

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FISHBOWL

“That Fishbowl—as frustrating as it was, as small as it was, you were always feeling a sense of surveillance—it was a magical space,” Renee Alexander Craft, a graduate of 1994, remembered, describing the University’s first Black Cultural Center (BCC).²²⁹ The Fishbowl or the BCC (students used the terms interchangeably) was located on the first floor of the Frank Porter Graham Student Union and enclosed in glass, giving the space its nickname. The space itself was small, roughly eight hundred square feet, and located in a renovated snack bar and vending machine area, a supposedly “temporary” location the Fishbowl occupied for almost two decades.²³⁰ Despite the many limitations of the physical space of the Fishbowl, it operated as one of the only campus spaces—along with Upendo Lounge and the South Campus dorms—in which Black students could find respite from the University’s whiteness and create a sense of community through the 1990s and early 2000s.

This chapter argues that after the colonization of Upendo Lounge and its elimination as the main counter-space for Black students in the 1980s, the Black Cultural Center served as the foremost counter-space for Black students, combining for the first time the social and academic needs of Black students within the space and drawing condemnation from white administrators. The Fishbowl also served as the nexus of a movement that sought to create a free-standing

²²⁹ Interview with Renee Alexander Craft by Charlotte Fryar, 2 February 2017, L-0456.

²³⁰ Interview with Christopher Faison by Charlotte Fryar, 9 December 2016, L-0458.

version of the BCC in honor of one of the faculty members who had fought the hardest for its creation. The history of the campus movements that operated for and within the space of the Fishbowl illustrates the ways in which the institution sought to control, contain, and exclude Black life from the dominant cultural landscape of the University.

The idea for a BCC began to take form in 1983, after administrators changed the reservation policy for Upendo Lounge. Black students, along with Black faculty and staff, petitioned the administration for a space separate from Upendo Lounge in which to hold Black cultural performances and academic programs. By the time this conversation had begun at the University, most of its peer institutions of public predominantly white universities across the United States had already built Black culture (or cultural) centers. Most centers had been built in the early 1970s, the result of Black student-led demonstrations in the wake of the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., protests which also brought Black studies programs and increased numbers of Black faculty to the white campuses.

Through the remainder of the decade, dozens of white universities built BCCs, centers which included not only social spaces for Black students (like Upendo Lounge), but dedicated space in which to hold Black academic and cultural programs.²³¹ During this period in Chapel Hill, a small number of Black faculty members presented a concept paper to Chancellor Nelson Ferebee Taylor outlining the creation of an “Institute for Minority Studies,” which they explained, could “serve as a unique or special resource center for minority students and faculty,” and “assist the university in its efforts to be more responsive to the needs of minority

²³¹ Frank Hord, ed., *Black culture centers : Politics of survival and identity*, (Chicago, IL: Third World Press and Association of Black Culture Centers, 2005).

communities.”²³² Taylor did not pursue their proposed institute, but among Black faculty in particular, there was a growing recognition that the University needed a Black Cultural Center to serve all Black people within the institution and Chapel Hill.

One of the most active participants in the national Black culture center movement was Dr. Sonja Haynes Stone, a professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies.²³³ Partially at Stone’s insistence, in 1984, Dean of Student Affairs Donald Boulton convened a committee to develop a proposal for a Black Cultural Center which would “promote learning, self awareness, self determination and broadened world perspectives.” The BCC planning committee (a group comprised largely of Black faculty and administrators) issued their final report in February 1986. They determined that a new Black Cultural Center would need a space of at least 8,548 square feet, an estimate which included space for a library, a large meeting room, an art gallery, a music room rehearsal hall, offices for staff members, and a lounge for socializing.²³⁴

In their report, the committee included a minimum of 2,500 square feet that could be used as a temporary space, a concession given with the understanding that it would take both time and financial resources to fully develop the larger proposed 8,548 square foot facility.²³⁵ But before

²³² Towards An Institute for Minority Studies: A Concept Paper, Spring 1977 in the Office of Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Paul Hardin Records #40025, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²³³ Proposal for a Black Cultural Center, February 1986 in the Office of Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Paul Hardin Records #40025, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Interview with Michelle Thomas by Charlotte Fryar, 26 December 2017, L-0466.

