

“Racism is alive and well”: (Re)visiting the University of Florida’s Black Student Union’s history through composite counterstorytelling

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Abstract

This study centers on the origins of the Black Student Union (BSU) during the late 1960s and early 1970s at the University of Florida (UF) presented as a speculative fiction composite counterstory. The story presented in this manuscript serves as a cautionary tale of what the future of higher education will be, if white supremacy persists, even when white people will no longer represent a numerical majority. Though the findings utilized in this piece are decades old, we offer the current climate of public institutions and DEI initiatives to emphasize the importance of counterstories that underscore the resistance and activism that challenges oppressive systems and birthed such organizations as Black Student Unions, which are now increasingly under threat of elimination. Utilizing BlackCrit, we look backward to explore the permanence of anti-Black racism in our future. We invoke the genre of speculative fiction to give form to our findings - a fictional short story that posits a possible future world that runs counter to expectations for a post-racial future on college campuses and in the United States more broadly. Through a deeper understanding of how Black students drew upon their social networks during the Long Black Student Movement era, we aim to spark dialogue about the future of Black student advocacy at predominantly white American colleges and universities.

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Introduction

Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the desegregation of higher education was a process, not an event (Rogers, 2012). The University of Florida did not admit its first Black undergraduate students until 1962. Once admitted, Black students struggled to find a sense of belonging, describing their status as “there and ignored” (Wallenstein, 2008, p. 44). Black Student Unions rose out of this sentiment, demanding that “American higher education make itself more hospitable and relevant to Black persons and ideas” (Rogers, 2009, p. 31). This study centers on the origins of the Black Student Union (BSU) at the University of Florida (UF). More than fifty-five years after its founding in 1968, the history of BSU at UF remains understudied. Far more is known about April 15, 1971, known as Black Thursday, which resulted from ignored demands by the Black Student Union to rectify Black students’ lack of

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supportive resources and exclusion “from meaningful social and cultural endeavors on this campus” (History, n.d.). The subsequent campus unrest culminated in students occupying the president’s office, leading to the expulsion and withdrawal of more than 100 Black students from the university.

Like their counterparts across the country (Rogers, 2006; 2012, Thompson, 2004), this activism impacted UF materially and physically - changing its landscape with the founding of the Institute of Black Culture in 1971 (Institute of Black Culture, n.d.). Black Thursday is undoubtedly a critical moment in UF history; however, the history of the Black Student Union remains inadequately documented. Consistent with BlackCrit, this manuscript challenges the ahistoricism present in the current understanding of the University of Florida’s Black Student Union foundation by placing Black Thursday within its proper context as a breakthrough in the protracted and cyclical battle for belonging and inclusion at the University of Florida (Dumas & ross, 2016).

This article is being published amidst increasing legislation that bans or seeks to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work and programming within public institutions nationwide, including the University of Florida. Earlier this year, the University of Florida eliminated all DEI spending, positions and appointments, which only accounted for less than 1% of the University’s annual budget for the 2022-2023 school year (Thomas, 2024). Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have condemned such actions and NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson cautioned that “Florida’s rampant anti-Black policies are a direct threat to the advancement of our young people and their ability to compete in a global economy” (AP, 2024). Moreover, The Coalition of Concerned Black Alumni, a group comprised of Black UF graduates, have demanded that the University utilize private funding to support DEI initiatives that state legislation has banned (Rayford, 2024). Though the findings utilized in this piece are decades old, we offer the current climate of public institutions and DEI initiatives, to emphasize the importance of counterstories that underscore the resistance and activism that challenges oppressive systems and birthed such organizations as Black Student Unions, which are now increasingly under threat of elimination.

Black Student Unions and the Long Black Student Movement

Black student on-campus activism during the 1960s and 1970s is separate but related to the Black student off-campus activism as a part of the contemporary civil rights period (1954-1965) (Rogers, 2012). Rogers (2012) argues that “this late 1960s Black power campus struggle represented a profound ideological, tactical, and spatial shift from early 1960s off-campus civil rights student confrontations” (p. 3). Although these moments of Black student mobilization may have represented “ideological, tactical, and spatial” changes, they are “separate but interlocking tussles in the Long Black Student Movement (LBSM) from 1919-1972” (Rogers, 2012, p. 3). The 1960s were not the beginning of Black student mobilization. Instead, the LBSM extends this activism to the 1920s (Rogers, 2012). Early examples of Black student activism include participation in “the antebellum abolitionist and colonization movements” (Rogers, 2012, p. 30).

Black Student Unions endeavored to make campuses habitable for Black students in higher education by challenging systemic racism and fighting for standardized inclusion (Rogers, 2012; Rook, 2006). Students critiqued institutions for “perpetuat[ing] Black oppression

through its admissions policies, its 'white-oriented' curriculum, and its overwhelmingly white teaching staff" (Rooks, 2006, p. 18). Black students did not work in isolation from others; however, Rogers (2012) argued for the need to recognize the "Black Campus Movement (BCM)" as distinct; therefore, this paper focuses on the experiences of Black students. Numerous studies have explored San Francisco State College's Black Student Union (San Fran BSU) (Rogers, 2009; 2012; Rooks, 2004; Thompson, 2004), one of the earliest Black student-led organizations on American college campuses and a group whose activist work led to the introduction of Black studies on their campus (Rogers, 2009). Thus, an opportunity exists to expand our understanding of the diverse histories within the LBSM and how it shaped universities. Moreover, while colleges and universities may currently contend with Black student enrollment and achievement, "few understand the strengths of the communities from which these students come" (Thompson, 2004, p. 434). Through a deeper understanding of how Black students drew upon their social networks during the Long Black Student Movement era, we aim to spark dialogue about the future of Black student advocacy at predominantly white American colleges and universities (C.J. Thompson, 2004).

