientation despite mounting contrary evidence from students of color in the school. As articulated by Barajas and Ronkvist (2007), race is inextricably linked to the very foundations of institutional processes, policies, and procedures.

[R]elationships in schools’ organizational spaces tended to operate according to an investment in Whiteness, an investment that sustains racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize White privilege and power. Because of the invisible or neutral status of Whiteness, the mechanisms through which this process occurred were also invisible.

In the schools studied, White space was created and reproduced through an organizational logic, a mechanism of informal practice and formal policy that rendered “difference” to disappear in order for the institution to appear race-neutral. (p. 1522)

Schools in which these norms are fully entrenched have little interest in “seeing” race or other forms of diversity and the particular needs these students might have. Accordingly, students of color may find few avenues of support in such institutions. These findings were echoed by Carter (2005), whose work with African American and Latino students revealed that schools cater to a generic “White” conception of success that students of color are often aware of and respond to in a variety of ways. Students whose cultural orientations fall outside the mainstream culture of the school are often marginalized (Carter, 2005; MacLeod, 2004; McCready, 2004; Mickelson, 2003; Venzant Chambers, 2009; Venzant Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2011).
While teaching at Carleton College during the 2005-2006 academic year, the researchers, both African American, learned of their common interest in the experiences of African American students in desegregated, dominant culture-normed high schools. Lance’s research focuses on the experiences of African American male students who identify as gay and are perceived as “gender nonconforming” or defying the norms associated with their birth sex (Wyss, 2004), whereas Terah’s research focuses on the experiences of African American students in tracked math and English classes. In comparing our research findings, we identified a common theme of students’ marginalization and diminished engagement being intensified by multiple stigmatized identities that interact and create experiences that are qualitatively different from other African American students in their school. One of the ways students coped with this differential marginalization was to “make space” (McCready, 2004, 2010) for themselves within a school environment they perceived as hostile. Here, we are using the term marginalization to describe the multiple ways African American lower track, gay, and gender nonconforming students are isolated, excluded, or opt out from resources they need to succeed in their high schools (Dei, 1997). We will further unpack our notion of “making space” later in this discussion.

In our study, evidence for African American students’ marginalization comes from school records data, interviews, and classroom observations that indicate both school sites of our research had racial disparities in academic outcomes, discipline, and extracurricular participation. We argue that rather than succumb to being cast in the negative light shown on youth who do not conform to dominant cultural norms, some African American students attempt to “make space” in school in ways that affirm their social and cultural identities. We use three categories, sociospatial, artistic/performative, and political/institutional, to describe the ways students in our projects responded to their perceived marginalization.

Even as we focus on these three categories, we realize that they are in no way an exhaustive or comprehensive list. Although they describe what we saw in our schools, other students may “make space” in other ways. Indeed, the behaviors exhibited by the students in our studies could likely be categorized in ways other than how we have here. This fact lends support to our contention that understanding school processes at the local school level is integral to a holistic understanding of important processes affecting students’ academic performance and school engagement. We encourage future work to expand on this notion of “making space” and how student subpopulations make sense of and respond to their marginalization.
Theoretical Support for “Making Space”

The notion of “making space” is derived from the work of critical theorists who use the concept of “spatiality” to show how struggles over geographic control create social boundaries that have material effects on individual and collective identities and people’s access to space (Foucault, 1986; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). More recently, scholars of social geography endeavor to show how young people figure in these struggles to constitute public space in urban communities and schools (Ruddick, 1996; Skelton & Valentine, 1998). Urban social geography is the study of the patterns related to how social groups use urban space (Knox & Pinch, 2006). It also involves consideration of the social patterns and processes arising from the distribution of and access to scarce resources for urban residents (Knox, 2006). In the context of public schools, McCready (2010) treats urban social geography as the study of the ways social groups of students and/or teachers use school space and of patterns of student participation in academic and extracurricular programs. How teachers and students use school space and participate in academic and extracurricular programs is a function of social and cultural forces in and beyond the walls of the school.

Susan Ruddick uses social geography through an investigation of the importance of “safe space” or “third space” where the marginality of homeless youth in Los Angeles could be affirmed or even celebrated by “suturing” (p. 196) spaces for themselves within the public eye (Ruddick, 1996).

Related to the work of social geographers, anthropologists John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham have a long record of publication on the social and cultural dynamics of African American peer groups, in particular how they create social boundaries. Some African American students’ decision to adopt a “raceless” persona can put them at odds with their peers who practice “fictive kinship” with other African American students through speaking Black English and deemphasizing academic achievement (Ogbu, 2003; Fordham, 1996). Similarly, in Race in the Schoolyard, sociologist Amanda Lewis (2003) provides several examples of how racial boundaries between students of color and White students are constructed in “everyday interactions” where young people ascribe specific racial identities to particular bodies. Lewis is careful to note that the notion of “doing race” in daily interaction applies to a range of social identities including race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. Venzant Chambers et al. (2011) also address this issue through a concept they term racial opportunity cost, which they define as the degree to which schools force students of color to give up, sacrifice, or disconnect from aspects of their racial identity to meet socially constructed norms for academic success. They suggest that schools construct such limited opportunity for
the expression of self that students of color can be forced to choose between who they are and academic success.

