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## The Creation of Political Survival Strategies by Black Collegiate Women on Virginia's Predominantly White Campuses

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The Creation of Political Survival Strategies by Black Collegiate Women on Virginia's

Predominantly White Campuses

By Maya Jenkins

University of Mary Washington

### Abstract

The University of Mary Washington is a liberal arts institution founded in 1908 as a normal and industrial school for women (Our History - About UMW, 2015). Because of its small size, Mary Washington was historically known as Virginia's "undiscovered gem" (Boyer, 2011). Mary Washington is described as a place built to support the "innovative, passionate, intellectual, and genuine" (Boyer, 2011). However, in 2020, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade and a racial protest that took place near the college's campus caused many Black collegiate women at Mary Washington to question if their university was built to support them or exclusively the white women who were first welcomed there. Historically, Black women in predominantly white places have had to protect themselves when their institutions abandoned them. Black women at Mary Washington have had to create spaces for themselves in an environment that was never meant to facilitate their survival. This practice continues to this day. Guided by Jatiya Wrighten's heavy lifter theory and the Black collegiate women before me, I examine the survival strategies that Black women create at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and how those strategies translate into policy solutions. To bind my research, I focus on the University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia. Through historical analysis, literature review, and data collection from social media accounts, I found that Black collegiate women develop innovative and complex survival strategies to affirm their identity and to make space for Black people and other marginalized groups on campus. These survival strategies inherently embody harm reduction and the liberationist policy-making that serves not just the collegiate space, but the world.

The Creation of Political Survival Strategies by Black Collegiate Women on Virginia's  
Predominantly White Campuses

**Introduction**

On the evening of May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, in the city of Fredericksburg, Virginia, young demonstrators participated in a protest against police brutality. The event occurred within a 5-mile radius of the University of Mary Washington's campus. Although the demonstration was peaceful and primarily involved Fredericksburg high schoolers, Mary Washington students, and children, the Fredericksburg Police Department (FPD) released Ortho-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile (CS/ tear gas) on the crowd four consecutive times for disturbance of the peace. In a preliminary report, the Fredericksburg Police Department (2020) wrote,

For the safety of all involved, and with proper authority, the grenadier deployed a handheld Ortho-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile (CS) smoke canister toward the advancing crowd in an attempt to begin dispersing the large crowd. CS smoke was utilized as the least injurious level of force for this situation. As this stopped only some of the crowd, additional CS smoke canisters had to be utilized.

There is no evidence to suggest that the University of Mary Washington Campus Police (UMW PD) tear-gassed any civilians, however, UMW PD was present and working alongside the Fredericksburg police at various protest sites throughout the city that night (VanLowe, 2021). The release of this information caused many Mary Washington students to question their relationship to the University and the lack of accountability Mary Washington takes on in response to the racism Black students face on campus. I, alongside many other Black collegiate women, reflected on experiences we shared with racism and racial isolation on campus. Although the UMW Campus Police did not "pull the trigger," the event forced us to publicly question the infrastructure that put students on one side and our university on the other. We

wondered why and how our inclusivity-promoting police department could be complacent in harming so many young people, specifically Black women and girls.

To unpack these questions, the University of Mary Washington chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) created surveys measuring student opinions (The University of Mary Washington Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2021, p. 7), our school newspaper, *The Blue and Grey Press*, wrote news stories about police brutality in Fredericksburg (Weber, 2020), and a Black queer-led club, Radical Student Union, cultivated social media posts about defunding the police (Radical Student Union, 2020). Through this process, we found that the events on May 31st were not out of the ordinary to Mary Washington. The same system that put our campus police in proximity to the tear gassing of Mary Washington students is the same system that did not allow Black women to integrate into the university until the 1960s (Crawley, 2008, p. 98), and it is the same system that struggles to hire Black academics to teach Black centered classes. It is the same system that continuously uses pictures of Black collegiate women to gain admissions dollars without substantively engaging with the needs of Black women on campus.

We found that this system was bigger than ourselves and the original questions we wanted to answer. From sharing experiences of sexual or gender-based violence on campus to hearing our history and experiences almost exclusively taught by white academics made many of us feel as if Mary Washington was not made for us. We began to believe that Mary Washington, like most other institutions of higher education, was built for white success and white survival, even if that meant Black women's neglect.

Along with this revelation, we witnessed the work that Black collegiate women were doing to protect themselves against this system. We saw the labor they contributed, the continual

struggle they had, the community they built in times of isolation, how hard they fought, and the sacrifices they had to make to survive. Knowing that their predominantly white institutions (PWIs) could not protect them in the way that they protected white people, Black people, specifically Black women, developed survival strategies to protect themselves.

### **Thesis**

Drawing on Jaita Wrighten's heavy lifter theory (2020), I will conduct an interdisciplinary analysis of those survival strategies Black collegiate women employ in the face of institutional violence. I undertake a comparative study of Black collegiate women at two predominantly white institutions in Virginia, the University of Mary Washington (UMW) and the University of Virginia (UVA), in the late 2010s and the 2020s.

To conduct this analysis, I first explain the framing and practice of the heavy lifter theory in my research and its connection to survival strategies. I then provide a rationale for the case study selection and follow it up with a historical literature review that identifies the current research on Black women's survival strategies at UVA and UMW. Next, I introduce my original research by explaining my methodology, the main survival strategies I see present in both universities and an explanation of how this research can translate into policy solutions for institutions of higher education.

