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## OPELE REVISITED: HOW OCEANIC BLACKNESS IMPACTS STUDENT BELONGING AND SUCCESS

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## Opele Revisited: How Oceanic Blackness Impacts Student Belonging and Success

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The *Opele* Report of 1992 provided a window into the concerns surrounding educational opportunities and quality of education for underrepresented Black students at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) (Takara, 1992, p. 4). By providing a comprehensive analysis, the “Opele Report” suggested multiple ways to improve Black student and faculty retention, recruitment, and well-being. Thirty years later, what has changed? How has Black student life and well-being improved, and how supported do they feel? How do they envision their belonging in an oceanic educational space where they are traditionally underrepresented? How might their experiences provide a space to rethink Blackness in oceanic settings? This article revisits the “Opele Report” by providing a window into the contemporary experiences of the 1.8% Black student population on campus by highlighting how they cultivate belonging while navigating their intersectional identities on the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus. I focus on six former and current students affiliated with the Black Student Association as they engage in storytelling surrounding Blackness and belonging on campus and in Hawai'i as an expansion of a previous photo voice project and current documentary project. Each student's response to a series of prompts reveals how Black hypervisibility and invisibility impact their on-campus experiences with belonging while gesturing to how it helps them expand conceptions of Blackness in an oceanic setting. Their dialogue highlights the need to honestly address diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice work on university campuses, including those beyond the continental United States. From experiencing tokenism from colleagues and throughout campus to racism from peers, these students' experiences highlight the intricacies of finding belonging in the face of anti-Blackness that remains pervasive on campus and statewide.

As one of the few Black-identifying professors on campus, I still remember my first semesters at UHM being greeted with mixed reactions: a sense of joy from students who were relieved and excited to see someone on campus and in the classrooms that

resembled them.<sup>1</sup> There were not many Black professors on campus, and many who did not come from a mixed-race background were student-focused and invested in teaching about the African American experience. I could sense a need for my position at UHM, one that students, community members, and campus allies fought diligently for in the years leading up to my start. I was motivated by the positive student response and their willingness to engage with myself, the subject matters, and their experiences on a diverse campus. Simultaneously, I felt the tension from colleagues outside of my department who, at larger events on campus, would refer to me as the college's diversity hire. For nearly a year, these colleagues would refer to the actions made by the larger Black communities on and off campus to advocate for an African American specialist position in the Department of Ethnic Studies as invalid and only being done to appease the optics of the university's commitment to a diverse and inclusive campus. This not only felt like a negation of my Black studies degree and the role of Black professors at the university, but it forced me to question how students were experiencing the tension surrounding anti-Blackness in this oceanic education setting as well.