This article centers on the formation of the Black Student Union at UF during the late 1960s and early 1970s. We begin by outlining the four framing ideas of BlackCrit Theory (Coles & Powell, 2018), the conceptual framework for our study, and then describe our historical research methods and how we present our findings. What follows is a narrative that blends historical data with speculative fiction - which we describe as a speculative fiction composite counterstory (SFCC).

Conceptual Framework

BlackCrit

We employ BlackCrit as the conceptual framework for this study. BlackCrit underscores how Black people are marginalized, dehumanized, and disdained globally. Drawn from Afro-pessimism and critical race theory (CRT), Dumas and ross (2016) put forth BlackCrit theory to center "the endemic structural, cultural and psychological manifestations of the dehumanization of Black people" (Tillis, 2018, p. 313). Though CRT is often used to make sense of racism experienced by Black people, it is not specifically a "Black theorization of race" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 416). BlackCrit allows research to make visible the "structural embeddedness of anti-Blackness" in society (Coles, 2020, p. 7) and move "beyond a general race critique" (Bryan, 2020, p. 12). Furthermore, Coles & Powell (2019) outlined four framing ideas of BlackCrit, including (1) "anti-Blackness as endemic," (2) "Blackness exists in tension with neoliberal-multicultural imagination," (3) the necessity for BlackCrit to "create space for Black liberatory fantasy," and (4) resist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories" (Coles & Powell, 2019). This paper draws on the framing ideas of BlackCrit while building upon three CRT tenets; "racism as normal," "voice or counterstory," and "interest convergence" (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

This project focuses on the framing ideas of BlackCrit and CRT tenets most pertinent to this work. While CRT in education began by drawing upon examples from Black people, CRT is not solely about confronting anti-blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016). BlackCrit draws from CRT; however, it differs as its framing ideas are specific to Blackness. For instance, whereas CRT posits that racism is endemic to American society, BlackCrit stresses the permanence of anti-

Blackness. Both the concepts of interest convergence and the tension between BlackCrit and neoliberal multiculturalism question laws and policy changes promoted as wholly beneficial to people of color. In order to challenge majoritarian stories about Black students and Black student groups on US campuses, we present a counterstory of UF's Black Student Union. Counterstories center the experiences of people of color, which directly relates to the BlackCrit critique of majoritarian stories. BlackCrit explicitly makes space for Black liberatory fantasy, and though the outcome of the story presented by our data is not inherently liberatory, we see the act of creating it as liberatory. We, as Black scholars, are creating work that we hope pushes the bounds of what "counts" as research.

Positionality

As authors' committed to work that furthers racial justice, we share our positionalities as we believe it is critical to share our relation to this work and the ways that our identities makes us both insiders-outsiders to this work. Author A is a Black American cisgender heterosexual man from the American South. Author A was a member of Black Student Union at his undergraduate alma mater, Auburn University. He also served as the President of the university's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Author B is a Black Canadian cisgender heterosexual woman of Jamaican parentage. Author B was active in the formation of her high school's Black Student Union in Brampton, Ontario, Canada and several years later would serve as the President for the Black Graduate Student Organization (BGSO) at the University of Florida while she pursued her doctoral studies. As former active members of organizations that support Black students at various institutional levels, we can be seen as cultural insiders as we have been involved with similar organizations as UF's BSU but were not active members of the organization at any point. As higher-education professionals, we want to emphasize our support of student organizations that center and serve the specific needs of marginalized students, including Black students. Such organizations have been instrumental to our own success as people, students and professionals. Author A credits his experience in Auburn University's BSU with advancing his understanding of the ways in which policy exacerbates disparities between Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Additionally, faced with the ever-declining Black enrollment at Auburn University during his undergraduate career, Author A found rejuvenating and resilience-building community through his engagement with the Black Student Union. Author B recalls how the friends she made through UF's BGSO were instrumental in navigating her doctoral studies as a first-generation College student as they shared their experiences and resources. We challenge all attacks on institutional work that supports diversity, equity, and, inclusion, which we also see as threats to student organizations, like Black student unions, which have been and continue to be instrumental in student activism and greater change in society.

Method

Speculative Fiction Composite Counterstory

This manuscript draws on primary and secondary sources chronicling the history of BSU at UF to present a speculative fiction composite counterstory (Carrington, 2016; Cook & Dixon, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016). This SFCC's primary sources consist of newspaper articles from the student-led paper, the Independent Florida Alligator, and university documents related to the inception of the BSU at UF (Cook & Dixon, 2012). We gathered the historical

data used in this study during visits to the University of Florida's Department of Special & Area Collections. Original issues of *The Independent Florida Alligator*, the University of Florida's student-run newspaper, are kept in glue-bound tomes. At the time of this research, the entire catalog of the *Alligator* was not available electronically. Thus, we reviewed each newspaper issue from April 1968 through December 1972, identifying articles related to the Black Student Union, campus racial tension, and general campus unrest. Ultimately, we sought to uncover how the historical narrative of this period unfolded in the public record by examining artifacts that provided context for the early years of the BSU. We also utilized secondary sources about the LBSM across the US to supplement the primary sources and provide an understanding of the broader social context and how events taking place at the University of Florida were simultaneously unique in their particularities but connected to student movements across the country.

We invoke the genre of speculative fiction to give form to our findings - a fictional short story that posits a possible future world that runs counter to expectations for a post-racial future on college campuses and in the United States more broadly (Carrington, 2016). We position the reader in a future where virtual reality newspaper archives reconstruct reported events around the reader, much like current-day virtual reality. Many virtual reality scenes are taken directly from the newspapers, with minor details added for effect. We leverage direct quotes from newspaper articles and place them in a context faithful to our understanding of the reported events. All characters in the scenes of the virtual reality newspaper archives are historical figures, and care was taken not to embellish in misrepresentative ways.