Developmental psychologist Beverly Tatum (1997) draws on the concept of spatiality to explain why “all the Black kids [are] sitting together in the cafeteria.” From Tatum’s perspective, “When one is faced with what Chester Pierce calls the ‘mundane extreme environmental stress’ of racism, in adolescence or in adulthood, the ability to see oneself as part of a larger group from which one can draw support is an important coping strategy” (p. 70). Overall, the notion of “making space” is meant to capture the social, cultural, geographical, and psychological dynamics of a strategy African American students can employ to respond to and/or cope with their marginalization.

Although “making space” allows some African American students to express the full range of their subjectivity and participate in school in more meaningful ways, the strategies can also obstruct and compete with academic striving. In other words, “making space” may not lead to the kind of school engagement that fosters academic achievement. Instead, it may cultivate participation in Ruddick’s “third spaces” that support their psychosocial well-being but reinforce students’ academic and therefore social and cultural marginality. Ruddick argues that marginalized groups, in her case the homeless, are able to survive not simply through the correct interpretation of marginal urban space and acceptance (passive or otherwise) of their own marginality. Rather, they also use urban space to produce “small dignities” with which they struggle to redefine their social position or to force concessions from those who have power over them. (Ruddick, 1996, p. 45)

In a similar way, the students in our project responded to their marginality by taking back spaces within the school they could use to support their own needs even if these spaces were already on the margins of the dominant culture. Although not always perfect, or even academically advisable, African American students were able to create a sense of safety, sanity, and community within a larger, unfriendly, school culture. A more detailed account of these dynamics follow in the descriptions of our case studies.

Case Study No. 1: Highview High School

The foundation of this project stemmed from Terah’s case study of Highview High School (HHS). Case study analysis seeks to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2002, p. 2). In the
case of Highview, the intent was to understand the experiences of African American students, specifically with regard to their experiences with tracking, the process by which students are sorted and selected into levels of academic classes based on perceived academic ability (Oakes, 1985). The focus of the project was on the students’ voices, underrepresented in much of our scholarship (Cook-Sather, 2002; Dahl, 1995; Fielding, 2001; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Lincoln, 1995; Mitra, 2004; Raymond, 2001; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997), specifically looking at their experiences with and perceptions of tracking. Teachers, parents, and administrators were involved only informally in the project.

Highview is located in a midsized Midwestern metropolitan suburb, less than a mile from the capital city. Located in a buffer area, HHS is north of sprawling predominantly White outer-ring suburbs but south of the predominantly minority city school district. The nearest high school in either community is no further than a couple of miles from Highview. Accordingly, Highview’s student body represents this demography. The median household income of students in the most affluent city in the district was nearly US$140,000, whereas those in the poorest city came from households earning less than US$40,000. A little more than 20% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch. The demographics of the school are about 73% White, 13% Hispanic, 8% African American, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.8% Native American. Highview sits on spacious grounds and recently underwent renovations, although the school, originally built in the 1970s, is dated and substantial renovations are necessary.

Data were collected in the fall semester of the 2005-2006 school year. The researcher spent 3 to 4 days each week in the school, primarily in the English and Math classes of the students in the project. In addition to the classroom observations, document analysis and individual and focus group interviews were conducted. Seven African American students, primarily seniors, participated in the project. This group was composed of 3 high track students (2 girls, 1 boy), 2 regular-track students (1 girl, 1 boy), and 2 students from the alternative program, called Bridge (1 girl, 1 boy). Participants were selected through the initial classroom observations and also through peer referrals and teacher recommendations. Once the project was limited to seniors, it was fairly easy to identify potential participants. It was even easier for the high-track students—the “sample” in this project represents all of the African American seniors enrolled in AP math and English courses. In fact, one of the students had actually graduated the year before and was attending college at an elite private college not far from the city. Each student was
interviewed individually three times. After each round of interviews, the stu-
dents were invited to participate in a focus group, which occurred three times 
over the semester. Between 3 and 6 students attended each focus group. The 
experiences of the regular-track and Bridge students (together considered 
“lower track”) is the primary focus of this article. Cortez and Darica, both 
enrolled in the Bridge program, are highlighted in this article, as is Raine, a 
regular-track student. Insights from Ted and Nicole, both high-track students, 
are included only indirectly as they provide insight on particular phenome-
non relevant to the lower track students’ experiences.

Case Study No. 2: California High School (CHS)

The second case study is based on Lance’s research on gay and gender non-
conforming African American male students’ experience of marginalization 
in an urban high school in Northern California. From 1997 to 2002, Lance 
gained invaluable experience working on a collaborative action research proj-
ect that investigated the origins of achievement gaps and racial separation at a 
multiracial high school located in a Northern California urban community, 
California High School (CHS). The focus of the research was to understand 
the interplay between the structural dimensions of race and gender segregation 
in extracurricular activities and in identity formation. A schoolwide survey of 
faculty advisors to extracurricular activities revealed race and sex segregated 
patterns of participation (Noguera & Wing, 2006). These findings led Lance 
to focus on gay and gender nonconforming students’ participation in extra-
curriculars, specifically Project 10, a social/support group for students who 
identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (Planck, 1999), 
and the African Dance Program (ADP), an extracurricular performing arts 
class that fulfilled the physical education requirement.