This research is timely and relevant because what is happening in the classroom and our universities is a microcosm of what is happening worldwide. Just like at UMW and UVA, the next generation of America's leaders is trying to create more effective ideas that do not replicate the harm of those oppressed in the past. One must see, value, and center the systematically ignored people to do that. Many of those people are Black women. Investigating what they did in the face of harm will help us create new ideas to aid institutions and universities more broadly.

Highlighting the policy solutions inspired by the labor and struggle of Black women at PWIs will illustrate the actionability of anti-racist change. Black women have and continue to make democratic advances in America's most prized spaces, the University. These policies do not solely apply to the classroom; they can help us approach some of the most significant racial and political dilemmas that impact this country and the world.

### **Theoretical Foundations and Defining Survival Strategies**

The intentional focus of Black women at predominantly white institutions can best be navigated through the heavy lifter theory. Jatia Wrighten (2020) devised the heavy lifter theory to explain the high success rate of Black Women in state legislatures. Black women have increased their numbers in state legislatures faster than Black men and white women (Wrighten, 2020, p. 2). Wrighten believes this phenomenon is due to the "unique experiences" Black women have in this country (Wrighten, 2020, p. 2). She describes the heavy lifter theory as "the premise that through their marginalized historical experiences, from slavery to after the Civil War and its consequences, Black women have embodied the tools, knowledge, and fortitude to effectively and decisively work together to address the specific problems of the Black community" (Wrighten, 2020, p. 2). These tools make Black women impactful policymakers for their constituents, encouraging voters to elect them.

In the heavy lifter theory, Wrighten exemplifies the research from authors and activists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, who argue that the spaces where Black women's identities intersect force them to problematize new ways of existing. Their gender and race deny them access to the social privileges that white women and Black men have, which allows them to see how a sexist and racist system could never be the source of liberation. As Audre Lorde said, the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2003, p.

26). This encourages Black women and gender non-conforming people to create movements outside of the structures used to oppress them. To gain the freedom and rights they dreamed of, Black women had to utilize the strategies and skills within them.

As Wrighten states, Black women's socio-cultural context has encouraged them to "community build outside of the confines of mainstream society" (Wrighten, 2022, p. 11). Wrighten believes that this community building is "ancestral training," which are lessons and strategies that Black women have technologically developed to respond to the racism they have experienced from generation to generation. Leadership in state legislatures positively correlates to intersectionality, specifically in Black women, partly due to the ancestral training Black women have undergone.

The heavy lifting theory is not confined to the legislature. This practice of community building permeates onto campuses of higher education. Black women at colleges and universities have been thought provokers and social justice policy engineers for generations. As said by Jamila L. Lee-Johnson, Khadejah Ray, Ayana T. Hardaway, and Ashton R. Cooper (2022), "Black womyn have pioneered more contemporary resistance movements in the fight for modern-day liberation for all marginalized and oppressed groups on and off the campus" (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022, p. 51). Using a case study, they found that Black "womyn's" largely forgotten labor has been paramount in social justice movements in universities and throughout American history (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022, p. 57). And this activism did not just come from protests or sit-ins. As argued by Christa J. Porter (2022), Black women create "pockets" in PWIs, "wherein they belong, matter, and love on each other (e.g., sororities, counseling groups, and organizations" (Porter, 2022, p. 109).



Along with Porter's, Lee-Johnson's article illustrates that Black women's activism is not always overt or entirely material. Black women at PWIs are doing the political heavy lifting by making Black women feel like they have a safe space to exist, which is a radical act. This paper relies on the heavy lifter theory by looking into those "pockets" that Black women create to make it easier for their peers to survive. Creating these "pockets" is how I define Black collegiate women's survival strategies. While Black women can act in overt forms of activism that help them survive, like protests, public meetings with the administration, and virtual thunderclaps, in this paper, I discuss the more covert survival strategies, like Black sorority panel discussions, fashion shows, Black collegiate study groups. These actions are also complex political survival strategies because they give Black women power and help them community build in spaces not meant for them to exist.

### **Case Study Rationale**

I chose the University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia as my primary case studies because both institutions exemplify how Black collegiate women survive in two different predominantly white spaces. The University of Virginia is almost six times the size of the University of Mary Washington, and the two schools are about 60 miles apart from each other. While these institutions are physically distant, they are inherently linked. When founded in 1908, Mary Washington was a state normal and industrial school for women (Crawley, 2008, p. 85). During World War II, the Virginia legislature voted to make Mary Washington a co-ordinate college of arts and sciences associated with the University of Virginia. In other words, Mary Washington and UVA were sister institutions. As indicated in Sierra Bellows, Carianne King, and Emma Rathbone's research on UVA's women's history, the University of Virginia was known as a "Gentleman's University" (Bellows et al., n.d.). Throughout the early 20th century,

UVA's students and administration viewed the admission of collegiate women into the institution as "portending the death of the honor system and, even worse, as an indication of 'creeping state-U-ism'" which would "destroy the institution's distinct character" (Crawley, 2008, p. 86). Mary Washington becoming a co-ordinate school of UVA was widely affirmed because it gave collegiate women the opportunity for a better education while providing a distance from UVA that would prevent co-education with men.