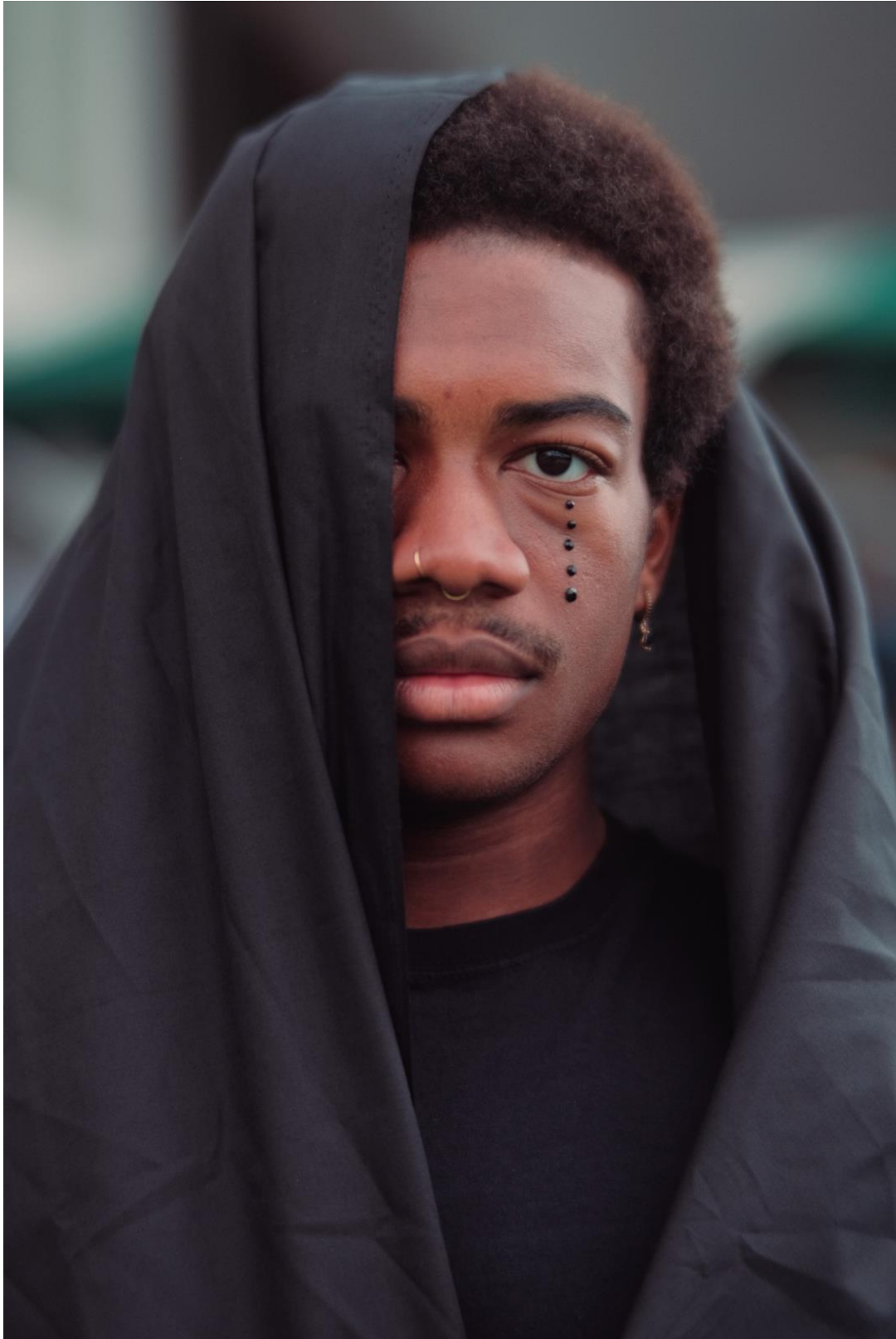
I wanted to understand what the students were experiencing and became more committed to holding space for students, providing time to check in, listen, understand, and build support to address their concerns. For many students, their uneasiness fell into silence from their friends and other colleagues. They felt like they were misunderstood or that their peers made judgments about what they were going through "just because they were Black." This opened my eyes to the incidents Black students encountered on a consistent basis, included having the n-word used in their presence by non-Black students and faculty without context or respect; hair being touched without permission or given notice about a change of hairstyle and whether it would be appropriate in personal settings; or being overlooked and having people speaking over them on issues that they weren't directly experiencing. Students sought someone to understand the difficulties they faced while Black on campus. I began to question how their experiences impacted their wellness, sense of self, and academics. How did they

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Manoa Institutional Research Office there are currently less than ten Black-identifying faculty at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2023b), representing less than 1% (.725%) of the faculty.

navigate being Black beyond the continent? How did they feel that Blackness impacted their belonging socially and institutionally on campus? How did Blackness on campus challenge diversity and multicultural practices promoted on campus and throughout the state?

This article seeks to explore how the context presented in the *Opele* report reflects on contemporary Black student experiences at UHM. In collaboration with the Black Student Association on campus, I use storytelling as a methodology, consisting of a combination of a short survey and an ongoing oral history documentary project with student respondents, to understand their experiences on campus and how that shapes their identity and well-being (Nadar, 2014). Through these stories as “data with soul” to focus on lived experiences, students share how they navigate on campus and in various educational settings as Black in Hawai‘i. The students discuss a diversity of encounters that reveal how they cultivate a sense of how their Blackness impacts their sense of belonging in spaces on campus, and how this relates to the possibilities of Blackness in an oceanic educational setting. Their experiences reveal the absence of Black student support, retention, and recognition on campus, highlighting the underlying anti-Blackness that makes their daily educational experiences tenuous. The students also reveal how oceanic recognitions of Blackness in Hawai‘i simultaneously allow anti-Blackness to remain pervasive while also providing space for it to reconfigure due to distance from the continent. Their experiences show how the UH educational institution perpetuates the multicultural ethos present in Hawai‘i that rarely supports Black community members in its calls for diversity.