²³⁴ Proposal for a Black Cultural Center, February 1986 in the Office of Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Paul Hardin Records #40025, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²³⁵ Proposal for a Black Cultural Center, February 1986 in the Office of Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Paul Hardin Records #40025, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

the BCC planning committee submitted their final report, Boulton set aside a temporary eight hundred square foot space in the front of the Frank Porter Graham Student Union, and funds were raised to hire a director for the University's new Black Cultural Center.²³⁶ Black students were dissatisfied with the space that had been set aside for the BCC. "No, we're not happy with the vending machine area," Black Student Movement (BSM) President from 1986 to 1987, Camille Roddy, said to *Campus Profile*. "This is due to the fact that the proposal that we have in mind encompasses much more spacing than what the vending machine area would allow. And by stifling us with that area, you're stifling the ideas and the plans for the cultural center."²³⁷

The Black Cultural Center Opens

Despite objections from students, on July 1, 1988, the University's Black Cultural Center officially opened in the temporary space in the Frank Porter Graham Student Union with Margo Crawford, a university professor and administrator from Chicago, as its first director.²³⁸ Donyell Roseboro, in her dissertation on the movement for a free-standing Black Cultural Center, points to the decision to create even the temporary BCC as monumental. "By officially assigning the Black cultural center temporary space in 1988," she explained, "university administrators publicly announced their belief in the importance of such a facility; it represented a social and academic coalescence of learning, a safe space for Black students, and a tribute to the struggles of Black people on the University campus and beyond."²³⁹ Although the BCC's opening was

²³⁶ Jean Lutes, "Report: BCC Needs Backing," *The Daily Tar Heel*, 23 January 1987, 1.

²³⁷ "Black Cultural Center," *Campus Profile*, Episode 20, UNC Student Television, 6 November 1985.

²³⁸ The same day, Paul Hardin became chancellor of the University.

²³⁹ Roseboro, Donyell L., *Icons of Power and Landscapes of Protest: The Student Movement for the Sonja Haynes Stone Black Cultural Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2005), 20.

indeed significant, the precarity of its status within the Division of Student Affairs and the inadequate resources it received always kept open the possibility that the BCC would be forced into a similar dismantling of power that Upendo Lounge had undergone over the last decade.

The Black Cultural Center, although small and exposed, immediately became a space for congregation and conversation for all members of the University's Black community. In describing the Fishbowl, Renee Alexander Craft referred to the structural, social, and emotional resonances of the space:

“In the middle of the space there were the same kind of chairs, but they formed a circle so that the seat part was facing out so it was like a flower in the middle, and then seats lining the side. So you'd have plenty of places to sit and plenty of floor space if you just wanted to plop down. So even if you didn't come in for a meeting, you just came in to get something, there's someone's TA over there having a conversation with their students, there's students talking about politics on campus and what needs to be done, there's students talking about the environment and what needs to be done about that. So there's all that energy and movement and you can fall in and fall out of those conversations as you're going about your mundane life.”²⁴⁰

Although the BCC held programs and lectures, organized by its director Margo Crawford and its staff of students, the center also functioned for Black students as a space for debate, mentoring, organizing, and relaxation. “I would literally walk in sometimes – I didn't go all the time – to sit down, not say anything to anyone, and just exhale, and then ten minutes later I would get up,” remembered former BSM President from 1999 to 2000, Chris Faison. “We didn't even have to say anything. It was just the acknowledgement of the fact that you just needed a break from being the only one in your class, right? And then you would get up and you would walk out.”²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Interview with Renee Alexander Craft by Charlotte Fryar, 2 February 2017, L-0456.

²⁴¹ Interview with Christopher Faison by Charlotte Fryar, 9 December 2016, L-0459.

The BCC operated not just as a social space for Black students, but also as a space of incubation for student created programs and initiatives. In 1991, Renee Alexander Craft established *Sauti M'pya*, the literary journal for the BCC and the first Black literary publication created by Black students in Chapel Hill, which gave many Black student writers and artists their first opportunity to publish their work.²⁴² In 1992, Michelle Thomas and Denise Matthewson founded the Communiversity Program, which continues to serves Black students in local elementary and middle schools through a variety of cultural and educational activities in Chapel Hill.²⁴³ Many Black students in the 1990s participated in a program called Around the Circle, weekly graduate student-led discussions of political and social issues happening across the University which “sharpened [their] teeth” for public discourse.²⁴⁴ Each of these initiatives was created by and for Black students, faculty, and staff within the eight hundred square feet of the Fishbowl.