As our story envisions a future that is technologically driven, we connect this work to Afrofuturism methodologies though, we acknowledge our pessimistic views of the future. Afrofuturism is defined as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (Womack, 2013, p. 9). As such, our use of speculative fiction draws on the imaginary, technology, future and liberation. Moreover, we see liberation in our methodological approach including the presentation of the data as a speculative fiction composite counterstory, rather than evident in the conclusion of the story itself. Instead, the story we present demonstrates an Afropessimistic view of the future. Afropessimism and Afrofuturism are very much connected as they "represent different forms of imagination within the afterlife of slavery" (Hart, 2021, p. 197).

We present the data on UF's Black Student Union as an SFCC, allowing us to "create space for Black liberatory fantasy" (Dumas & ross, 2015, p. 431). Unlike purely fictional stories, we use data to develop a story "grounded in real life" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 136) but set in an imagined future. Though there are several functions of counterstories, this SFCC serves to "challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 136). Finally, composite counterstories make research accessible beyond academic audiences. As such, SFCC serves as both our findings and a "pedagogical teaching and learning [tool] that use[s] story to expand our understanding of reality and possibility" (Cook & Dixon, 2013, p. 186). We submit that the nonfictional stories of marginalized students from another era embedded within a fictional (albeit plausible) future may be leveraged to help readers apprehend the realities of racism's resilience across time, which is a fundamental tenet of both BlackCrit and CRT.

Findings

Findings as Storytelling

Counterstories, counternarratives and storytelling have been employed by critical race theorists to “make visible the racial biases deeply embedded in the unstated norms of American law and culture” (Brown & Jackson, 2022, p. 18). One of CRT’s foundational education scholars, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2022) cautions that counterstorytelling is not merely to vent about racial struggles but to underscore racial injustice writ large. Consequently, we present our research findings as a counterstory in the spirit of Derrick Bell’s (1992) science fiction story “Space Traders.” Stories are powerful tools for destroying mindset, which Delgado (1989) defines as “the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourse takes place” (p. 2413). We employ the context of the founding of the Black Student Union at the University of Florida to imagine, through a lens of racial realism (Bell, 2005), how racism will continue to bear down on Blacks even when non-Hispanic whites are no longer the numerical majority. Furthermore, this counterstory reveals how Black students at UF struggled against racism for many years before Black Thursday. The following section tells the story of Miles, and Ella, two traditionally-aged students attending the University of Florida in 2071. Notably, the story takes place several years after the U.S. Census Bureau’s prediction that by 2060 non-Hispanic whites will no longer be the majority in the United States. Miles and Ella follow a similar path to our path as researchers, yet serve as a proxy for the reader - encountering a history that challenges and expands the popular narrative of the founding of the Black Student Union at the University of Florida.

Toward a White Student Union

Miles desperately needed to find someone to serve as the advisor for his brand-new student organization. Seventy-eight students had already declared membership within the organization, exceeding the number of required members by fifty students. The founding of the University of Florida’s White Student Union would be a critical moment in the institution’s history as long as people continued to catch the vision. As a cisgender white man, Miles knew that the organization would receive less backlash if the advisor was a person of color. He hoped that having a person of color as an advisor would convince others that the new student group was nothing like white nationalist hate groups from back in the day. Instead, the White Student Union would preserve the history and culture of white students - an underrepresented minority at the university.

When he was admitted in 2069, Miles was ecstatic to be attending the number one ranked institution in the US News & World Report. However, when he arrived, he quickly realized that only 20% of the students were white. Alternatively, Black and multiracial students comprised 40% of the student population. Furthermore, Miles was disturbed to witness faculty and staff openly supporting the Black Student Action Network, an underground militant organization that emerged after the state legislature disbanded the Black Student Union in 2024. Meanwhile, white students’ efforts to establish a legitimate organization for preserving the history and values of Western Civilization remained unsupported. Miles’ parents were understandably disappointed in the university. They had even threatened to rescind their substantial annual financial contributions to the university and make Miles transfer. However, Miles had staved off his parents’ reaction by promising to create change within the institution

and found a White Student Union. For now, his parents agreed to continue giving to the university and allow him to continue his studies. This was important to Miles. As a minority in America and at the University of Florida, Miles believed white people needed a group to foster self-love, advocacy, and pride in their heritage.

Unfortunately, Miles had been unable to convince any staff members to sign on as an advisor, which led him to his most recent plan. Miles thought that if he could prove that the condition of white people was similar to the circumstances under which the Black Student Union was originally conceived, he could easily convince a faculty or staff member to be the White Student Union's advisor. He believed it was doable - with a bit of research.

Miles entered the library and approached the student employee, a brown-skinned woman, sitting behind the help desk.

"I am seeking information on the founding of the Black Student Union at UF. I heard that there was an exhibit on display right now. Is that correct?"

"It was," said the woman tepidly. "We had an exhibit in Special Collections. Unfortunately, we've been told it was out of compliance with state and institutional policies, and it has been closed to the public until it can be taken down."

"How can they do this?" balked Miles. "Isn't that a violation of freedom of speech? "I need that information for a project I'm working on!"

"Well, the information is still available," the woman clarified. "It's just that the way the information was presented made unfounded allegations of institutional racism against the university and state of Florida."

"Institutional racism?" Miles chuckled. "Talk about a blast from the past. Any chance I can take a peek anyway?"

The young woman behind the counter looked unamused. Miles poked out his bottom lip in mock sadness. She looked skeptically at Miles for an eternity before keying something that Miles could not read into the holographic screen before her face.