The goal of Lance’s fieldwork with African American gay and gender 
nonconforming male students was to get a sense of their everyday lives in the 
segregated school environment of CHS, extracurricular activities in particu-
lar, and understand how the “troubles” they experienced were both similar to 
and different from “troubles” of heterosexual African American male stu-
dents in the school (see Noguera, 2003b for a discussion of structural vs. 
cultural explanations of the “troubles” of African American boys). Toward 
that end, the researcher spent the 1997-98 academic year observing Project 
10 meetings at least once a month. During that time, the researcher inform-
ally spoke with the faculty advisor on several occasions during lunch, after 
school, or during Diversity Project meetings (she was a member of the 
research team). The researcher also spoke with Project 10 students on several
occasions after meetings, in the hallways and after school. Overall, Lance spoke to more than 20 students who participated in Project 10. The researcher recorded observations and key events in a notebook while in the field and during and after Project 10 meetings and hallway conversations. More formal interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

Lance’s presence in the ADP was more extensive than in Project 10. He observed ADP classes over a longer period of time, approximately 2 academic years. The researcher spent the entire 1998-1999 academic year observing a beginning ADP class twice a week for a total of 2 hr per week. The researcher also stage managed the 1998 Fall African dance concert and periodically provided administrative assistance to the ADP instructor. Near the end of fall term 1998, the researcher conducted an hour-long lunchtime focus group with 10 students (8 African American female students, 1 White female student, and 1 African American male student). In addition, at the end of spring term 1999, the researcher formally interviewed 3 students (1 White female, 1 African American female, and 1 African American male) about their future aspirations and experiences taking ADP classes. Observations of the classes tended to focus on how African American male students articulated their identities as raced, classed, gendered, and/or sexualized subjects through performances of identity. This article describes the experiences of four of the young men the researcher interviewed: David, Jamal, Kevin, and Antoine. In the next section, we describe the findings from our case studies.

Finding No. 1: African American Students Feel Marginalized by Multiple Stigmatized Identities

The students in both projects felt their marginalization stemmed from multiple social identities (e.g., Black and gay or gender nonconforming, or Black and lower track). We learned of this through listening to participants’ stories about incidents with their peers and school personnel. Some of these incidents were actually witnessed by the authors and thus are recounted here. These incidents set the stage for the marginalization students felt and consequently their desire to “make space.”

During the fall semester 1997, Lance interviewed David, a Black gay male senior at CHS. David was a 17-year-old when Lance interviewed him. He was a lanky 6’4” with skin the color of honey. He had large, earthy brown eyes, meticulously arched eyebrows, and usually dressed in jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. Occasionally, Lance saw him wear something flashier such as a Hawaiian print shirt, but most times he wore standard Gap-inspired clothes with either a baseball or wool-knit cap, depending on
how cold it was outside. The combination of David’s light brown skin color, height, and what some students viewed as feminine appearing eyes, marked him as gender nonconforming and thus made him a target of abuse from his peers.

Lance was rapt with attention as David recounted multiple incidents of harassment he received in elementary and middle school. “I had long curly hair,” he said, “so people used to think I was a girl and I used to get teased a lot because of that.” When David got to CHS, the harassment became more physical. “. . . People eventually started throwing things at me and shit.” David approached Mr. Jones, a Black man in his mid-40s and the director of CHS security, about the harassment he was receiving, particularly from his Black male peers. Mr. Jones asked, “Well, what did you do to deserve it [the harassment]?” David replied, “I was walking out of the library and these [Black] boys threw a magazine at me and called me names.” Mr. Jones replied, “Oh, well, usually someone does something to someone first before they’re going to throw some books at you.”

As a result of this harassment during the fall semester of his junior year, David no longer felt safe at CHS and decided, after much pleading with his mother, to finish high school in Independent Studies, a self-directed high school diploma program administered by the continuation high school in the school district. It is important to understand that David’s decision to leave was not based on his gender nonconformity alone. Rather, his gender nonconformity exacerbated marginalization emanating from multiple dimensions of his identity. For example, in my interview with David, I learned he had been identified as a “gifted” student in elementary school. For most of his time in school, David was in a separate academic track than the majority of Black students. According to David, participating in gifted and talented programs was hard because he was one of the few students of color in his classes and his Black peers felt his participation in these programs symbolized he was trying to “act White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In addition, David was biracial, his mother was White, his father Black. At times, David believed his skin color combined with his gender nonconformity, seemed to position him outside the social boundaries of his black peer group.

At Highview, Terah shadowed students all day through their courses. The bulk of these observations occurred in math and English classes so Terah remained in these courses for most of the day. However, on the days when she shadowed individual students, she would stay with that student for the whole day through their entire course schedule. During one observation in Cortez and Darica’s Bridge algebra class, a huge flock of white birds landed in a soccer field outside the window. Once they landed, it was clear that there
was one black bird among them and one of the students remarked, “Hey Cortez! That’s you!” He immediately knew what they were talking about, hesitated, and, with a momentary look of pain, simply shrugged and did not say anything.