This official change also highlighted a socio-cultural pattern already present in Virginia's collegiate arena. The University of Virginia was a college for Virginia's most promising white men, and Mary Washington was a place where those men could find their nice white wives. Along with other social activities, for decades, the University of Virginia's male students would take group road trips to Mary Washington, where they would court white Mary Washington collegiate women (Crawley, 2008, p.243). These intercollegiate encounters impacted both universities' social environments. While these universities' relationship was birthed out of sexism, it gave white women the power of education and proximity to white male masculinity. This educational and social symbiotic relationship between Mary Washington and the University of Virginia never included Black women when they entered the campus in the '60s and '70s (Apprey & Poe, 2017) (Crawley, 2008).

This reality is different from the ones at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). As stated in Bernard Beck's research on the perception of Black and white colleges in pop culture, dissimilarly from PWIs, HBCUs were engineered to provide a means for "young African Americans to pursue the supreme prize of the American Dream: a college education" (Beck, 2015, p. 140). These institutions gave Black students the skills to "master the fields that

White people had reserved for themselves," while simultaneously giving them this space to create "a thriving collegiate subculture and an elite subculture of community leadership" (Beck, 2015, p. 141). Unlike at HBCUs, Black collegiate students at PWIs imagined and constructed spaces for themselves because they were never considered when the institutions' social fabrics were conceptualized. I focus on the University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia because Black women at both institutions were forced into "heavy lifting." They have always built structures of survival that help them thrive.

Since the mid-2010s, Black women at both institutions have publicized survival strategies through social media and local news media sources. I also focus on Mary Washington because of my proximity and familial awareness of Black people at UMW and the Black women who built that community. A comparison to UVA also is beneficial because of how large the Black community is, and the number of Black organizations that center around the Black experience. This gives me the evidence to better understand the survival strategies that Black collegiate women create on different PWIs.

### **Historical Context**

Higher education scholars Kim Saichaie and Christopher C. Morpew (2021) state that America's collegiate system focuses on particular goals for their students, "democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility" (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014, p. 501). Many thinkers believe those ideas have fueled our collegiate machine since its genesis. Founding fathers like Benjamin Rush believed that "learning and liberty were inseparable" (Zeiger, 2008). The University of Virginia and the University of Mary Washington embodied that phenomenon. Thomas Jefferson founded UVA in 1819 to produce "a bold experiment- a public university

designed to advance human knowledge, educate leaders, and cultivate an informed citizenry" (About the University, 2022). That university would build on the intellectual thought generated in England and France but would not replicate their academic institutions' restrictive organization and industry (Woods, 1985, p. 282). Jefferson planned to put a library in the center of campus instead of a chapel which was against common practice, symbolizing the necessity of knowledge even if it meant the sacrifice of preconceived ideals (the University of Virginia Library, 2019). However, freedom of thought was not the only founding principle that encouraged Jefferson to establish UVA.

The preservation of slavery was central to Thomas Jefferson's motivations. Much of the research regarding UVA's relationship to slavery is from a report produced by the University of Virginia's Presidential Commission on Slavery. In the report, they argued that slavery was at the University of Virginia's "core" (Sullivan, 2018, p. 15). Jefferson thought "a southern institution was necessary to protect the sons of the South from abolitionist teachings in the North" (Sullivan, 2018, pp. 15-16). Furthermore, while Black people were not students at the university until more than a century later, they were ingrained in the fabric that produced UVA. Before 1819, Jefferson's academic dream was erected by the free labor of enslaved Africans. Maurie D. McInnis states, "From constructing and maintaining the building to feeding and caring for the faculty and students, enslaved people brought into existence and then sustained the institution" (McInnis et al., 2019). Because of this historical reality, UVA was not a purely white campus.

Enslaved Black Africans co-habited UVA in a caste system. In UVA's early years, Black people could exist on campus but did not have rights. This reality enforced the necessity of surveillance on their bodies. Enslaved Black Africans did not need to be near their enslavers for them to "stay in line." They were being watched by the white campus community that believed

in the upkeep of the slave system. The over-surveillance of Black bodies was most accurate for Black women. There were numerous recorded instances of violence toward enslaved Black women on the grounds and surrounding areas. In 1856, a student "savagely beat a ten-year-old girl" outside her enslaver's boarding house (Sullivan, 2018, p. 15). Another student broke into a professor's residence and raped a twelve-year-old girl. A group of students "insulted and stripped" an enslaved Black woman (Sullivan, 2018, p. 24). When a complaint was filed, the students said they thought the woman had infected them with disease and blamed their "sexual desires" and "predation" on her (Sullivan, 2018, p. 24).

Black women's bodies have been policed on UVA's campus since its inception. Black women were dehumanized and blamed for the sins of the white male student body. They were beaten and brutalized with little to no punishment because they were the ultimate sacrifice for this grand educational experiment. This history explains the social and academic space that Black women occupy on campus today. UVA was never meant to educate Black women; it was inherently made to keep them in chains. The struggle for rights and political power on campus has always been an upward battle for Black women because their labor, pain, and "heavy lifting" was always ignored to preserve the University.