**Image 1:** *Luffy conceals half of his face under a black cloth, revealing black tear drops from the other half while standing outside Campus Center.*

## Hypervisibility and Invisibility

Several studies provide context to the emerging field that helps us understand Black students' experiences and visibility with UHM, where issues of race, ethnicity, and belonging remain at the forefront. In 1992, Dr. Kathryn Waddell Takara wrote the "*Opele*: Report on African Americans at the University of Hawai'i" for the Director of Minority Student Affairs at UHM. The report was the first of its kind at UHM directed towards the wellness and education of Black students, faculty, and staff, and described the concerns and quality of educational opportunities for Black students at UHM. The report noted how African Americans were underrepresented in Hawai'i's educational system, reflected in the low student demographics throughout the UH system and each campus, representing .8% of the student body at UHM (Takara, 1994, pp. 6-7). Takara made several suggestions in the report, including to provide students with institutional student support, receiving additional recruitment and retention efforts besides athletics, and including Black contributions to UH and the community beyond Black History Month (Takara, 1994, p. 13). Additional recommendations included hiring more Black faculty beyond the five present at the time to increase their presence system-wide. Since the *Opele* report was published, some of the main shifts emerge from the demographics of the Black population in Hawai'i and at the University of Hawai'i (2023a). Compared to the 1990 Census, which listed approximately 27,700 African Americans residing in the state (1.8% of the total population), the 2020 U.S. Census reflects a decrease to 25,100 (1.77%). On campus, Black students have risen from .8% (152 students out of approximately 19,000) to 1.8% (343 of 19,074). Over 30 years later, although demographic changes have decreased the total Black population in the state and increased the number of Black students on campus, many of the same concerns from the *Opele* report remain.

From Generation X to millennials and Generation Z, the lack of progress for Black students on campus shrouds any semblance of progress through calls for diversity and inclusion as hollow. Instead, the testimonies from *Opele* and current students at UHM reinforce the notion that Black issues are not taken seriously on campus. One must wonder how the push for progress as a diverse campus and state has also reinforced local notions of race and belonging that, as Daniel Martinez HoSang

notes from a similar context, “ultimately sustained, rather than displaced, patterns of racial domination” where existing hierarchies are supported by multiple community members that continue to mask the role racism and anti-Blackness in Hawai‘i (HoSang, 2010, p. 2). Charles Lawrence reminds us that such acts challenge the unconscious bias maintained by a post-racial ethos, one that perpetuates harm. In recognizing this denial around an incident involving students at the law school, Lawrence notes how the denial at a community level “becomes a denial of the racism they experience many times every day and therefore feels like a denial of entirely of their lived experiences with racism as well” (2015). The denial is evident on individual and institutional levels when connecting the generations of Black student experiences at UHM. The *Opele* report reminds us that anti-Blackness has never left the university setting, nor Hawai‘i. Instead, it forces us to rethink the meaning behind diversity and inclusion in oceanic educational settings, where issues surrounding Blackness remain as prevalent as in the past, if not more so in the current experiences of millennial and Generation Z students.

Engaging with Blackness at UHM sets the stage to question the myth of the multicultural paradise that Hawai‘i. As students tackle simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility, they are also subject to Blackness as an absent presence and present absence (Newton, 2022; Sharma, 2011; 2021). Community scholars, such as Dr. Akiemi Glenn of the Popolo Project, suggest that Black people’s status as perpetual foreigners in Hawai‘i impacts how race and ethnicity are mistreated to perpetuate the norms of white supremacy (Glenn, 2019). This leads to Black erasure from not only the campus but also Hawai‘i history and the sociopolitical landscape. It confines Black people in Hawai‘i to specific group affiliations, such as being in the military, athletes, or musicians, which leads to a gap in knowledge that allows for the proliferation of stereotypical, racist depictions of Blackness in popular discourse (Sharma, 2021). Linking back to Hariston shows us how this anti-Blackness exists not only at UHM but also in the larger sociopolitical landscape, an unaddressed current that flows in the daily lived experiences of people in Hawai‘i. It allows what Roderick Labrador posits as racial vog to continue to blanket Hawai‘i society with a veil that prevents discussions of race, racism, and Indigeneity from occurring on the islands at the risk of exposing a racist past and present (2018, pp. 73-74). By not engaging in Blackness at UHM, the campus

can continue to promote the status quo that reaffirms the multicultural settler state without being accountable for Black and Indigenous livelihoods on campus. This prevents any corrective actions that would benefit not only Black students and people in Hawai'i but also others impacted by the stagnant hold of multiculturalism on the island. The harm continues.