"Ok," she said, exasperated. "But I'll have to come with you. I'm Ella, by the way."

"Perfect! And I'm Miles," he said, smiling.

A Force to Deal With

Ella stood and walked around the counter. As she stepped from behind the holographic display, Miles saw that she wore a thick black sweater with red lettering that read '*Anti-Black Racism - Alive & Well @ UF Since 1853.*' Miles froze as he read the words.

"So, is this research for a class?" asked Ella as she began maneuvering through the library toward the exhibit.

Miles almost tripped over his feet as he snapped back to reality and struggled to catch up to Ella. He worried that if she knew about the White Student Union, she might be unwilling to help, so he acted like he hadn't heard her question. Ella stopped briefly at an unlabeled door before slipping in and closing the door. Seconds later, she motioned Miles inside.

The room was littered with Black Thursday artifacts. Historical photos were projected along

the walls. HoloGuides paced the room, reciting short vignettes and referencing photos as they appeared. An art installation of a giant scroll containing the list of demands submitted to University President Stephen C. O'Connell in April 1971 hung from the ceiling.

Miles approached a thick glass slate affixed to a marble base. This was the control panel for the university's new Arti-View, an immersive holographic visualization system that brought historical artifacts to life. Once programmed with the desired source material, the Arti-View could turn the room into a window to the past. Every document possessed by Special Collections was programmed into Arti-View, effectively making it a time machine.

"Please don't touch that, Miles," Ella said. She stepped before the Arti-View and scrolled through the menu with a finger. An endless sea of icons appeared, underscored by dates. She typed '*Black Student Union*.' The icons reindexed themselves. Ella clicked on the first available icon labeled as March 1968. Suddenly the room spun around them, and colors and images blended. When the room stopped spinning, they stood at the center of a living room filled with Black students.

One of the men in the room spoke, "If we are going to survive, we will have to fight. Each day we are *losing our identity* (R. Thompson, 1968, p. 3). The Afro-American Student Association (AASA) needs to be *a force to deal with whenever the UF administration makes any decision affecting Blacks*" (R. Thompson, 1968, p. 3).

"What is the Afro-American Student Association?" Miles asked the man.

"They can't hear you," Ella responded. "The Afro-American Student Association is a proto-BSU that was founded in 1967. So if you want to know how BSU was founded, the AASA is where you should start."

"They are fighting to save their identity. I can relate to that," Miles said to himself.

"How, exactly?" Ella asked.

"I just meant that I can understand why this group was so militant considering the national Civil Rights movement." Miles lied.

Ella pressed an icon on the control panel. The room spun around them again, and they were back in 1968. They were in a conference room. Two white men sat across from a group of Black students. A colorful graphic hovered over the head of one Black student, identifying him as Wayne Fulton, the president of the AASA. The white men were the directors of UF Housing and Off-Campus Housing, Harold C. Riker and Carl Opp.

"I want to be clear," said one of the students. "We are demanding that something be done about the racial housing discrimination in Gainesville."

"We are a university," said Riker. "We don't control the greater Gainesville community."

"This institution brings a tremendous wealth to the local community," Wayne Fulton began.

"I find it hard to believe that it cannot ensure fair and adequate housing for Black students."

"And how would you propose we do that?" asked Opp.

"By *prevent[ing] students from renting from a landlord that discriminates, thus freezing the landlord out*" (Almand, 1968, p. 5). Fulton responded.

"That's not possible," said Riker. "Your only option would be to seek prosecution under the 1964 Civil Rights Act."

The scene froze. Miles rolled his eyes.

"I'm afraid to ask what you are rolling your eyes at," Ella said.

"I don't understand why they expected the university to strongarm landlords for them," Miles said.

Ella sighed. "They were asking their university – which couldn't house all of them, by the way – to help them secure housing in a racist community. How studious would you be if you weren't sure where you would lay your head each night?"

Miles stayed silent.

Any Means of Dissent is Possible

The room morphed around Ella and Miles again. They now stood along the perimeter of a large conference room. Stephen C. O'Connell, university president, presided over an event called the Action Conference.

"Student Government is committed to addressing the *problem of the Negro student* by helping to recruit more Black students to the University of Florida," said a young white man identified as Steve Zack, the administrative assistant to the student body president. "We need to ensure we don't lose *this Negro resource pool to other state universities up north*" (SG to Recruit Negroes, 1968, p. 6).

"Great," said President O'Connell. "And I am committed to ensuring that the university offers a Black history course."

However, for all the progress made, it was clear from the faces in the room that many students were discontented.

"Hell no, one course in Black history is not enough. We need several more with Black professors teaching them, not whites," Wayne Fulton chimed in (R. Thompson, 1968, p. 14).

"Is that all?" asked a member of the administration with a chuckle.

"No," Larry Jordan stated flatly. "We want to have a role in hiring Black professors, more Black-oriented courses, and counselors for Black students."

"And if we are unwilling to meet these demands?" asked President O'Connell.

"Let me be clear..." Fulton began. "If we do not see real progress in the coming weeks, then *any means of dissent is possible* within the current academic year" (R. Thompson, 1968, p. 3).

The scene froze again.

"You know," said Miles, "I feel like they are just expecting too much, too fast. After all the progress made in their first year, they are still ready to raise hell?"

Ella swallowed her anger. "How long after the university's founding did white students have to wait for classes about them to be taught by professors that looked like them? How long did white students have to wait for nondiscriminatory off-campus housing? How long did they

have to wait for counselors that understood their unique needs? How -"

"The administrators were trying!" Miles interrupted.

"Were they?" asked Ella. "This sounds like interest convergence to me."

Miles' blank stare implored Ella to keep talking.