The University of Mary Washington did not mirror UVA's history because of its 20th-century establishment. Mary Washington was founded as the State Normal Industrial School for Women in Fredericksburg in 1908. Its goal was to create a premier educational space for young white women who aspired to be teachers. In the 1930s, the institution changed its name to Mary Washington College and became a public liberal arts college for women. The University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia's history became linked in 1944 as sister institutions (University of Mary Washington, 2022). Mary Washington was the outlet through which white

women could gain college experiences that the University of Virginia had not yet allowed. They could live amongst other academically driven women in a safe learning environment, and in their third or fourth year, they were able to transfer to UVA (Miller, 2020). However, both learning environments at UVA and Mary Washington were inaccessible to Black students. This policy changed with *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in public institutions in 1954.

While UVA admitted its first Black graduate student in 1951 (Williamson, 2019), Mary Washington and the University of Virginia struggled to integrate undergraduate schools. And according to William Crawley's centennial research on Mary Washington's history from 1908-2008 (2008), UMW's Board of Visitors did not formally approve a desegregation policy until ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (Crawley, 2008: 99). While a couple of Black women took classes following the desegregation policy, only five Black women were enrolled at Mary Washington by the 1960s (Crawley, 2008, p. 102). Even in the beginning, Black collegiate women organized and developed survival strategies for each other. Those Black women called each other the "big five," an analogy to the civil rights movement's "Big Four leaders," Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and James Farmer (Crawley, 2008, p. 101). They naturally bonded with each other and organized against the racism they were experiencing from their white classmates. Crawley described the big five as "curiosities" to their white counterparts and they were "lumped together as 'the Negroes'" until more Black students came on campus (Crawley, 2008, p. 102). Segregation permeated into dorm life. Through organizing together, they called out the administration, which grouped all Black students in the same dorm rooms because white students did not want to live with them (Crawley, 2008, p. 102).

With a slight increase in the Black student population in the early 70s, Black women at UMW began to advocate for themselves in more formal ways with radical feminist ideals. In the fall of 1970, Claudith Holmes founded the Afro-American Association (Crawley, 2008, p. 106). Although the association did not conduct physical protests, they continuously spoke out through the University's school newspaper, *The Bullet*. In February 1972, the student leaders wrote an op-ed about wanting more Black studies courses. They once wrote a story entitled "We Want Our Men Back," which discussed "white girls' current fad" with dating Black men (Crawley, 2008, p. 106). The group also published demands to increase the number of Black-centered activities on campus and establish a designated space for Black women to socialize. With the absence of Black men, Black collegiate women could be radicalized amongst themselves. Mary Washington was their space where they could problematize their femininity and Blackness without having to make room or share that intellectual space with Black men.

This kind of informal activism continued throughout the late 20th century. With very few Black professors, the Black Student Association invited provocative activists like Khalid Abdul Muhammad, a leader in the Nation of Islam, to speak to the campus community. He lectured about the racism on campus and discussed the problematic naming of Mary Washington, the mother of George Washington, castigating George as "a slave owner who used black women as bed warmers and belly warmers and then sold his children into slavery" (Crawley, 2008, p.491). In 2000, Black students organized and spoke out to news sources about the move of the James Farmer Multicultural Center offices to make room for more Admissions employees. As highlighted by Jacqueline Conciatore in the *Black Issues in Higher Education Journal*, students of color and faculty felt as if the University's desire to promote diversity and equality was insincere and utilized flowery language and vague words from civil rights icons to promote their

agenda (Conciatore, 2000). These students, many of them women, advocated for themselves and the space in which they found refuge.

Black women's activism was actualized through more muted forms of survival at UMW. They grouped and wrote stories and met with college administrators. Because Black women were the only Black people at UMW, they organized explicitly for Black women and their struggles. Students at UVA were more forthright about their survival strategies. This is highlighted in Maurice Apprey and Shelli Poe's research on early Black student life at UVA (2017). Following the release of a 1972 race report that revealed that Black enrollment stood at just 2%; more it did 15 years prior, many students were compelled into campus activism. Black students protested on the lawn concerning increased financial aid and the number of Black professors (Apprey & Poe, 2017). Students' organizations denounced "unfair trading practices and reprisals against students who wore African Kente clothing to class. And in the mid-1990s, Black students wore Black gags taped across their mouths, symbolizing their lack of voice in university governance" (Apprey & Poe, 2017). Black collegiate women also organized community service in Charlottesville. While most of those activities were co-ed, two of the first three Black Greek organizations on campus were sororities. In the 1970s, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated were chartered (Apprey & Poe, 2017).

While Black women were enrolled at both the University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century, research regarding UVA tends to focus on the struggle that all Black people had when attending the school. Literature rarely specifies the gendered dynamic of Black students and how they survived on campus. However, Mary Washington did not become co-ed until 1970 (University of Mary



Washington), and men, let alone Black men were a very small part of the population. Because of this, most of the research about Black students at Mary Washington is narrated from a woman's perspective. Research also tends to skew toward the Black experiences of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. The Black experience at Mary Washington during the 21st century is mainly under-researched, especially regarding Black women's experiences. While there is more literature regarding the Black experience at UVA in the 21st century, a lot of it centered around the white supremacist and antisemitic riots that happened in Charlottesville in 2015, and it is not taken from an intersectional frame.

### **Methodology**

For my research, I use the heavy lifter theory by building on the literature and experiences of Black collegiate women of the 19th and 20th centuries. I extend this investigation to 2015 and 2023. I examine this topic through Black clubs and organizations to best answer my research question. I will examine how Black women in Black women-centered, or Black women-led clubs and organizations operate and survive at their institutions. I use primary sources to investigate my research topic.