One of the striking features from the *Opele* report that remains consistent today involves the underrepresentation of Black students at UHM. When asked how they would describe Blackness on campus, many students supported Dr. Takara's assertions from 1992 and noted that they rarely were in contact with other Black students when passing throughout the 320-acre area. However, when it does appear, Black students felt that they were relegated into one of several categories: student-athlete, military-connected, from the continent, but rarely, if ever, from Hawai'i. Some of the interviewed Black students noted that although the campus seemed racially and ethnically diverse, they questioned where Blackness fit into the social paradigm. Their Blackness was both a marker of hypervisibility and invisibility, one that presented a barrier for creating community and belonging at UHM.

For Breena, president of the UHM Black Student Association (BSA) on campus, this took on further meaning:

Blackness on campus looks like either an invisibility blanket or like a sore thumb. Some days, people act as if you aren't here, completely ignoring you in the classroom and even on the walkways, almost walking into you. Some days, it feels like a sore thumb where [sic] all you do is stick out even when you don't want to. In comparison to Hawai'i [versus campus], I truly don't think I've felt anything, but I do know that whenever I am out with my other Black friends, we are all shocked when we see other black folks!

Breena describes how Blackness on campus makes her stand out among the rest of the body in a simultaneously opposing manner where she is made present and non-present, a true embodiment of Nitasha Sharma's absent-presence and present absence; however, Breena and other students indicate how consistent this occurred throughout the whole campus.

Other Black students shared similar thoughts as Breena when I asked about how their Blackness related to their presence and sense of belonging on campus. For LaJoya, she felt the weakest sense of belonging outside of the places she created. In



her documentary interview, she notes how “I’m not quite sure where my place is on campus... There’s these assumptions about Black people on this campus that we aren’t here, and we’re focused on athletics and not academics... there’s this hypervisibility and also an invisibility that exists as well.” The simultaneous nature of hypervisibility and invisibility reveal the tenuous terrain Black students navigate through when on the UHM campus. For Luffy, this terrain remains difficult due to his queer identity. Not only was Blackness similar to finding a “needle in the haystack the size of a basketball court, and the needle isn’t even there,” Luffy noted that it was “astronomically hard to find a sliver of comfort in any place I go to as a Black gay man. However, I recognize how I am the complete opposite of almost everyone else in the population, and when people stick out like that, chances are they are punished for that” (Caldwell, 2023, p. 199). In an institution that is proud of its diverse, multiethnic heritage where the spirit of aloha contributes to a unique campus environment, Black student experiences force us to question which students are included and supported by these initiatives.

Black students also face the additional pressures of being the only Black representative in their classes and majors and often are called upon to provide service as examples of diversity, connection, and relation for the campus and other Black students. As one of the longest-tenured students on campus, spending her undergraduate and graduate career, LaJoya faces the pressure of being one of the first points of contact for many students, staff, faculty, and administrators on campus. As a graduate student, she notes the pressure of being “singled out” as the Black student on campus: “It’s pressure, too, because again, it’s the idea of being a representative, being a role model to undergraduate students, being a good colleague to my graduate and doctoral students, being a connector, but also who is that for me? But also, who is that for me when you have to be it for so many other people.” LaJoya notes how this pressure she navigates as a Black woman on campus constantly shapes the way she moves in a hypervisible manner situationally, especially when in service to the institution. She, and other Black women I interviewed, expressed a concern with how their service to the university is often over and underutilized, with the expressed notion that “they forget we’re students” being a commonality. This reminds us of the invisible labor Black women are often tasked with and rarely recognized for, and it becomes

more troubling when one thinks about how they are tasked with multiple responsibilities with little support.