"It seems like they could only figure out how to do things that were in the best interest of Black folks when Black people's demands converged with the interests of powerful whites," Ella remarked (Taylor, 2016). "President O'Connell was compelled by campus and community unrest to create the Action Conference. Even the Student Government initiative to bring more Black students to UF was described as a means to a financial end."

"Maybe that Steve Zack guy just chose his words poorly," Miles pleaded.

"You seem to have more sympathy for Steve Zack than any Black students we have seen."

"Because the institution is trying!" exclaimed Miles. "These students are so impatient and ungrateful."

"When you first visited campus, what color was your tour guide?" asked Ella.

"I don't know," said a frustrated Miles. "white, I guess?"

"You know," continued Ella matter-of-factly, "You never told me what course this research is for."

"White," responded Miles – still ignoring Ella's question. "But that doesn't mean the university is privileging me over Black students."

"Miles," began Ella. "What exactly are we doing here? You asked me to help you research the founding of the Black Student Union, but you seem resistant to the idea that there were legitimate grievances with the institution that warranted student activism."

"Sorry," said Miles. "Keep going?"

Ella slid her fingers along the control panel. When the room stopped spinning, they stood in a Gainesville barbershop in November 1968. A Black student identified as Fred Kanali entered the doors of the barbershop.

"You won't be getting a haircut here," replied the barber.

"What's the problem?" Fred asked.

"Listen nigger," began the barber. "You need to leave."

Fred, tears staining his brown cheeks, turned to exit the barbershop. The scene twisted around them as Ella moved them forward in time a few weeks. A group of white students had Fred surrounded.

"Can I please just go to class?" Fred asked.

Without responding, the white students began spitting on him. Fred covered his face, and the scene froze ("Racism Alive and Well," 1968, p. 7; "Interfraternity Council Blamed," 1969).

"He's had a rough couple of weeks," Miles conceded.

“How long is Fred supposed to wait patiently for basic human decency?” asked Ella.

Miles got the sense that he shouldn’t respond. Ella changed the date on the control panel to April 4, 1968.

Suddenly, Ella and Miles stood in the center of a dark street. The scant light provided by the streetlights helped Ella identify the area as Northwest Gainesville, a predominantly Black area of the city. It was eerily quiet (Alper, 1968a; Alper, 1968b; Kennedy, 1968a) save for the sound of an approaching vehicle. Its headlights abruptly appeared as it reached the summit of a hill. The car slowed as it approached Ella and Miles.

“I didn’t think anyone could see us,” Miles said. His nerves made the statement sound more like a question.

A siren pierced through the silence. Red lights illuminated the neighborhood. The houses and trees looked as if they were stained with blood. The red light was abruptly replaced with an icy blue, followed by a spotlight - stopping them both in their tracks. Two police officers jumped out of the patrol car and swiftly drew their firearms.

“What the hell is going on?” demanded Miles.

“All right, boys. Keep your hands where we can see them.”

Miles’s heart raced in his chest. The pair turned around and saw a group of Black teenage boys. Their hands were in the air. Their eyes were wide with fear and confusion. The police approached the group of Black teenagers with their guns still drawn.

“We received a report of riots and property damage in this area,” said one of the officers.

“What’s that got to do with us?” one of the teenagers asked.

Reality stirred around Ella and Miles. When things settled, they were on the same dark road as the previous scene. Large, imposing military vehicles lined the street. The growl of their engines echoed through the streets. Men in military uniforms stood like sentries beside the vehicles. Arti-View identified these men as members of Troop E, 153 Armored Cavalry.

“I heard a white woman was assaulted by a group of these niggers last week after King was assassinated.” One soldier grunted.

“Yeah, I heard a mob of them were rioting in the streets,” another trooper responded.

“That’s why we are here,” said a man that was clearly more highly ranked than the others, “They can *speak their peace, march their march, and threaten their threats*, but we are going to keep them in line” (“Racial Peace,” 1968, p. 6). Honestly, I get why they are upset. Martin Luther King Junior was the *only great leader of Black freedom that both Black and white felt akin to* (Moran, 1968, p. 7). But he also proved that peace was the only path to equality.”

“Right,” the first soldier responded, “and we are going to keep the peace. Military occupation is a far better outcome than ‘temporary anarchy and local racial war’” (“Racial Peace,” 1968, p. 6). “Ultimately, we will either ‘sit down and talk, iron out our differences and be friends, or we shall destroy one another and the great nation which we all, Black and white, have built’” (p. 6).

The scene froze.

“Riots, property destruction, assaults,” Miles began. “Wow.”

“We don’t even know if any of that happened,” Ella responded. “If the riots, property destruction, and assaults were confirmable Arti-View would’ve shown us.”

“Well, the military was there for a reason,” said Miles. “I’m sure military presence averted *possible killings, lootings, and physical attacks*” (“A Solution,” 1968, p. 6).

“Who said anything about looting and killing?” asked Ella.

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” Ella exhaled.

“I’m saying that violence solves nothing. It only destroys the great nation we’ve built.”

“Great for who?”

Ella did not wait for a response. She moved the dial forward to April 6. Colors mingled and danced around them. When their vision settled, they stood outside of Mount Olive Baptist Church. AASA leaders Wayne Fulton and Larry Jordan stood on the church’s raised steps next to two Black activists who were identified as Joe Waller and Levi Wilcox. About 70 other citizens crowded around them. After a corporate prayer and a collective Amen, the four leaders led the group down the street. The march ended at the Alachua County Jail (Kennedy, 1968c). An officer stood in the doorway to the jail.

“We are here to demand the release of Jack Dawkins,” said Levi Wilcox to the officer.

“That Dawkins boy has been charged with arson. So unless y’all want to end up in jail alongside him, you need to go home,” said the officer.