Terah also observed a Bridge geography class where a small group of students worked on a project. Three White students and one Latino student worked together, whereas an African American student sat at the same table working alone with headphones on. Terah understood from interviews with school administrators that in Bridge classes, students were permitted to listen to music on their headphones during quiet work time, provided the volume was low enough. Terah observed the teacher ask the African American student to turn down his headphones. The student did not hear the request initially, so when he failed to respond immediately, one of the White students, who had just made a disparaging racial remark to the Latino student in his group, yelled, “Turn the music down, Hip Hop!” This entire exchange drew no response from the teacher who apparently did not hear the comment, as loud as it was.

Often, the students recalled these experiences during their individual interviews, as Raine, a regular-track student, did in her first session while talking about a White student she encountered in one of her classes.

She gave me a high five because I got the question right on the board. And she goes like, “Oh my gosh Raine, your hands are so rough. Is that, like, from pickin’ cotton?” I can’t hit her. I can’t hit her ’cuz I’ll get in trouble, and then my grandma will send me back to New York.

Unfortunately, Raine recounted several incidents of this nature during her interviews. Not surprisingly, the issue also came up during the first student focus group Terah facilitated. Students in this focus group, who were in lower track, discussed racial jokes they were subjected to in the school:

Cortez: But then I got people [who]say little racist comments or things. One time I walked in the library and heard this dude saying, “How you get a Black person from a tree? You cut him down.” I heard him say that. And I got pissed off. So, I went up to him and he responded, “Ah—ah—oh—I read it from a magazine.” I remember that. Like, they say a lot of racist things here.

As the students discussed this issue further among themselves, Raine added another “joke” she had heard a White student tell: “They was like,
‘Why are Black people so good at basketball? Because it involves running, shooting, and stealing.’” All of the students in the lower track classes were able to recall racial incidents that occurred at Highview on a daily basis that made them feel uncomfortable. Terah observed that regardless of the class, lower track African American seemed quiet and isolated. Even Raine, so outspoken and self-confident normally, would shrink into herself in some of these classrooms, seeming to avoid any kind of attention at all.

The students’ interview excerpts, and the observations of regularly occurring racial incidents, are supported by literature on racial battle fatigue (see, for example, Smith, 2004; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006, 2007), which draws from work with combat soldiers and battle fatigue resulting from working in high-stress environments where danger is imminent. Applying this to the racial arena, these theorists forward that “racial battle fatigue is the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments” (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007, p. 555). This description of the experiences students of color face in predominantly White institutions characterizes the experiences of the students in our projects quite well. As the schools had already decided, to varying degrees, that these students did not fit the parameters of the dominant school paradigm, they were not afforded spaces of safety and support. African American students could not always count on teachers or administrators to protect them from the racial incidents recounted above. Students were left to devise their own ways of coping with and/or responding to their marginalization.

Finding No. 2: Students Respond to Their Marginalization by “Making Space”

Students responded to their marginalization in ways that can best be expressed in three categories: sociospatial, performative, and political. We collectively theorize these coping strategies as African American students’ attempt to “make space” in the predominantly White, traditionally masculine, middle-class cultural milieu of the school. Below, we provide a more in-depth discussion of each strategy.

Sociospacial

At Highview, the students used a sociospacial strategy of “making space” for themselves. This occurred in at least two ways. The first way was by informally enrolling in the same classes. They found relying on each other for
support to be the strategy of choice. By the time they got to high school, the pervasive exclusion they experienced caused them to disengage almost entirely from the school, but they learned to deal with this isolation by sticking together in classes as much as possible. None of the students specifically said that they stuck to their regular or Bridge classes to have classes with other African American students. However, in conversations about taking more high-track classes, Students often talked about the lack of African American students in certain academic classes as a deterrent to taking them. Raine, a regular-track student, spoke to this dynamic when asked about the probability of having other African American students in her classes. “It’s not very likely. It will be like, one Black student at the most, unless you get, like, a class like I got. Like my psychology class—there are six Black people in it. But, that’s just rare. That’s like a record-breaker.” Raine also felt that many African American students enrolled in Bridge courses because they were put there by racist teachers and because they welcomed the opportunity to be around more African American and Latino students. From Raine’s perspective, African American students did not consciously take regular-track classes or enroll in the alternative program to be together; however, it was clear that this was one apparently unconscious method of “making space” in the school.

The second, more visible and specific manifestations of students “making space” for themselves within the school was at the second floor main stairwell. Even before the research project officially began and Terah was visiting the school, this phenomenon caught her attention. Before school, between classes, and after school, African American students would flock to this area to chat and catch up before inevitably being broken up by administrators and sent to class. As Terah became familiar with the students in the school, it became clear that it was primarily the regular-track and Bridge students who congregated there. In fact, when the high-track students were asked about this situation, they really had no idea what it was about but commented about being annoyed by the traffic blockage it created. The Bridge and regular-track students had no explanation for the phenomenon either—only that the practice had existed as long as any of them could remember. All of these students participated in it but could not explain why or offer any hypotheses.