For nearly all the Black students in the conversation for this project, their hypervisibility and invisibility take center stage at Campus Center. During the school year, the Campus Center is the Student Union for UHM, a nexus for student life, engagement, recreation, and socialization. It provides a centralized location for food and other services for students. Campus Center is often filled with different student groups promoting events, a place for students to study and hang out between classes, and different events to be held for the campus community. The space was also central for Black students who felt that Campus Center made them recognize and realize their Blackness much further. At Campus Center, Bliss, a UHM alumni and member of the BSA, notes that “People didn’t really see me. I think they saw the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, the shape of my face, and just wrote me off in their head or just saw right through me like I was the help or something.” Her thoughts echo Breena’s current observations on Campus Center, a space where “I feel like I have so many eyes on me, and even though I know it not to be true I can’t help the feeling.” Both Bliss and Breena’s observations capture how walking through Campus Center is uncomfortable due to how their Blackness is being read and unread, a tension where their race takes center stage.

In other situations, the Campus Center could be a conduit for Black connection and networking, though this was often only reserved for student-athletes. For Zoar, Campus Center provided a different possibility compared to his colleagues. As a member of the school’s men’s basketball team, Zoar would meet with his teammates off-court at Campus Center. To Zoar, it was “where I normally see most of my teammates whether they are on the way to the next class or chilling by the tree waiting for their class to start” (Caldwell, 2023, p. 196). He notes that whether at Campus Center or the locker room on lower campus, the sense of belonging was felt strongly also because “the majority of my friends that are Black are [there].” His experience remains important to note as many other interviewed students are not affiliated with athletics, nor would traverse through Campus Center with the same size group. This makes for an interesting observation and distinction of how Blackness in a group setting

provides a space for belonging to flourish, even when others feel more isolated. Instead of Campus Center, his various graduate courses were the spaces where Black representation was not present, making him feel like “an outsider, especially when I give certain examples in class people don’t understand where I’m coming from” (Caldwell, 2023, p. 198). This harkens back to LaJoya’s earlier statement, one echoed by many students that forces us to question where Black students are supported and can find belonging on campus. While Zoar found Campus Center to be one of the few places where he found a strong sense of belonging and community on campus, this may be contextually driven depending on if his community of teammates were present compared to his classroom experiences.

As representative of the 1.8% of Black students on campus, these Black students are seen and unseen, contributing to their marginalization and erasure on campus in a manner shared by other Black students on predominantly white campuses (Newton, 2022). Newton’s work directs us to consider the intersectional nature of racism and sexism experienced by Black women through microaggressions perpetuated by white individuals on college campuses, and its impact on student wellness and success. However, the key difference between what Newton and other scholars describe is that these microaggressions occur from other students of color; in addition, some students would contend that there is nothing micro about the aggression they experience from their colleagues and throughout campus. Although many would consider these people of color to also practice racist notions against their Black colleagues, Beverly Tatum’s notion of racism and its limits based on social and institutional structures provide critical insights that help us place this into perspective. Although these students of color may not systematically benefit from racism as a system of advantage based on race, they perpetuate anti-Blackness that allows these harmful acts to thrive (Tatum, 2017). In turn, this perpetuates a power differential that reinforces notions of White superiority, even in a place where white is not the majority on campus. While UHM may be an Indigenous-serving institution that is prideful of its diversity, the Black student experiences reveal the institutional roots where anti-Blackness remains a strong, prominent feature to its construction and the constitution of its student body, faculty, and staff.

Anti-Black prejudices manifest further through some of the notable acts of anti-Black prejudice and discrimination observed by Black students on campus. One may encounter representations of Blackness at Campus Center without any Black people that perplex students as they pass through the area. A common experience for the students stemmed from tabling that occurred in the upper areas of the campus center, where fraternities and other student groups promoted their organizations. It was common for nearly all the students to travel through the area and hear rap music being played by fraternities to draw attention to their organization while building morale. However, in many cases observed by the students and faculty, lyrics that included the n-word were being repeated by local and continentally transplanted Asian Americans, White Americans, and other students. Hearing the n-word was “jarring,” especially when it did not come from a Black person nor in support of Black events or people on campus. Instead, one student described the distasteful nature of hearing, confronting, and, eventually, leaving Campus Center after inaction from their student colleagues. Hariston (2008) highlights how common these experiences occur in Hawai‘i for Black grade school students, in addition to the lack of acknowledgement and action taken to address their concerns; it is important to note that instead of finding solutions to anti-Blackness in these situations, the students Hariston studies were “expected to accept the ‘objectified’ words used to describe them” instead of relying on institutional figures to address the root issues these actions stemmed from (2008, p. 75). This connects to contemporary Black college student experiences, where in instances where Black cultural forms were on display, especially from non-Black people, Black students felt hypervisible and invisible as they were recognized alongside the lyrics and form, while their concerns remained unheard.