“Mark my words. The next time we come, we might take him,” Wilcox said (Kennedy, 1968c, p. 3).

“You angry Negroes better stay away from this jail,” replied the officer.

“Oh, we will be back,” said Joe Waller. “This city is in danger of being destroyed by angry Negroes like ourselves. This is a *declaration of war - a declaration of independence*” (Alper, 1968a, p. 5).

“A war, huh?” Mocked the officer. “I thought your king ordered nonviolence. You Negroes just can’t help yourself, though, huh?”

“You and I both know the *good white folks’* system birthed our anger,” Wilcox said. “It was [t]he *assassin’s bullet that killed Dr. King killed nonviolence, and just about killed integration*” (Alper, 1968c, p. 13).

The officer moved swiftly toward the crowd, trailed by several other officers. Ella couldn’t tell how many officers there were, but they looked formidable despite being outnumbered.

“Joe Waller and Levi Wilcox,” one of the officers began. “You two are under arrest for inciting a riot.”

The scene froze.

Freedom and Power

Ella moved them forward in time to Sunday, April 7.

A Black man, identified as Dr. Marshall Jones, a psychology professor at UF, was leading a demonstration at Gainesville City Hall alongside students, faculty, and community members (Kennedy, 1968b).

“Gainesville is a racist community,” Dr. Jones half-screamed.

The group responded affirmatively.

“The University of Florida is a racist institution,” he continued.

More affirmation.

“Even as I speak, I am embroiled in a battle to obtain the tenure status that I have been denied tenure because of my commitment to justice and activism. There must be a reckoning, and it is up to the Black citizens of Gainesville and those who stand in solidarity with us to make this happen!”

Cheers erupted.

He continued, “We must never forget that King’s philosophy ‘was not simply nonviolence.’ He called for *resistance to war, poverty, and racism by direct action* (Kennedy, 1968b). We must take direct action against Gainesville and the University of Florida for how they alienate, denigrate, and impoverish Black citizens and students.”

The group began to march closer to City Hall. As they approached, police officers flooded out of the doors and descended upon the group of demonstrators. Dr. Marshall Jones and about 20 other people were placed in handcuffs.

The scene froze.

“I feel like they are just mad at white people but aren’t interested in being productive. They just want to tear down innocent white people,” Miles quipped.

“Are we watching the same scenes?” Ella asked. “I see several powerful white people ranging from disinterested to staunchly opposed to progress. Black activists, like Dr. Marshall Jones and Levi Wilcox, were not blindly upset with all white people. You heard Wilcox say that it was the *good white folks’ system* that birthed their anger. The system is what is hated, not white people.”

“You believe that?” asked Miles.

“I do,” Ella continued. “Frantz Fanon (1963) argued that the colonizer conceptualizes the life of the colonized individual, and thus decolonization must be *an agenda for total disorder*. Since we are colonized through violence, *the colonized man liberates himself in and through violence*” (p. 2; p. 44).

“Who is France Fanon?” asked Miles incredulously.

Ella shut her eyes and exhaled loudly.

So, you agree with the riots and the beatings?” Asked Miles.

“We have witnessed exactly zero riots and zero beatings,” said Ella. “And no, I am not advocating for killings, beatings, or the destruction of property. But shouldn’t we question why the tactics used to take and make this country are suddenly taboo when the colonized threaten to adopt them? Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy was that civil disobedience and demonstrations were the *instruments of creative power that work to pull down mountains of evil* (Fine, 1968, p. 7). Tearing down mountains is a violent process, wouldn’t you agree?”

Miles said nothing. Ella moved them to May 11, 1969.

The Afro-American Student Association was meeting with UF administrators. President Stephen C. O’Connell and Vice President for Student Affairs Lester Hale were there. Miles peered over President O’Connell’s shoulder to sneak a look at the agenda.

“Black student recruiting, dormitory bigotry, remedial programs for disadvantaged students, and the Black student-administration relationship” (Osier, 1969, p. 1), began Miles. “Seems like the agenda hasn’t changed much since 1967.”

“Neither have the problems,” quipped Ella.

“Nearly half of all Black students at the University of Florida are members of the AASA (Doucette, 1969), so our requests are those of a significant portion of Black students,” said Larry Jordan.

“Listen,” said Lester Hale. “The University of Florida is not interested in instituting remedial programs for disadvantaged Black students. As this institution grows, more competitive *junior colleges should be the focus of Black student recruiting*. Black students have it good at UF. It’s time to stop asking for more. Meeting adjourned” (Joseph, 1969, p. 1).

The scene froze.

Ella clicked on the next available date, May 18, 1969.

Ella and Miles stood outside Tigert Hall, UF’s administration building, amongst about 75 students. Many of the students were members of the AASA, but about 45 white students joined them.

One of the Black students addressed the group, “Today we commemorate the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. But, unfortunately, this commemoration is not a celebration. Despite the Supreme Court’s ruling, *UF has continued to exist as a segregated institution* where Black students merely exist as tokens. The newspaper reports that Mr. Hale called our meeting last week a success. We disagree” (Joseph, 1969).

Larry Jordan emerged from the group grasping a copy of the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision. He ascended the steps of Tigert Hall, took a lighter from his pocket, and set the papers ablaze.

“The deliberateness of a snail and the speed of a turtle will not help us. We must do something now!” Larry Jordan declared. “Today we present four simple demands to the UF administration: ‘1) more Black students, 2) more Black faculty members, 3) employment of more Blacks in staff positions, and 4) training of campus police not to harass Black students’” (Reddick, 1969, p. 1).

“Seriously? Fire?” Miles asked in shock.

Ella rolled her eyes and moved them to September 1969. A Black man in a dark suit stood before the Afro-American Student Association. The students looked on skeptically.