My primary sources are centered on social media, specifically Instagram. Social media networks like Instagram are the main mechanisms of lightly regulated organizing by Black collegiate women. Instagram is the space where students can learn about events, have updates on campus news, and participate in the discourse surrounding young Black perspectives. Looking at posts and comments will help me understand the protection strategies created by Black collegiate women. Instagram is also where people can create and fine-tune the identity they want to put out into the world. Profiles become a mosaic of Black women's experiences, their narratives, their opinions, the music they listen to, and how they dress. Social media is the most relevant tool for investigation because it is the most authentic. I can know what and how Black women want an audience to feel because it comes directly from their narrative, not from a secondary source.

### **Setting the Stage**

The University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia are predominantly white institutions, meaning most students are white compared to all other racial demographics combined. According to the University of Virginia Diversity Dashboard provided by the Rector and Board of Visitors, in 2022, UVA was 52% white American, and 48% of students identified with a racial minority. About 7 % identified as Black (Rector and Visitors of the University of

Virginia, 2023). The University of Mary Washington does not publicly provide its percentages on its websites. However, the estimates from US News show that 68% of the student body enrolled are white, and 28% of the students belong to a minority racial group. Eight percent of those students are Black (US News, 2023). While both universities have similar rates of Black student enrollment, the overall university population diverges. In 2022, the University of Virginia enrolled 23,721 students on grounds. The University of Mary Washington's student population is around 4,000 (University of Mary Washington, 2023). Mary Washington is less than a quarter of the size of the University of Virginia. Moreover, while UMW has a slightly higher percentage of Black students, the University of Virginia has far more Black students at their university. The more significant number of students at UVA translates to more Black clubs and organizations on their grounds.

Over the years, UVA has developed clubs and organizations for various identities and intersections within the African Diaspora. Some of these are the Black Student Alliance (@BSAatUVA), Organization of African Students at UVA (@oasatuva), Student Organization for Caribbean Awareness (@SOCA\_at\_UVA), Afro-Latinx Organization at UVA (@alsoatUVA), Black Student-Athletes Offering Service and Support (@Boss\_UVA), and the University of Virginia Chapter of the NAACP (@naacpatuva). Most of Black life at Mary Washington is organized within sports teams and very few Black clubs, like the Black Student Association (@umwbsa), African Student Union (@asu\_umw), and the University of Mary Washington chapter of the NAACP (@naacpumw). This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Clubs and Organization that Specifically Identify with the African Diaspora*

UVA	UMW
- Black Student Alliance (@BSAatUVA)	- Black Student Association (@umwbsa)
- Organization of African Student at UVA (@oasatuva)	- African Student Union (@asu_umw)
- University of Virginia Chapter of the NAACP (@naacpatuva)	- University of Mary Washington chapter of the NAACP (@naacpumw).
- Organization of African Student at UVA	
- Student Organization for Caribbean Awareness (@SOCA_at_UVA)	
- Afro-Latinx Organization at UVA (@alsoatUVA)	
- Black Student Athletes Offering Service and Support (@Boss_UVA)	

While the University of Virginia has far more clubs about the Black experience than the University of Mary Washington, there are fewer than three clubs on the Black women's experience at both UVA and UMW. For example, the University of Virginia has Black College Women (@uvablackcollegewomen), a wellness club that focuses on the empowerment of Black women (the University of Virginia Black College Women, 2023), and UnitedSisters at UVA (@unitedsistersatUVA) which is a club that focuses on creating a bond between Black women on campus and with the Charlottesville community (UnitedSisters at UVA, 2017). Unfortunately, the club became inactive in 2017. At the University of Mary Washington, there is UMW's Women of Color (@umw.woc) and Comb As You Are (@umw\_caya), a club started by Black women to educate their community about how to care for their hair naturally (Comb As You Are, 2021). This club recently became inactive in 2021.

Considering their population compared to UMW, there is a negatively disproportionate number of Black women's clubs at UVA. However, Black women's organizational life is divided

by the Black sororities in the National Pan-Hellenistic Council (NPHC), the body of nine member historically black Greek letter organizations. On grounds, there are four active member organizations of the NPHC, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (Theta Kappa Chapter), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (Kappa Rho Chapter), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (Tau Theta Chapter), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (Theta Lambda Chapter). Their respective Instagram handles are @thetakappa\_1974, @kapparhodst, @tauthetazphib, and @thetalambdasgrhos. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Clubs and Organization that Specifically Identify with Black Women’s Experiences*

UVA	UMW
- UnitedSisters at UVA (@unitedsistersatUVA)	- University of Mary Washington’s Women of Color (@umw.woc)
- Black College Women (@uvablackcollegewomen)	- Comb As You Are (@umw_caya),
NPHC Member Sororities	
- Delta Sigma Theta (@kapparhodst)	
- Alpha Kappa Alpha (@thetakappa_1974)	
- Sigma Gamma Rho (@thetalambdasgrhos)	
- Zeta Phi Beta (@tauthetazphib)	

**Black Greek Life and Formal Social Circles**

Black sororities and fraternities have been on UVA's campus since the early 1970s. The letter, colors, and traditions are different within those sororities, but the type of events they sponsor are largely similar. They have trivia nights, bake sales for charity, panel discussions, workshops on topics impacting the Black community like environmental racism (Theta Kappa chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, 2023), and social events alongside Black

fraternities. These events build community on campus. However, Black sororities at UVA are not solely survival spaces because of what they do but because of who they are and what they represent. Specifically, Black sororities help Black women locate themselves in a Black ecosystem beyond UVA's grounds.