**Image 2:** *Sam sits in an Ethnic Studies faculty member's office, one of the few safe spaces identified for her on campus.*

Black student responses to the anti-Blackness are tempered by a combination of self-reflection and respectability. When faced with incidents at the Campus Center, the classroom, or even the dorms, students approach it through a complicated lens that places emphasis on how their Blackness will be read as a threat due to the calls for accountability. Some of the students, in passing, also expressed the following: “Will I be read as less professional, less serious?;” “What if I’m seen as the angry Black person?;” and, “What happens if it escalates?” Students hold back from responding under the notion that their Blackness would become hypervisible, in addition to any stereotypes that reify their existence in a negative manner. If they, as one of the only markers of Blackness on campus, take action, this has the ability to place them with preconceived notions that others have of them through mediated and historical exploitive notions of Blackness. It forces some students to question their presence and whether it is worth engaging when the potential consequences will negatively impact how they continue to navigate on campus. For LaJoya, this represented the hold of anti-Blackness on how

students engage. “The [anti-Blackness] becomes espoused in actions. But really, it's the root. It's the root of it. It's the idea that we're taking up this space that maybe we don't deserve, I'm not sure, or maybe we don't need. Because, again, how many Black students really go here?” LaJoya's response highlights a way that continental references and paradigms travel with us and police the way students engage with issues that can magnify their presence, even in spaces where white people are not the majority. It forces us to remain critical of how anti-Blackness aggregates and places Black lives in a dangerous flux due to the multiple references surrounding Blackness beyond the island that impact the way it is seen within smaller community spaces, such as on campus.

Black students struggle to find a sense of belonging at UHM from Black hypervisibility and invisibility on campus, which makes some students question if they belong and whether the anti-Black discrimination they face is worth enduring at UHM during their academic career. Nearly all the interviewed students can recall other Black students who have transferred from the university, often citing the low Black student and faculty population on campus, difficulties in finding and building community, and a sense of disconnection as key reasons for their departure. During my time at UHM, I have seen countless Black students struggling to find their grounding. In our documentary interview, LaJoya explained how Black engagement is connected to diversity and retention:

We need to think about diversity for whom, and diversity is not just a numerical representation but it's the representation of ... having classes, having support systems in place, having student organizing that supports Black students, but really institutionally having things that support Black students. If we only focus on “well, we have Black folks!” That's tokenizing. How are Black people navigating these spaces? How do they feel in this space? And at a student level, are they matriculating? At a faculty level, are faculty able to receive tenure? We had three Black faculty that departed the College of Education... why weren't they retained? Why weren't they sustained? I think these are larger questions that we need to ask when we celebrate diversity, and these are the larger questions we need to ask when we think about who's departing the institution and why.

LaJoya's testimony serves as a call to action for additional support to not only address Black student issues with hypervisibility and invisibility but also to honestly assess how Black students fit into the campus' vision and goals. By not recognizing the experiences

of Black students, and due to the fact that the impact on Black students is minimal due to their low numbers on campus, little efforts are made institutionally to encourage, uplift, and support Black student success. It shows a hesitancy to engage with Blackness in an honest and direct manner on campus. To do so would require a level of accountability that invokes the *Opele* report and would reveal how little progress has been made since Dr. Takara's (1992) suggestions to the campus for the improvement of Black life at UHM.