“Good evening. My name is Roy Ishman Mitchell. I am the *new director for Blacks and disadvantaged students*. I’ll be taking over many of Don Henderson’s responsibilities, who served as the Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs from June until the beginning of this month. My primary role will be recruiting *Black and economically disadvantaged white students from the state’s community colleges*. I will be hiring three graduate assistants to support my work as well. I look forward to working with you all to improve UF” (Hinant, 1969, n.p.).

The students appeared unconvinced and unimpressed.

The scene froze.

“The next stop will be the last stop,” said Ella. “October 8, 1969.”

They stood in a classroom with journalist John Sugg and Larry Jordan, now identified as Secretary of Minority Affairs for Student Government and a founding member of the Afro-American Student Association.

“So Larry, I spoke to Mr. Roy Ishman Mitchell, and he communicated that *the atmosphere on campus is atrocious* and that, barring a change, *all hell will break loose*. Do you have a response to this?” (Adams, 1969, p. 3).

“I do. But first, I want to make it abundantly clear that the Afro-American Student Association is dead,” Larry Jordan began. “It has been replaced with a new organization of Black students, the Black Student Union (BSU).”

“Why the shift?” John Sugg asked.

“The heightened political identity of the Black students at the University of Florida. We believe that *there can be no separation of the problems of Black students from the problems of Black people. There can be no separation of the problems of racism from the problems of developing an academically liberated mind. We shouldn’t confine our activity to an attack of the problems of Black students. Black workers are equally or more important*” (Sugg, 1969, p. 5).

“How is this different from the beliefs of the AASA?” asked Sugg.

“We are a group of revolutionary nationalists. The Afro-American Student Association was culturally nationalistic. We have a political rather than cultural orientation, and our *duty as Black people is to confront the system [of racism] wherever and whenever necessary*. Our fundamental belief is that UF perpetuates racism, and *we want UF to take the lead in ending racism in the city, state, and nation*” (Sugg, 1969, p. 5).

“And I assume you all have some ideas of how you will do that?” asked Sugg.

“Of course,” Jordan said with a smirk. “We have a ten-point program. Are you ready to take this down?”

John Sugg grabbed a pen and nodded (Sugg, 1969, p. 5).

- 1) Freedom and power to determine the destiny of our school
- 2) Full enrollment in the schools for our people

- 3) An end to the robbery by the white man of our Black community
- 4) Decent educational facilities fit for the use of students.
- 5) An education for our people that teaches how to survive in the present-day society
- 6) Exclusion and restriction of all racist teachers from all public schools,
- 7) An immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people. Exclusion and restriction of all police and special agents from school premises
- 8) Reinstatement of all students who have been exempt, expelled, or suspended from school
- 9) Trial in student court by a jury of their peer group or students of their school of all students brought to the trial.
- 10) Power, enrollment, equipment, education, teachers, justice, and peace.

The scene froze.

Look at the Data

“Progress was being made,” Miles began, “but instead of taking this as a sign of *good faith*, the students further radicalized themselves and made unrealistic demands.”

“Miles, when should Black people expect to cash in on this good faith? It seems that fostering racism is the University of Florida’s natural state. These demands are nearly identical to those of other Black Student Unions nationwide during this period (Rogers, 2012; Wallenstein, 2008). The needs were clear, but the response was insufficient. It’s no wonder Black Thursday happened.”

“Black Thursday was reckless. The students fought for years to increase enrollment and then walked out. Where’s the logic?” Asked Miles.

“So Black people are supposed to endure oppression while trusting that white people will voluntarily decide to dismantle White supremacy? Where’s the logic?” Quipped Ella.

“They stood in silence.

“Miles, why are you really here?” Asked Ella.

“I’m launching a UF White Student Union here at UF, and I thought learning about the history of BSU would help. I just want to create a space for white students to celebrate their history. ”

“Which parts of their history, exactly?” Ella asked. “Settler colonialism, chattel slavery, whatever the hell Donald Trump was?”

“Your anti-white racism is showing.” snapped Miles.

Ella exhaled heavily. “Please explain how anything you’ve seen today makes you think that UF needs a White Student Union.”

“I saw a group of minorities fighting for a voice within the university. White students need to protect our voice and our interests before it’s too late,” said Miles.

“This university was literally built for you!” Ella exclaimed. “Your interests are the foundation of the university.”

“Look at the data,” Miles responded. “The white student population is declining at a steady pace. We are the minority, yet the Black Student Action Network, which was supposed to be disbanded, is thriving and has support from faculty and staff. What is the group even fighting for these days?”

“More Black mental health counselors,” began Ella. “More Black advisors. More Black career coaches. More students who are descendants of enslaved people.”

“Black students already have it good at UF,” Miles quipped. “Maybe that wasn’t true when Lester Hale said it, but surely we can agree that it is true today.”

“Miles, you only believe that because you aren’t a Black student at UF,” responded Ella.

“Ella, things are much better today than in the 1960s. Black people need to acknowledge that UF has done enough for them.”

“Enough? Miles, you can’t believe that.” Ella asked. She sounded genuinely hurt.

“I believe that Black students and their woke agenda have been slowly killing this great university since they were admitted in the 1960s.”

Ella exhaled as she moved toward the exit.

That night, Ella sent Miles a final appeal. As a Black woman and first-generation college student, Ella almost did not know where to begin. Her parents took out a reverse mortgage on their home and borrowed from their retirement just to help her afford tuition at the University of Florida. For Ella, visiting these moments in Black history at the University of Florida connected her experience at the institution to an ongoing struggle and solidified the importance of persevering. Rather than lean on her own words, Ella used an adapted version of an opinion editorial written by a Black student in 1969. She hoped that the words would resonate with him:

[In] your distorted views...only you are responsible for the great Western strides of progress, only your paternalistic liberalness or conservative radicalness can accurately decide the best distributions of rewards, the best methods of educating the masses and the proper attitude, manner, and techniques one should use in politely requesting a change in your status quo white existence. And for a while, we even believed you. But uh-uh, no mo’ baby. You’re unequivocally and damned wrong. (Horne, 1969).