When their classes were over, the students would bolt out of class to the stairwell—even when their next class was right next door. Trevonne, another regular-track student, had a schedule that kept him in the “D” wing of the school for the first several periods, which is on the other side of the school from “the stairwell.” Even so, he would head there after each class even if it meant he would have to turn right back around to get to class on time.
After several weeks of observations and seeing how isolating (and often hostile) the classroom environments could be, given the experiences of the students recounted above, it seemed plausible that these brief periods of time represented African American students’ sole opportunities to relax, replenish their energy, and exhale briefly before returning back into the battle for another 50-min class period. These students were exhausted from dealing with the isolation, from feeling so alone in their experiences. With no school personnel to go to, or allies to protect them, being together in the one location in the school that felt like “theirs” helped them feel a sense of unity as a community—even if it was only for a few minutes several times a day. It helped them to remember that they were not alone.

Returning to Ruddick’s concept of “third space,” and the idea of reclaiming space within mainstream contexts, it is interesting that the students claimed this particular area. Abandoned as an area of any real worth, it did serve as an important throughway for all students and school personnel to travel throughout the school. By taking up this space, the students forced people to see them; they could not be ignored.

A comment by Ted, a high-track African American student, corroborates the idea that lower track African American students in the school saw the space around the second floor stairwell as their turf.

Everyone, they’re walking—they’re trying to walk by and it’s crowded enough by the stairs especially . . . [S]o you get this kind of idea, “Oh, the ghetto kids aren’t moving, they are standing there, why are they doing that? What’s wrong with them?” I think it’s adding to this “them and us” mentality, almost.

Ted saw these students, with whom he does not identify, as staking out this territory in a way that he characterizes as hostile. This same perspective was offered by other White students, teachers, and administrators informally asked about the phenomenon. However, from the perspective of the African American students who hung out in this area, they were responding to the larger school environment that they perceived as hostile toward them. Hanging out near the stairwell was their way of “making space” for themselves in a larger environment that they felt was unfriendly. Ted’s comments also illustrate the disconnect within the African American student body perpetrated by the pervasive academic tracking present in the school. While seen by the school as members of the same racial group, they nonetheless did not feel connected and experienced the school environment in drastically different ways.
Performative

Whereas the students at Highview overwhelmingly “made space” in more sociospatial ways, the students at CHS used different strategies. One of these strategies was to use the artistic and performative spaces available in the school for expression. For example, they could respond to their feelings of marginalization by displaying their race, gender, and/or sexuality identity to their peers (perform it) in ways that challenged dominant meanings of those identities, masculinity in particular. Kevin, a student who participated in the ADP, routinely interrupted the dominant masculine dress codes among his African American male peers. “Junior year, I went more, I like to call it gay boy illusion, ’cause it wasn’t really feminine and it wasn’t really masculine. It was right in the middle.”

Although many of Kevin’s Black female peers supported his androgynous way of dressing, others felt his gender nonconformity was inappropriate. For example, Kevin routinely had run-ins with the director of ADP, affectionately known as “Mama,” and some of the heterosexual-identified Black male dancers and drummers who thought the way he expressed himself in dance and everyday situations was too effeminate. On several occasions, Lance witnessed Mama and the drummers scold Kevin for using his hips too much. During one class, one of the drummers sucked his teeth and yelled at Kevin for pointing his toes while doing a kicking movement. Lance overheard a Black female student in the class snicker, “Kevin look so funny pointing his toes.” Later, Kevin told Lance that he was well aware that he was supposed to keep his foot flexed in kicking movements, but sometimes he liked to practice other dance forms to “shake things up.”

Although Kevin admitted acquiescing to criticisms about his gender in class and during rehearsals, he did his “own thing” during performances, which meant doing as many gyrating hip movements as possible. Such performances allowed Kevin not only to express himself but also to indirectly challenge ADP’s emphasis on traditional masculinity and the limited range of self-expression available to Black males. For instance, in the last ADP dance concert of his senior year, Lance observed that Kevin wore Black yarn hair-extensions that made his dance steps look even more dramatic. Lance sat in the audience to gauge the reaction of Kevin’s peers when he danced. As is customary among Black students, a contingent of Black female supporters of Kevin to my left hooped and hollered his name whenever he came out on stage furiously shaking his hips, lips pursed in mock coquettishness sporting serious attitude. The supporters’ Black male friends and boyfriends laughed and pointed their fingers at Kevin exclaiming, “That guy dance like a faggot!”
Quick as a flash, the Black female contingent jumped to Kevin’s defense. One student said, “Shut-up! I don’t see you up there dancin’!” In this instance, Lance believed Kevin was making space to express the full range of his gender subjectivity through staged parodies of femininity.