**Image 3:** *LaJoya reveals what the black cloak hides from others in the middle of campus.*

### ***Crafting Blackness, Cultivating Belonging***

One of the startling developments that emerged from my interviews with students revolved around the diversity of responses when asked about Blackness in an oceanic context. Nearly every student indicated safety as one of the primary reasons they had a different sense of space and ease related to thinking about how to define the way Black

and Blackness developed as they moved from a continental context to an oceanic setting. Many felt that they no longer had the additional pressures of being surveilled by the police, the worry of whether they would safely make it home from being in public, or having to deal with a direct and violent act of racism that could result in death. Zoar noted that the feeling of safety and the notion that racism did not manifest as strongly as on the continent gets “lost in the fact that you don’t see as many people who look like you do.” Black students proximity to the continent provides them space to conceptualize Blackness and its various tenants through intentionality, community building, and an openness that did not confine Black cultural ties to a specific monolithic experience. As Sharma notes, “Forming a Black community is a way to maintain a meaningful identity, including cultural and aesthetic alternatives to local culture” (Sharma, 2021, p. 93). Although finding belonging on campus highlighted a challenge, it did not deter them from exploring the expansive possibilities an oceanic engagement with Blackness provides to identity formation and community building on campus.

The students recognize that Blackness comes in many forms, and many discuss how their conceptualization of it serves as a gateway to building a close-knit community and relations on campus. Instead of waiting for the institution to build spaces for student belonging, many students harness a grassroots approach and carve out spaces where they can craft community with an emphasis on cultivating Blackness and belonging. For Breena, being in Hawai’i and the possibilities surrounding Blackness entailed having a “really tight and close-knit community, granted that is something you can technically have anywhere. I think when focusing on the islands, there is a certain community that can be built and held since we are much smaller here.” Going further, she described the safety that came from community building: “Although Blackness means I have an indirect target on my back it also means I have a community and a safe space that welcomes me and asks no questions!” Breena embodies this ethos through her current work with the Black Student Association on campus, a student-led organization that centers Blackness and Black experiences on campus to increase the awareness and understanding of Black issues while promoting unity and engagement for Black students in Hawai’i. Through programming and community-building events, Breena and many



students forge a sense of Blackness and belonging through BSA and the bonds created from their engagement.

Student organizations such as BSA, departments including Ethnic Studies, and the Office of Student Equity, Excellence, and Diversity help provide spaces for Black students to explore and conceptualize Blackness beyond the continent. For Luffy, Blackness is versatile and layered. “It is never the same as someone else’s Blackness. There may be one or even many similarities, but experiences and emotions are and can never be replicated entirely. Because of this, Blackness is a complex and unique goddess that shines so bright and will never dim.” Bliss shares a similar perspective, noting that her definition of Blackness as an “embrace of the richness of our culture and our solves that have been the backbone of almost every facet of this country” receives more space to grow once away from the continent. For her, the possibilities of Blackness are further realized once she left Orange County and immersed in community building in Hawaii: “I have found myself able to embrace my Blackness more here, when before I was terrified and felt the need to hide it to survive. I’ve delved into protective Black hairstyles and have come out of my shell. I’m not ashamed of the way I speak, my interests, nor my brown skin. I’ve allowed myself to find beauty in my ethnic background and in myself here, which is new for me.” This aligns with the responses shared by Black community members outside of campus, noting a different kind of freedom that does not mean they are running away from Blackness, nor leaving racism and anti-Blackness fully behind (Sharma, 2021 p. 92). These students highlight how the continental ties force them to reckon with the hegemonic nature of Blackness and the possibilities that exist beyond it.

Building community provides Black students with a way to engage with Blackness beyond the constraints of the continent and help place those paradigms into perspective. Understanding oceanic connections that weaponized Blackness to serve colonial interests rarely acknowledged on the continent helped many of these students to learn and challenge who they considered Black and how they reflected on their ideas of Blackness. For many students, being in Hawai’i is their first time understanding the impact of Blackness in the Pacific, one that Teresia Teaiwa implores us to remember that has “its own histories of ambivalence around skin color and ideas about cultural

superiority—and as Afro-diasporic children of the Pacific, we know too well the derogatory terms that exist in indigenous Pacific languages for blackness” (2017, p. 145). Her important work, along with many Black Pacific scholars, helps illuminate our understanding of Blackness beyond the continent, one tied to the afterlife of slavery in the form of blackbirding, local conceptions of the n-word, and the lingering colonial legacies reactivated by the presence of a Black body as a reference point. Students are confronted with having to reconstitute their definitions of Blackness once in a community with other Oceanic community members who recognize impositions of Blackness negatively throughout their Pacific communities.

