

### CHAPTER THREE: UPENDO LOUNGE

“So you go to Upendo on Saturday night to party and you come back on Sunday morning to go to church. It was the same space, the very same space. Just cleaned it out, put the chairs up differently and you had a party on Saturday, church on Sunday,” Henry Foust remembered. By the time Foust arrived as a freshman in 1974, Upendo Lounge was already “the spot” for Black students.<sup>199</sup> Officially opened on February 16, 1973 and located on the first floor of Chase Hall, the dining hall for South Campus, Upendo (Swahili for “love”) was envisioned by Black students as a space in which they could “gather to study, read, relax, and socialize in a predominantly Black atmosphere.”<sup>200</sup> Upendo Lounge was the first formal Black counter-space on the campus which operated to provide for the social needs of Black students within and against the whiteness of the University’s culture. This chapter argues that because Upendo was the first formal Black student space on the campus, it was deemed by the University’s white administrators and students as a hazard to the maintenance of white supremacy, and thus, it faced tremendous scrutiny and retaliation through established institutional practices of discrimination and neglect.

Prior to the opening of Upendo, the Black Student Movement (BSM) procured a small office space on the second floor of the Frank Porter Graham Student Union. John Sellars, a member of the class of 1971, noted that, for the BSM, “having a place that we could sit and talk

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<sup>199</sup> Interview with Henry Foust by Monique LaBorde, 24 November 2015, N-0036.

<sup>200</sup> “‘Upendo’ to open,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 16 February 1973, 2.

and meet, that gave us some authority. I mean, we were not student government, the student council, but we were another recognized group, and we knew that we had a purpose.”<sup>201</sup> The office did not, however, serve as a space for Black students to socialize or to build a sense of community outside of the organization of the BSM, which, by the early 1970s was growing larger in size. Although the University had been formally desegregated at both the undergraduate and graduate levels beginning in 1955, it was not until 1971 that the total number of Black students on campus reached five hundred.<sup>202</sup> The protracted pace of desegregation can be attributed to the institution’s “hostility to genuine racial justice,” a judgment shared by dozens of white institutions across the South.<sup>203</sup> In the 1969-1970 school year, the percentage of Black undergraduates reached just over one percent, with sixty Black freshman in an entering class of 2,394.<sup>204</sup> As the Black student body continued to grow, albeit slowly, so did the BSM, which organized into subgroups, including the Opeyo dance group, BSM Gospel Choir, and *Black Ink* magazine.<sup>205</sup> In 1972, Richard Epps was elected as the University’s first Black student body president, and his election signaled to the University’s administrators that Black student power was strengthening on the campus.

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with John Sellars by Alex Ford, 8 November 2015, N-0042.

<sup>202</sup> Enrollment Data in the Office of the Registrar and Director of Institutional Research of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Records #40130, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>203</sup> John K. Chapman, *Black Freedom and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1793-1960*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), 171.

<sup>204</sup> Enrollment Data in the Office of the Registrar and Director of Institutional Research of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Records #40130, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>205</sup> Black Notes from Carolina, Fall 1971 in the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Records #40124, University Archives, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The BSM worked to acquire a larger space for their organization from the University, lobbying administrators in the Division of Student Affairs for a physical space on the campus that could meet the operational needs of the growing organization. With the opening of Upendo Lounge in 1973 after several years of the BSM advocating for a meeting space, Black students had their first official space on the campus dedicated solely to the community of Black students at the University. It was the first formally recognized counter-space for Black students, a space in which they could “specifically affirm the racial and/or ethnic aspects of their identity.”<sup>206</sup> Like South Campus and Manning Hall, two contemporary counter-spaces, Upendo Lounge, as a space of Black autonomy, would face censure and attack from white students and administrators through certain anti-Black processes which operated on behalf of institutional control of all Black people on the campus.<sup>207</sup>

### **A Perceived Threat to White Supremacy**

The placement of Upendo in Chase Hall, on South Campus, was essential for developing a sense of shared experience among Black students. Finding themselves unwelcome in other spaces in which white students socialized (primarily white fraternities, and the Frank Porter Graham Student Union on North Campus), Black students gathered in dorm rooms and floor lounges in the South Campus dorms to socialize.<sup>208</sup> White students and housing administrators perceived these gatherings of Black students as threatening, and in Hinton James, the Housing Department enacted a new lounge policy in 1972 to curtail socializing among Black students.

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<sup>206</sup> Dorinda J. Carter, “Role of Identity-Affirming Counter-Spaces in a Predominantly White High School,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 76, No. 4 (Fall 2007): 543.

<sup>207</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10-11.

<sup>208</sup> Jonathan Rich, “UNC race relations a many-sided issue,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 1 October 1981, 9.