**Political/Institutional**

A third way of making space, particularly at CHS, was through becoming part of the leadership of programs and activities that served the mainstream student body. For example, Jamal purposely got involved in high-status extracurricular activities that were valued by his peers to improve his own status and deflect attention away from aspects of his identity that could deauthenticate his Blackness: “I was class secretary and I mean, everybody knew me.” David began working with the school’s newly formed Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), suggesting social activities and discussion topics that appealed to non-White LGBT students who traditionally stayed away from the group. He showed the GSA peer leaders how to plan events that would appeal to racially diverse audiences. In addition, he cofacilitated staff-development workshops where he coached faculty members on how to create an environment that felt welcoming to LGBT students of color. From David’s perspective,

You know when you’re dealing with issues of homophobia or you know racism or whatever, all the issues that people in this school have to go through day to day, I think its everyone’s job to try and remedy those problems.

**Finding No. 3: Not All Students Rely on “Making Space” Strategies**

While the focus in this article has been on lower track and gay and gender nonconforming students, this is not to suggest that the high-track and heterosexual African American students did not encounter difficulties in the schools. In this article, we are specifically looking at students who are marginalized in multiple ways from the dominant culture of their schools. At HHS, the high-track students in the research project tended to have a different relationship with the dominant culture compared to the regular-track and Bridge students and were more comfortably aligned with that culture. This is not to say that they did not then have their own challenges. Many of the high-track students also expressed feelings of isolation in their classes, of being the “only one” for most of the day with no other students of color in sight.
Their decision to acculturate did not entirely relieve them of a host of other issues in their classes.

For example, similar racial incidents to those observed in the lower track classes were also observed in the high-track students’ classrooms. During one observation in an AP physics class, a group of White students caught Terah’s attention when they were apparently throwing up mock gang signs to each other. The teacher was lecturing on the concept \( \hat{k} \) (pronounced “‘k’ hat”), to which one of these students made a joke, again escaping comment from the teacher, about it being a “kkk hat.” However, although they did face difficult challenges, the high-track students did not face the kind of pervasive exclusion and isolation that characterized the lower track African American students’ experiences. The high-track students were involved in numerous activities, were well liked by their teachers, and had strong friendships with other academically successful (predominantly White) students. Thus they were more engaged in the school culture. Although they felt uncomfortable at times, there was no “need” for them to seek out additional spaces in the way the lower track students were compelled.

At CHS, where there was intense racial segregation in academic programs and extracurricular activities, Lance asked Jamal how he managed to make his way around and/or through the formidable social boundaries between African American students and non–African American students, especially as he had been in the college-bound track and was somewhat of a gender nonconformist. Jamal responded that he participated in extracurricular activities that were valued by his peers and gave him cachet. Participating in certain activities deflected attention away from less accepted aspects of his racial identity:

Jamal: I mean I was involved in, like I was class secretary and I mean, everybody knew me. Everybody knew me. I mean like, I was fine in high school, I mean nobody really knew that I was gay necessarily. I mean I had a boyfriend, he was in dance production and we were together. And then, I dated this other guy that was also in dance production. So they, all the girls, all the girls in dance production knew that I had, that I was with Alex and Charles. And like that was around the school. Like, I guess I was considered like this player or something ‘cause I was kinda with both of them. Not at the same time I don’t think. I don’t remember.

Jamal’s perception that he might have been “considered like this player or something” is intriguing. Even though he dates men, not women, Jamal
wants to be considered “a player” because it is a symbol of status among his peers. Perhaps Jamal felt that being a player, gay or straight, seemingly counteracted his homosexuality. In other words, as long as he was a player, no one really cared if he was gay.

This is an important detail, the fact that not all African American students or all of any particular group of students may feel the need to “make space” for themselves within a particular environment. In the case of the HHS and CHS, only some of the African American lower track, gay and gender non-conforming students, by virtue of the specific, multiple sources of marginalization and stigmatization they experienced, felt the kind of pervasive exclusion and isolation that led them to “make space” in the way we are using this term here.

Finding No. 4: Institutional Responses Can Mediate and/or Intensify Marginalization

In drawing attention to the importance of intragroup differences and institutional culture, we do not want to dismiss the importance of schools in the process. We concede that although the students may not have had much power in their situations, they did have some control. One piece that remains to be more clearly articulated is the role of the school and school personnel in these processes. Although CHS and HHS had many characteristics in common, one way in which they differed significantly was in how well they responded to the needs of marginalized students. These responses, we found, could mediate some of the negative effects, as shown by some of the institutional responses at CHS. To the contrary, many of the responses (or lack of response) exhibited by personnel at HHS served to intensify the students’ marginalization. We now turn to a discussion of these divergent institutional responses.

CHS is a fairly progressive school in a liberal community. Long before most schools, CHS, in partnership with members of the community, initiated a program called Project 10. A nationwide program, this organization reaches out to LGBT youth. At CHS, however, the program historically catered to White lesbian students, leaving gay students of color and male students without an affirming space. CHS had recently moved to the GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) model and during the period of Lance’s ethnographic research, David, one of the more vocal African American gay male students, began participating in its leadership. Therefore, the African American gay male students did have student organizations and activities that could serve as outlets of expression (through GSA and the ADP, discussed earlier) and spaces of safety, even if they were limited. Also, the students found an administration
and school community that was relatively receptive to their ideas and participation. Finally, there were some faculty who were African American and/or openly lesbian and gay who took steps to create a caring and supportive community for African American and LGBT students.