From the transient nature of Blackness being tied to the military to the way Blackness is viewed and placed in Oceanic communities, students encounter different possibilities that further layer the meaning of Blackness and its many tenants to their oceanic experiences. LaJoya discusses how being in Hawai'i and thinking of the strong local association of Black as military forces her to complicate her military dependent status and how that is read. For LaJoya, “Being military-connected, there is this idea that: “aren't y'all glad that we're here?” There's tension around that, so Black folks need to have spaces... to call one another in and navigate being in allyship and accomplices to this larger idea of pushing this institution to be more open and live up to its mission.” This challenges the positionality of Black people participating in the military by forcing them to reckon with the implications of their role in the institution as a continuation of the historical dispossession of Native Hawaiian land and sovereignty. This remains a critical juncture that students and others continue to grapple with as they learn more about Hawai'i and become open to possibilities and connections with Indigenous struggles.

Closer to Hawai'i, some students are able to tie this back to the way an oceanic engagement was necessary to ensure Blackness was not a weapon but a connector and supporter to the movement for Indigenous Pacific communities and their struggles. An emphasis on expansive Blackness and oceanic possibilities helps us reconnect the possibilities for connection and liberation on campus. For LaJoya, it was important to recognize how integral honest engagement with Blackness in its multiple, oceanically connected forms was crucial to the university's mission as an indigenous serving institution. “In creating spaces for Black folks, I'm also aligned with the mission of

pushing the institution to be more Indigenous serving. If this institution were to embrace and adopt that as a mentality, it would also result in more belonging for Black students. Because... liberation for one group does not mean oppression for another.” LaJoya speaks in alignment with other students I interviewed who point to the possibilities of liberation when Blackness is accounted for in relation to Native Hawaiian struggles and sovereignty. Their experiences push to expand how Black people can be in alignment locally to stand with and build alongside Native Hawaiians on and beyond campus.



**Image 4:** *Zoar stands shrouded under a black cloth in front of his graduate department building as he recalls his invisibility during his coursework.*

## **Conclusion**

In the 30+ years since *Opele* was written as a glimpse into the experiences of Generation X students, the need to recognize and support millennial and Generation Z Black lives on campus remains strong. By discussing Black student experiences on campus, we learn how they grapple with anti-Blackness surrounding their hypervisibility and invisibility as they move through various spaces at UHM. As they search for belonging and understanding, they face the challenges of their Blackness in the spotlight, leading to dangerous situations from an unsettled tension that can result in a reiteration of continental forms of racism and violence being perpetrated. This tension runs constantly for many students, shrouded behind calls hailing Hawai'i for its diversity and multicultural ethos, even if those are lofty myths at best. At the same time, Black students continue to use Blackness to cultivate community to build and connect. They carve out within and beyond the institution to address and cope with the tensions while imagining the possibilities of connection between Black people at UHM and other racial and ethnic groups on campus and beyond. Recognizing their efforts in the face of institutional silence is crucial to understanding the lack of support these students receive at one of the most racially and ethnically diverse campuses in the United States and beyond. More must be done to ensure the university's messaging to students is consistent and adequately addresses the inequalities these students face.

Honoring Black student stories forces us to reckon with the continued maintenance of the multicultural paradise myth on and beyond campus. How can one be diverse if Blackness is not acknowledged, supported, or celebrated? How can we adequately address harm if too many folks are, as one student mentioned, "lost in the sauce" of white supremacy? This allows anti-Blackness to run alongside calls for diversity, complicating not only the messages being sent by the university but also making it harder for students to find belonging, safety, and support. Maintaining the myth allows racial vlog to maintain its presence and the status quo without the trade winds of change to reckon with and clear the air. Blackness cannot be ignored or only recognized for specific moments annually, including Black History Month celebrations. It cannot only appear as a spectacle that helps the university generate athletic accolades, nor limited to measures taken at face value as part of diversity efforts. Fully addressing

Black student concerns, stemming back decades, is necessary for the university to cultivate and educate a community all students, faculty, staff, and organizations can benefit from.

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