Despite its limitations, the Fishbowl engendered a remarkable social dynamism infused with a progressive political orientation that marked it as distinct from Upendo Lounge as a social *and* academic counter-space. It was crucial for Black students’ identity development that the BCC served as an academic counter-space as well as a social space, because, as critical race theorists Daniel Solórzano and Octavio Villalpando have determined, academic counter-spaces allow Black students to stimulate their own learning in a nurturing environment where their

²⁴² Interview with Renee Alexander Craft by Charlotte Fryar, 2 February 2017, L-0456.

²⁴³ Communiversity Youth Program, The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, Accessed 10 November 2018, <<https://stonecenter.unc.edu/communiversity-youth-program/>>.

²⁴⁴ Interview with Michelle Thomas by Charlotte Fryar, 26 December 2017, L-0466.

experiences are considered important in teaching and learning.²⁴⁵ As the University struggled to recruit Black faculty (in 1988, there were only fifty Black faculty members out of a total of more than two thousand), the Fishbowl served as a critical space for Black students to access Black academic programs through peer mentorship.²⁴⁶

White students viewed the Fishbowl, as they had Upendo Lounge, as a threat on their claims to the campus landscape. Unlike Upendo, which had been located on South Campus, the accepted space for Black students on campus, the Fishbowl was located on North Campus, in the main student union, a critical social space for white students. Speaking to *Campus Profile* in front of the Fishbowl in the fall of 1988, only months after its opening, a white student explained that “in some cases I think the Black students take it too far in that they have so many organizations for minority rights and minority counsels...I feel that Black students are pampered.”²⁴⁷ In 1992, the *Carolina Alumni Review* explained that many white students and faculty believed that “black students seem to be claiming that their race entitles them to be treated differently...well-meaning programs have often encouraged minorities to be dependent on special help and to think of themselves as victims with special rights.”²⁴⁸

Black students and faculty rejected the idea that the Fishbowl's eight hundred square feet somehow afforded them special status on campus. “Everybody asks about a white cultural

²⁴⁵ Daniel Solórzano and Octavio Villalpando, “Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of minority student in higher education,” in *Emerging Issues in the sociology of education: comparative perspectives*, ed. C. Torres and T. Mitchell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 211-224.

²⁴⁶ Will Spears, “Lack of candidates adds to dearth of Black faculty,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 23 January 1990, 1.

²⁴⁷ “Race Relations on Campus: A Special Campus Profile Presentation,” *Campus Profile*, Episode 77, UNC Student Television, 14 November 1988, <<http://www.uncstv.com/shows/campus-profile-episode-77>>.

²⁴⁸ Wallace Kaufmann, “Racism and the BCC Controversy,” *Carolina Alumni Review* 81, No. 4 (Winter 1992): 17.

center, but the whole University is a white cultural center,” Lee Greene, a professor of English, argued.²⁴⁹ Because the Fishbowl was enclosed in glass and faced the Pit— a sunken plaza in front of Lenoir Hall and the Frank Porter Graham Student Union through which hundreds of people passed daily—the space could be surveilled at all times. “You did have a feeling of surveillance, and that’s both good and bad,” explained Craft. “You felt surveilled at times by people you didn’t feel like looking in on you, but you also could always find the people you were looking for, because all you had to do was peek in.”²⁵⁰ Simone Browne, a scholar of Blackness and surveillance studies, explains that “blackness [is] a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted.”²⁵¹ Even if the Fishbowl site was not chosen specifically for its increased capacities for surveillance, within the cultural landscape of white supremacy, this was an added benefit for administrators.

Even before the opening of the BCC in the summer of 1988, the center’s students and staff sought a commitment from administrators for a permanent location for the center. “If we accept the space that the University has given us then it will become permanent,” Lee Greene explained.²⁵² In the spring of 1990, *Campus Profile* reported that the planning committee for the BCC was eyeing the soon to be emptied Howell Hall, then the location for the School of Journalism, which was moving to Carroll Hall. Chancellor Paul Hardin met with the BCC planning committee in early February, but made no promises about the future of Howell Hall. For the students and administrators who had been working for seven years on the creation of a

²⁴⁹ Brenda Campbell, “Panel Addresses Black Concerns,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 30 March 1988, 5.