Highview High School did not have the same diverse faculty or history of activism and innovation. Despite being located in a fairly diverse community, the school in general has been resistant to embracing its diversity. Discussions with representatives from the State Department of Education, as well as the school’s principal, revealed an almost 40% private school enrollment in the district. By catering to affluent Whites in the district with a respected advanced placement program in hopes of enticing them to stay in the public schools, Highview had created a school within a school. Neither did marginalized students face a school administration that was receptive to their ideas, or even their presence, nor did they have any particular staff to go to as there were only two identified teachers of color in the entire high school (one biracial English teacher and one Japanese language teacher on exchange from Japan).

By not supporting organizations for students of color, the school sent a clear message that the students took to mean that their racial identity was not valued. There were no organizations explicitly for students of color at Highview. Although there were some organizations tangentially related to issues of diversity (mainly on an international level), none existed for students of color or to discuss domestic racial issues, and no African American regular track/Bridge students in the project (or interviewed informally at the school) indicated being involved in anything other than sports. The importance of extracurricular activities came up numerous times in the interview, as students (particularly Ted and Nicole, both high-track students) truly believed that being involved in these activities was the best way to interact with a wide range of students. As Ted said,

> From what I’ve seen, being in a lot of extracurricular/co-curricular activities is kind of synonymous with taking advanced classes and getting better grades. I’m not sure exactly why that is, but, that’s just kind of a trend that I’ve noticed, and so, they kind of go hand-in-hand, and both would be really beneficial.

Ted was unable to see that these students may not feel welcome in these programs. Instead of seeing the situation as Ted did, that involvement in extracurricular activities leads to enrollment in high-track classes, another explanation would be that extracurricular involvement is reserved for the
students deemed by the school to be worthy of participation, the high-track students. The difference in experiences related to extracurricular participation provides an important insight into how differently the high- and regular/alternative-track students perceived the school culture. It is also an important indicator of school engagement, particularly the school’s role in ensuring students have appropriate and adequate opportunities to become engaged in various school activities.

The final example of the lack of alternative spaces or outlets for African American students at HHS was a botched effort on the part of the school to make up for the lack of culturally relevant programming. The year prior to the study, an attempt was made to hire a man with the title “African American Mentor.” The students called him a glorified hall monitor. By his own admission in a personal conversation, he described his job as mainly to keep the African American students in line. One attempt he did make was to bring in a local African American preacher to give a motivational speech to African American students. Instead of sending a letter home, or perhaps discreet notes delivered to students in class, he merely got on the school’s public address system and directed, “all Black students to report” to a specified room. Many students recounted feeling horrified by this occurrence—especially those in AP classes. In a school where race is a taboo topic, to have it pointed out in such a blatant way probably created more distress for the students than it alleviated. The mentor was let go at the end of the 2004-2005 school year, due officially to budget cuts. The school was uncomfortable and unfamiliar with providing support to nonmainstream students in the school, as this example reveals. Instead of providing support to these students, it had the effect of marginalizing them even further. It caused the high-track students to feel uncomfortable and the regular-track and Bridge students to feel further isolated, increasing their need to seek out alternatives spaces and “make space” in a way that felt supportive and affirming but did not move them closer to integration and engagement with the school.

Unlike the students in CHS, where students were able to find supportive spaces within the school, the HHS students were without any spaces within the institution to feel comfortable. Accordingly, they relied on more covert ways of “making space.” CHS was able to act as a positive force in addressing the feelings of marginalization expressed by the students. While there was more the school could have done, by creating a diverse, open school community and supporting organizations for marginalized students, CHS was able to mediate some of the deleterious effects of gay and gender non-conforming African American male students’ isolation. HHS, however, had a very different history. A school divided by race and social class, HHS
administrators felt pressured to retain its affluent White population from the booming private school industry and created an island of opportunity for its affluent dominant-culture students. The lack of a diverse staff led to botched outreach efforts (as limited as they were) and the focus on affluent White students meant students of color, if they did not fit in, were largely ignored. Highview had an opportunity to improve the situation for all of its students but instead managed to make the situation worse.

**Discussion: How “Making Space” Enhances Our Understanding of Student Engagement**

The students at CHS and HHS inform our understanding of student engagement in multiple ways. First, the findings from these case studies serve as a reminder regarding the importance of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; McCready, 2004, 2010) and the complexity of student identity. In both schools, social class, gender identity/performance, and track placement were only some of the aspects of the students’ identities that were critical to a holistic understanding of the students’ experiences. It is not appropriate to approach racial subgroups (African American, Latino, etc.) as if they are monolithic groups. As our students revealed, even within a particular racial subgroup, complexities abound that are essential to understand if we are to more fully appreciate their experiences. When students hold multiple identities that are not valued in a school, it can set up complexities of experiences that are more than simply the sum of their parts. That is, an African American gay student does not have the same experience as an African American student and a gay student—the combination of multiple stigmatized identities produces a qualitatively different experience.