Natalie T.J. Tindall (2011) gives a historical framework of Black sororities. She states that Black sororities were founded on W.E.B. Du Bois' early philosophies. In his early academic career, Du Bois authored and believed in the concept of the "talented tenth," "The notion that the top 10% of Black people would lead the race through the inculcation of fellowship and camaraderie of sisterhood, the promotion of 'finer womanhood,' the accomplishment of high scholastic and moral standards, and social justice and community activism" (Tindall et al., 2011, p. 2). Black sororities and fraternities are built on the principle that our community should be led by a group of high-achieving, college-educated Black people dedicated to improving the Black identity. While the talented tenth was gendered for Black men, Black sororities embodied the belief for Black women. Becoming a member of those organizations at UVA inaugurated Black women into that percentage.

The philosophy behind these sororities cements those places as a survival space for Black women. It gave them an alternative identity in their predominantly white spaces. Even though Black women on the grounds consistently face oppression in and outside of the classroom with professors, police, and fellow students, they are no longer "the help" or victims. They are the next inaugural class of Black excellence that will push Black America forward. Moreover, this class is more than just 8% of the population at the University of Virginia. They are rooted in groups on many campuses, cities, and countries. If chapters need assistance at the University of Virginia, they have connections to Black women who were alumni who can help them. This is

illustrated through academic panels from sororities. In 2019, the Tau Theta chapter of Zeta Phi Beta had a "Health is Wealth" forum where a graduated member of the organization presented about Crohn's Disease Awareness (The Tau Theta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc, 2019).

Greek spaces at the University of Virginia also help Black women survive because it can give them an African diasporic lineage. Walter M. Kimbrough's research explains the power of grouping and the historical importance of Black fraternities and sororities. When a woman is in the process of pledging to a Black sorority, she is on "line," which refers to the people who are pledging together through their membership intake process. After she becomes a member of the organization, the individuals that pledge with her are her line sisters. While the concept of the "line" has not always existed in Black fraternities and sororities, they are culturally symbolic. As said by Kimbrough, "the image of the line was similar to candidates participating in an African rite-of-passage ceremony" (Kimbrough, 2003, p. 114). Historically, if someone "broke the line" or separated from their line, they would be punished, which Kimbrough explains as a reenactment. "Slaves clung to each other to prevent separation, just as pledges attempted to during their process" (Kimbrough, 2003, p. 114). This is exemplified through the Kappa Rho Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta's Instagram. When they produced a line, there were pictures of the newly initiated members bending down, connected arm and arm, in height order (Kappa Rho Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, 2018). The symbolism encapsulated in these photos span far beyond my understanding as a non-member, but it shows a physical representation of Black Greek womanhood at PWIs. They are part of a community where they are linked to each other. Their ability to stand and move is inherently linked to the other women they are connected to. Their prosperity and ability to survive at that moment depend on that line.

Compared to many other Black women's clubs at the University of Virginia, Black sororities are selective organizations. In order to get on "line" and become a member, one has to pledge. This pledging process costs money, time, and commitment. Nevertheless, Black women are promised a survival space linked to a new existence. Alongside Kimbrough, Ricky L. Jones explores this idea through a male lens (2004). Kimbrough explains the pledging period as an "event that gave Greeks a sort of mystique with their peers. They were seen with admiration in many instances because they completed a difficult process and achieved a goal" (Kimbrough, 2003, p. 37). What occurs within a pledge process varies among chapters and periods and is often intentionally vague to non-members. However, Jones argues that the process is ingrained in the Black Greek experience because it allows Black men to reincarnate themselves and gain a new Black identity. He states that "to members, the process moves the initiates from the place of a disconnected individual to that of a connected, metamorphosized fraternity man" (Jones, 2004, p. 61). Drawing on the research from James Brunson and Asa Hilliard's study of Black Greek Letter fraternities and African Initiation Systems, he explains the psychological change that Black pledges go through. Jones states that Black pledges must renounce their past existence "and state an allegiance to the tenets of the organization that they are being initiated into" (Jones, 2004, p. 64). This new allegiance carries a new name. After crossing, or being initiated, into the organization, people in Black fraternities and sororities are often given "line names," names associated with the person pledging, chapter, and sorority title. In the Fall of 2021, the Theta Kappa chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated produced a line entitled K.A.R.A.T.S.. Every new initiate's "line name" was a precious stone (Theta Kappa chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, 2021).



The initiation processes expose the political power structure involved with Black sororities. This network and access to survival material are not just given to every Black collegiate woman. However, special consideration is given to "legacies," which are a sorority member's daughters (including adopted, stepdaughters, or granddaughters). For most, if one wants to be a part of a sorority, they have to work for it. And the practitioners and producers of lines (dean of pledges and presidents) are often their peers. Rooted in the history and norms within chapters, Black collegiate women at the university can choose who gets into the organization by determining the difficulty of the process. In some ways, their survival is linked to the power structure. As highlighted in Kimbrough and Jones, Black sorority letters connote a level of mysticism that is appealing to young Black collegiate women. Black women often lead pledges and interested members. Thus, their power and survivability are inherently linked to power and leadership over other Black collegiate women.