²⁵⁰ Interview with Renee Alexander Craft by Charlotte Fryar, 2 February 2017, L-0456.

²⁵¹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

²⁵² Brenda Campbell, “Panel Addresses Black Concerns,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 30 March 1988, 5.

permanent BCC, the timeline was stagnant. “From their perspective,” Margo Crawford explained, “this is very slow and they’ve seen other programs blossom to life or be prioritized over the BCC facility.” Speaking rather presciently about the lack of movement on Howell Hall, the BSM president from 1990 to 1991, Tonya Perry, told *Campus Profile*: “It’s a student building. If students want it, they’re going to have to push for it.”²⁵³

Legacy of the Fishbowl

On August 10, 1991, Dr. Sonja Haynes Stone, the much-admired faculty member in the Department of Afro-American Studies and mentor to many students, passed away suddenly. Students immediately began to gather in the Fishbowl to comfort and support one another, reeling in their collective loss. From meetings in August 1991 held in the Fishbowl, students began to build a movement to create a permanent and free-standing Black Cultural Center, an ambition that had been deeply held by the late Dr. Stone (detailed in the chapter on *The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History*). As the movement to construct a free-standing building for the BCC continued to grow, the Fishbowl remained a site of incubation, energy, and renewal for Black students engaged in the struggle. The Fishbowl, which was designed to be a temporary space to be occupied for no longer than two years, was not closed until 2004, when the Stone Center building officially opened.²⁵⁴

Many alumni who remember the communal nature of the Fishbowl have been surprised and even dismayed to learn that its free-standing successor, the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, does not always play the same role as a community gathering space

²⁵³ “Black Cultural Center,” *Campus Profile*, Episode 102, UNC Student Television, 26 February 1990, <<http://www.uncstv.com/shows/campus-profile-episode-102>>.

²⁵⁴ Interview with Michelle Thomas by Charlotte Fryar, 26 December 2017, L-0466.

for Black students, faculty, and staff. “I am so proud to have the free-standing Sonja Haynes Stone Center...But there’s something we took for granted that we had in the Fishbowl that does not currently exist, which is again, a space for multiple generations and multiple ranks to come together just to be,” Renee Alexander Craft, now a faculty member in the Department of Communication Studies, explained.²⁵⁵ This belief that the contemporary Stone Center suffers from the absence of social spaces is repeated throughout other interviews with Black alumni who remember the collective energy of the Fishbowl.²⁵⁶ The loss of a social space within the Stone Center confirms that part of the dynamism that marked the Fishbowl as a counter-space separate in significance from either the Stone Center or Upendo Lounge was the remarkable way in which it melded the academic and social needs of Black students.

The Fishbowl, though no longer in existence, operated for close to two decades in a temporary space defined in part by its physical shortcomings and uncertainty regarding its future. Despite this precarity, the history of the Fishbowl stands as a testament to the students, faculty, and staff who created a counter-space that supported Black students’ experiences and identity development, despite the University’s consistent undervaluing of the importance of the BCC. By blending the social and academic interests of Black students, the BCC became a vigorous force within the institution for progressive energies, intellectual activities, and passionate discourse. And in creating a space in which to both challenge the prevailing cultural practices of the University and support one another, Black students also developed the BCC into a powerful space from which to build and sustain a major movement for racial justice. But the physical

²⁵⁵ Interview with Renee Alexander Craft by Charlotte Fryar, 2 February 2017, L-0456.

²⁵⁶ Interview with Christopher Faison by Charlotte Fryar, 9 December 2016, L-0459; Interview with Michelle Thomas by Charlotte Fryar, 26 December 2017, L-0466.

space of the Fishbowl exposed the University's anti-Black institutional policies, which sought to contain Black life within a space which could be surveilled at all times. Thus, the Fishbowl, like Upendo Lounge, carries a dual legacy of both the insurgent power of Black counter-space creation and the institutional policies utilized to suppress the capacity for Black students to exercise their power.