A second student-engagement issue relates to the idea that institutional responses mediate student engagement. Although students at both schools employed “making space” strategies, the students at CHS had additional outlets of expression in their extracurricular program. It would be naïve to suggest that we can eradicate the marginalization students feel completely—some students will always have the need to find alternative outlets of expression. However, schools can play a major role in creating supportive, affirming school environments that not only welcome various viewpoints but also incorporate them into the mainstream school culture. This will require us to think critically about ways schools privilege particular cultural orientations and work to give voice to those who are not recognized through intentionally recruiting a diverse faculty and the creation of extracurricular activities that
draw on nondominant cultural perspectives. Although not perfect, CHS provided an environment with a diverse staff that was open to hearing the students’ perspectives and also in involving them in various organizations to let their voices be heard. Due to particular historical and contextual factors, HHS was not open to supporting the lower track African American students through organizations, student involvement or student–administration partnerships, which served to exacerbate an already difficult situation. The lesson here is that schools, and individual teachers and administrators in particular, have an opportunity to make a difference. Changing an institutional culture that is based on middle-class White values will take time and concentrated effort on the part of all of us, but the good news is that in the meantime we can make a difference by ensuring students have access to a diverse, caring staff and encouraging students to explore their identities through nontraditional extracurricular activities. These are difficult tasks, to be sure, but we both found the students in our schools quite capable of furthering our understanding of marginalizing school processes and policies when provided with an audience that truly listened to what they had to say.

A corollary issue to the importance of school personnel interventions is making sure faculty, staff, and administrators seek to understand the social and cultural dynamics of their school communities. The notion of “making space,” and the range of strategies that reflect this phenomenon, make a strong argument for understanding educational issues, like the test–score gap, in more situated ways that reflect institutionally specific processes of marginalization. It is virtually impossible to understand these issues separate from the institutional cultures of specific schools because knowledge is highly situated within particular school environments. Although the macro perspective offered by our current national education reform efforts is important, we also need these more localized understandings. At HHS, the normalization of Whiteness undergirded the racial separation, while at CHS, heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) was part of the culture of racial separation. We must know more about the social and cultural processes that run through our schools, otherwise we cannot truly know our students, and therefore provide support for their academic and social success.

The final implication for student engagement relates to issues of accountability and standards-based reform. At both schools, when students retained cultural orientations that were not valued by the school, this intensified their feelings of isolation. This disparate treatment had important implications for the ways the students participated in school, what classes they decided to enroll in, where they hung out in between classes, and what extracurricular
activities for which they signed up. Standardized testing results broken down by racial subgroup, although providing important indicators of macro-level trends, cannot grasp the complexity of these dynamics and therefore provide educators with inadequate and ultimately misleading information about important contextual factors undergirding these issues. Educators may incorrectly interpret racial subgroup reports as evidence of a uniform group dynamic with respect to achievement or school engagement. However, based on the students’ narratives, racial subgroup testing data probably tell us very little about the social and cultural dynamics situated in particular schools that are also important to understand. We must continue to learn more about these processes if we want to disrupt these patterns, not simply be made aware of them, which is all subgroup testing data offers.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have argued that African American students in our research projects relied on strategies of “making space” to affirm their social and cultural identities in response to hostile, unsupportive school environments. We describe types of “making space” strategies: sociospatial, performative and political/institutional, and use these categories to describe the ways students in our projects responded to their perceived marginalization. Our effort here is not to categorize all of the ways of “making space” but begin a dialogue about how the concept of “making space” opens up new ways of thinking about student engagement. In particular, we want to shift the analytic focus away from the actions of individual students and onto social and cultural dynamics of the school at the local level. We believe that if educators work to understand these dynamics using theories and concepts from the social sciences, they can intervene in ways that improve student engagement, and by extension, student achievement.

In looking at the ways structural and cultural forces shape the schooling experiences and identity constructions of Black students, it is evident that the intersectionality of other salient identities—gender, sexuality and even track placement—remain underexplored dimensions of their experience. There is a tendency to focus on issues of race and class as the primary structural and cultural dimensions affecting the lives of Black male students (Anderson, 1992; Kunjufu, 1986; Noguera, 1996; Wilson, 1987). In this article, we argue that lower track placement, gender, and sexuality also are integral structural and cultural dimensions of the comprehensive high school. Thus, Black students potentially can be marginalized not only on the basis of their racial and class identities but also on the basis of and in
combination with other identities. The more holistic notion of a matrix of domination may be useful for urban education because it treats the interaction among multiple systems of oppression as the object of study, rather than “adding to existing theories by inserting previously excluded variables” (Collins, 2000, p. 20). Perhaps some of the greatest challenges in urban education reflect a matrix of domination rather than a single form of oppression.

For the students in our case studies, feelings of marginalization were perpetuated by institutional forces that pushed them to seek spaces of safety that were not always congruent with academic participation and engagement. In short, we must look at ways schools are marginalizing certain students by privileging and perpetuating particular White, middle-class, heterosexual models of success (Delpit, 1988; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Venzant Chambers et al., 2011). We must also remain committed to balancing macro-perspectives of school achievement with knowledge of locally occurring social and cultural processes that have differential impacts on students in various racial subgroups. To ensure the success of all students, we must think expansively about what students need and respond appropriately to students whose voices we must strain the hardest to hear.

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