These networks and systems are non-existent on the campus of the University of Mary Washington because the administration made the intentional decision not to affiliate itself with any "single-sex Greek social fraternities or sororities" (Statement on Greek Life - Office of Student Activities and Engagement (S.A.E.), 2018). However, Black women-centered clubs at Mary Washington primarily produce the same physical events. The UMW's Women of Color Club (WOC), currently and historically led by Black women, sponsors panel discussions, craft nights, mental health check-ins, and social events with different clubs (University of Mary Washington's Women of Color Club, 2021-2023).

Mary Washington's Women of Color and other clubs led by Black collegiate women differ from other Black sororities at the University of Virginia because they do not have organizational, political, or historical infrastructure beyond Mary Washington. There are no

chapters of Women of Color in several countries, no structured after-college support networks, and no service projects supporting a national strategic plan or initiative. Women of Color is non-selective. They are guided solely by the current leadership and current members, and their constitution is produced and can be amended by the current executive committee members. Outside of t-shirts and the club's logo, Mary Washington's Women of Color (University of Mary Washington Women of Color Club, 2019) is not linked to a set of colors, customs, songs, or mottos that makes them a part of a larger fabric of Black women that has a nationally recognized identity. However, the lack of deep cross-campus roots allows them to complicate and dissect their identity as Black women, allowing them to help the Black community surrounding them.

In the fall of 2021, Black students at Mary Washington began an online discourse about the misconception and discomfort between Black Americans and Black Africans; WOC partnered with the African Student Union (another Black woman-led club) and created the "Two Cultures One Continent panel: The Elephant in the Room Between African & African Americans" (University of Mary Washington's Women of Color Club, 2021). In that same year, the club also led a meeting focusing on colorism and texturism in the natural hair community and a talk on accessibility issues in feminism (University of Mary Washington's Women of Color Club, 2021). Although they do not self-define as a political or social justice club, they often create space to discuss socio-political topics because they impact and cofound their existence and livelihoods. These meetings operate as survival spaces because they offer friendship and a safe environment to be whom one is while simultaneously allowing Black collegiate women to work through the issues that impact their community. While they are not drafting policy or initiating Black women in a sorority that might make it easier for them to survive on campus, they are creating a conversation that exposes the margins within the Black communities. Their liberation

away from a strong Black political structure allows them to gain a nuanced interpretation of Blackness that does not just show Black women but Black men and all the various intersections within Black womanhood. This survival space creation embodies the heavy lifter theory. Members of Women of Color are creating places for Black women to better survive in a predominantly white institution. They theorize how to survive better and serve their people by creating informal discussion forums. Clubs like WOC explore the intersections of their Blackness because they are not connected to a structure that determines a part of their identity.

### **Black Art and Informal Strategies**

Black clubs can further italicize the creation and labor surrounding survival strategies at UMW through artistic expression. While not a club exclusively for Black women, Black collegiate women have led the University of Mary Washington's Comb as You Are Club (CAYA) since its conception. While they became newly inactive in 2022, from its start, the club was built on the goals of educating members about natural haircare, gaining knowledge about the Black natural hair community, giving product suggestions, providing a space for hair entrepreneurs on campus to gain clientele, and having a safe space for open dialogue about what natural hair means and its implications (University of Mary Washington's Comb As You Are Club, 2019). Comb As You Are was a space where Black women could talk about their struggles with their natural hair and learn from other members how to reaffirm themselves. While members would leave meetings and return to the same systematic issues facing the Black community on campus, Black women in the club had the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how to express best and present their identity. This identity presentation is also a survival strategy created by Black women on campus. Dyese L Matthews explains this idea through his analysis of Black women's fashion at midwestern PWIs (2020).

In his research, Matthews examines "how Black women use dress and appearance as an embodied practice and as a way to negotiate both Black and activist identities at PWIs in Iowa" (Matthew, 2020, p. xii). Through in-depth interviews, he found that Black women use dress to empower themselves while facing racism and discrimination on campus. Black women would wear sloganed t-shirts like "stolen from Africa," headwraps, or outfits celebrating their major to intentionally take pride in their identity while challenging white people's misnomers of Black women. He said that the Black women wore politically charged garments as a form of activism.

This politic can be illustrated through CAYA. Black women in CAYA are aware of the socio-cultural importance of their hair. At the beginning of the club's existence, the e-committee would post inspirational quotes every week; one said, "I love my natural hair because it is a gift that we as Black women have" (University of Mary Washington's Comb As You Are Club, 2020). During COVID quarantine, Black women in the club would film their skin care and hair routine, preserving expressions of their Blackness (University of Mary Washington's Comb As You Are Club, 2020). The club would also post information about Black-owned skin, hair, and wellness brands that they encouraged fellow club members to participate in (University of Mary Washington's Comb As You Are Club, 2020). Comb As You Are was a survival space because it gave Black women the space to express themselves and how to protect their hair while doing it. The Black women leaders who created that club exemplified the heavy lifter theory because they built a community around these specific needs of their people by doing the labor to provide that need for themselves.

UVA's Creative, Raw, and Very Edgy club (CRAVE) (@crave\_uva) also illustrates the survival strategies within Black artistic spaces. CRAVE is a club that seeks to "be a creative fashion outlet for students and to serve the greater Charlottesville community (CRAVE, 2023).