Miles’ reply was short -“Ella, Thank you for your perspective. After careful consideration, I’ve decided not to start the White Student Union. Instead, I’ve decided to run for Student Government President. Our time together made me realize that what UF needs is to put an end to racial divisiveness. If I win, I will dismantle the Black Student Action Network - expelling all students who choose to remain affiliated and pursuing disciplinary action against faculty or staff aligned with this radical woke mob. I will make UF great again...for all students.”

Discussion

This speculative fiction composite counterstory elucidates the logic that leads to the deconstruction of measures aimed at redressing racial injustices and advancing equality, such as Black student organizations. Miles represents those in power who acknowledge systemic racism but work to end measures designed to reverse its effects as if they are no longer needed (Taylor, 2000). Dorsey and Chambers (2013) refer to this process as “Cedar” or C-D-R, convergence-divergence-retrenchment, explaining how the interests that converged in affirmative action are quickly moving toward divergence and retrenchment.

Miles is a white cisgender heterosexual man from a high-income family. His character and the

perspectives he embodies represent an amalgamation of Donald Trump's hubris and the many white characters encountered throughout the narrative. Ella, whose namesake is derived from Ella Baker, is a Black woman and first-generation college student. She represents the legacy of Black students at the University of Florida who have been thrust into the roles of activist and educator since their first moments on campus. Ultimately, it is important for Miles to reject the knowledge that Ella presents because racist policymaking is not traceable to a lack of knowledge. Thus, their interactions are representative of the tension between disparate interests – converging for a period before diverging and ultimately retrenching.

The Afro-American Student Association's agenda, and the Black Student Union after it, is not a foreign conception in 2024. UF's Black student enrollment has declined for the past decade, with Black students representing 10.1% of the total student population in 2009 and 6.97% in 2019 (*Enrollment*, 2020), even as the university ascends the *US News and World Report* rankings. Black students at UF endure an anti-Black climate perpetuated by their fellow students (Aspuru, 2020; Escalante, 2019; Kline, 2016) and the institution itself (Caron, 2018; Maner, 2019; Stewart, 2019; Wegman, 2017). Black students continue to fight for a student experience free from racial trauma (Aspuru, 2020; Wolcuff, 2020; Wood & Hernandez, 2020). There has undoubtedly been progress since the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it is worthwhile to question the extent to which this progress was palatable because of its capacity to serve the interests of the (predominantly) white state and university leadership.

Governor Ron DeSantis has taken up the cause of resisting the *woke mob* and refers to Florida as the state “where woke goes to die” (DeSantis, 2023). Specifically, he has defunded *DEI and CRT bureaucracies*, hoping they will *wither on the vine*. These policies aim to ensure “Florida's public universities and colleges are grounded in the history and philosophy of Western Civilization” and “prohibiting higher education institutions from using any funding, regardless of source, to support DEI, CRT, and other discriminatory initiatives” (Staff, 2023). Furthermore, House Bill 999 requires state institutions to remove from its programs “any major or minor in Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems” (Fla., 2023) and curtails DEI efforts in areas like hiring, performance appraisals, and procurement. The dark reality of Florida's political climate is that we might soon witness the end of the institution's ability and willingness to support organizations like the Black Student Union. Even if the organization's existence is permitted, the lack of *DEI bureaucracies* will prohibit institutions from acting on students' demands. The possible elimination or defunding of these organizations will likely have a deleterious impact on Black students attending PWIs as studies have underscored such organizations' impact on the well-being and overall academic success of Black students (Brunson et al., 2024).

Conclusion and Implications

We contend that the targeted nature of these policies and the prioritization placed on espousing *Western Civilization* is institutionalized white supremacy (Maher, Gunaydin, & McSwiney, 2021) and anti-black epistemicide (Grosfoguel, 2013). We take these assaults seriously, and the Afropessimism present in our conclusion exists as resistance to both the “revisionist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories” and “the anti-Black structures in their lives” (Coles & Powell, 2019, p. 118). Given the current context of the University of Florida's anti-DEI actions, our story expresses a form of “gloominess” about the future for Black students at the institution (Hart, 2021).

The relevance of this study is not unique to the University of Florida or the state. At present, 20 states have each passed laws or other state-level bans on Critical Race Theory (Schwartz, 2023). Moreover, anti-Blackness permeates American public education and society (Dumas & ross, 2016). Thus, this project transcends historical storytelling to serve as a prophetic refutation of white supremacy, grounded in the past, present, and future. While Miles embodies the normality of anti-Blackness, Ella represents Black optimism - hopeful in her ability to shift Miles' perspective through education. Hart (2018) explained that while Black optimism and Afropessimism have "similar conceptual roots," they bear different flowers (p. 16). He noted that "Afro-pessimists see the present order of things as radically anti-black, as constitutively incapable of apprehending the humanity of Black people" (Hart, 2018, p. 17).

Ultimately we use this story to reveal the necessity of honoring the history of the Black Student Union at UF while sharing both our optimism and pessimism about a world free of anti-Blackness. We are optimistic about the power of storytelling to challenge majoritarian narratives (Dumas & ross, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016) and "create space for Black liberatory fantasy" (Coles & Powell, 2019, p. 118); however, the historical and contemporary plight of Black people shows us that it takes more than sharing of history for systemic change.

Declarations

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