CRAVE is a club open to everyone, but Black women have primarily led the past three season cohorts. The club's primary events are model walk challenges, photoshoots, and a fashion show at the end of every spring semester. CRAVE releases short promo videos days before the event to promote these fashion shows. The Spring 2022 show was entitled "ANDROMEDA." The promo video features mostly Black women wearing all white, with angel wings and sun-shaped headpieces. The video goes to a shot of a Black collegiate man feeding a Black collegiate woman grapes as she lay on his lap (CRAVE, 2022). While the video was just a trailer for an annual fashion show, the club developed a survival strategy. It illustrated an alternative to Black existence at UVA. Black women created those images on the grounds of the University of Virginia, where Black women were initially abused and beaten. They used that land as a background for a photo shoot in which they were dressed as angels. Clubs like CRAVE create survival strategies because they allow Black women to be seen in the light that society deems them unworthy of. The club also conducts heavy lifting because it changes the conception of what Black womanhood can be on campus from the images it produces. While they are not protesting or meeting with the administration, they are conducting a kind of labor that helps Black women survive on campus.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research seeks to utilize Jasia Wrighten's heavy lifter theory as a frame to explain the ways Black women survive and predominantly white institutions. As seen in Wrighten's research, this paper aimed to show how Black women can use the oppression done to them to create political survival strategies that help themselves and the community that makes them who they are. However, there are sure holes in the research. The original research depends on Instagram as the primary data source. While Instagram allows Black collegiate women to curate

images of themselves in their community without any interference, sometimes those images are not always authentic to the reality on campus. In future research, the Instagram sources would best be supplemented by semi-structured interviews with Black collegiate women at predominantly white institutions to see what strategies they believe help them survive.

### **Conclusion**

On May 29th, 2020, two days before the tear-gassing incident in Fredericksburg, a fellow student leader, and friend, Brianna Simone Reaves, wrote and released a letter on her Instagram, addressed to the UMW community. In the letter, she advocates for the administration, the police, and clubs to condemn the racism and anti-blackness being exposed in the media. She argued that while Black students work to make racial change on campus, the administration responds with neutrality to their existence. At the end of the letter, Reaves wrote the following (2020):

Despite my academic success and my leadership on campus, I am still a Black woman in the City of Fredericksburg and in America. On campus, I may be your student, your friend, your leader, your classmate, your partner on a project, and maybe even someone you see when you're walking to Vocelli's; I may be Breezy to you, but I am a walking target to someone else.

Black women occupy a complicated space on college campuses. We inherently cannot be one thing. We do not have the privilege to be. We cannot afford to just be a student or a friend at Mary Washington because this university was never made to cater to us. Black women have always had to work hard for the spaces we occupy. We were born heavy lifting. This research documents the many ways Black women have lifted this university. In the 21st century, Black women at the University of Virginia and Mary Washington have created homes for Black women in activism. This sisterhood is more significant than any individual, club, or artistic expression. Black women have developed complex political and culturally relevant survival strategies in response to their environment. Black women at Virginia's PWIs had built worlds of

survival strategies that sustain Black life on campus, even when they were “walking targets” (Reaves, 2020).

### **Solutions**

The solutions emphasize the values and work the Black women have done at the University of Mary Washington and the University of Virginia. Like the survival strategies developed on both campuses, these solutions center harm reduction, Black women's space hood, and Black women's intellectual development. These are all policies that can be implemented at the University of Mary Washington.

- 1. The Office of Student Engagement and the Office of the Provost should sponsor a Guest Speaker Fund** - A guest speaker fund would give Black collegiate women access to the resources that would allow more Black academics and intellectuals to speak about their experiences.

*Model: University of York's Public Lecture Fund which allocates grants to college departments and student societies who want to invite esteemed guests (University of York, n.d.)*

*Translating From:*

- *Mary Washington's Black Student Association's speaker event with Khalid Abdul Muhammed (Crawley, 2008, p.491).*
- *Tau Theta chapter of Zeta Phi Beta's "Health is Wealth" forum, in which they brought a guest speaker on grounds to discuss Crohn's Disease Awareness (The Tau theta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, 2019).*

2. **The Departments of Geography, Sociology, American Studies, Political Science and International Affairs, and Sociology should create an interdisciplinary racial equity research lab-**

A research lab would not only allow students of color to participate in research that impacts racial identity, but it could also increase the amount of Black presence on campus, depending on the kind of research that is produced.

*Model:* The L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs' Research Institute for Social Equity (RISE) at Virginia Commonwealth University, which produce social equity research, minority leadership training, and social equity tool kits and resources (THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL EQUITY (RISE), 2019)

*Translating From:* The University of Mary Washington's NAACP Chapter's Black female student led research report, "UMW Campus Police Assessment Report: Safe For Who?" (2020), and the UVA's Black Student Alliance's "Toward a Better University"

3. **University of Mary Washington's Residence Life should change Ball Hall from an all-women dorm to Black community housing.**

– Ball is the center building in the tri-unit dorm structure that includes Madison, an LGBTQ living-learning community and Custis, an all-women dorm (Parrish et al., 2014). A residence hall specifically for racial minorities would allow them to create space for themselves amongst other people who look like them.

*Model:* Black Affinity Housing at Western Washington University

*Translating From:* Mary Washington's Afro American Club's 1972 article in *The Bullet*, advocating for a space just for Black women on campus (Afro-American Club, 1972).





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