Charles Duncan, a writer for *Black Ink*, described the effect of the policy: “there will be no Black floor parties in the respective floor lounges because, under this new policy, only residents of a particular floor can have a party. There are no all Black floors, so any floor party will be mixed.”<sup>209</sup>

The year before, white students in Hinton James asked for weekend ID checks for all persons entering the dormitory, presumably to prevent Black non-students from entering the building, the result of what the *Yackety Yack*, the University’s yearbook, called, “the south campus situation, fraught with community-campus and black-white tensions.”<sup>210</sup> The creation of Upendo Lounge on South Campus as a space for solely Black student life was essential for the sustaining of the BSM, then still a fledgling organization. Henry Foust, a member of the BSM Gospel Choir through the mid-1970s, highlighted the significance of Upendo’s location, saying that “it was very much a hub and everything happened there. Dances, parties, meetings, concerts sometimes, practices. Anything that went on in the Black community, pretty much the first place you tried to get was Upendo.”<sup>211</sup>

The physical location of Upendo on the first floor of Chase Hall had formerly been a space referred to in *The Daily Tar Heel* as a “mini-union,” much smaller than the main North Campus student union.<sup>212</sup> Because the space of Upendo had formerly been dedicated for use by any student in the University’s predominantly white student body, the permanence of Upendo as an entirely Black social space was always in question. Many white students viewed Upendo

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<sup>209</sup> Charles Duncan, “New Lounge Policy Enacted,” *Black Ink*, September 1972, 7.

<sup>210</sup> *Yackety Yack*, 1971-1972, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 281.

<sup>211</sup> Interview with Henry Foust by Monique LaBorde, 24 November 2015, N-0036.

<sup>212</sup> “‘Upendo’ to Open,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 16 February 1972, 2.

Lounge, the first space for Black students recognized by the institution, as a threat to their claims on the cultural and campus landscape. Two white men articulated the fears of many white students in a letter to the editor of *The Daily Tar Heel*, writing that “after reading and hearing about all the uproar concerning the Upendo Lounge, it occurs to us that whites have been discriminated against ever since the concept for the Upendo Lounge was conceived...whites do not have an area set aside for their activities...after all, equality is what we are all fighting for, isn’t it?”<sup>213</sup> Because Upendo Lounge highlighted racial difference instead of concealing it, the space threatened white privilege, the foundation of white supremacy, and endangered the social and cultural dominance established on campus by white students.<sup>214</sup> Upendo Lounge was therefore vulnerable to attacks from white students, as well as white administrators, as soon as it opened.

Black students understood the possible consequences of white suspicion and potential attacks. *Black Ink* reported that some Black students had “concocted various reasons why the University administration saw fit to allow us to set the place up. Some believe that they did it to allow for an embarrassment to the Black student populace. They believe the center is sure to flop and that the failure will be credited directly to the BSM and Black students in general. The University would then return to its do-nothing program for Blacks on the basis that their problems are incurred by themselves and not by the University.” Other students thought that the University had given the BSM the space in order to confine the activities of Black students, “thus sparing the administration the unpleasant task of coping with the continuing nuisance of Black

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<sup>213</sup> Mark Stover and Bobby Green, “White Student Movement?” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 15 October 1976, 8.

<sup>214</sup> Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 13.

masses in the dorms on weekends, participating in ‘wild jungle rituals,’ or with the discordant and disdainful music of a so called ‘choir’ practicing in a dorm lounge.”<sup>215</sup> These explanations, though perhaps true, do not give full agency to the Black students who organized to create Upendo Lounge. The creation of the space was, BSM chairman Warren Carson Jr. explained, “due to the innovative ideas offered by BSM concerning a Black student lounge, and the persistent pursuit in making the idea a reality.”<sup>216</sup> However, if the intent on the part of University administrators was to segregate Black student activities into a single space, they were somewhat successful in that containment, though the subsequent attacks against the space make this rationalization less credible.

Only three years after the establishment of Upendo Lounge, white administrators challenged the space for the first time. In the summer of 1976, the University’s Space Committee approved the relocation of the cafeteria in Chase Hall from the second floor to the first, displacing Upendo Lounge, without informing the leadership of the BSM. Dean of Student Affairs Donald Boulton promised a space would be set aside for the BSM on the second floor, following renovations, but the lack of communication between the Space Committee and the BSM’s leadership enlarged a rift between Black students and white administrators.<sup>217</sup> Henry Foust explained what was at stake in the potential threat to Upendo, stating his feeling at the time that “You can talk about money all you want to but you’re talking about closing Upendo, you’ve got a fight on your hands. It’s like, ‘You are not closing that because that’s our spot.’”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Larry Mixon, “Upendo: a love uprising!,” *Black Ink*, February 1973, 3.

<sup>216</sup> Warren Carson, “Ex-BSM chairman: ‘We Must Survive,’” *Black Ink*, April 1973, 3.

<sup>217</sup> Laura Scism and David Stacks, “BSM not consulted on moving Upendo,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 5 October 1976, 1.

<sup>218</sup> Interview with Henry Foust by Monique LaBorde, 24 November 2015, N-0036.

On the celebration of the University's founding, University Day, October 12, 1976, two hundred Black students marched into Memorial Hall, the main auditorium on campus. Chanting "Power to the people, Black Power to the African people, we shall survive in America," the students protested the planned relocation of Upendo Lounge and demanded an apology from the Space Committee.<sup>219</sup> Foust, describing the frustrations of Black students about the way they had been treated during the process of relocating Upendo, said he and others felt that "we just want to be here. Just treat us like you treat the rest of the organizations on campus and just let us do what we're going to do. Why is this becoming an issue every time?"<sup>220</sup> The BSM acquiesced to the relocation of Upendo Lounge to the second floor of Chase Hall, but seven years later, in 1983, the building once again underwent renovations, with the second floor rededicated as the Chase Union, now under administrative control of the Carolina Student Union.

Although the physical space of Upendo Lounge had been retained, the Union shifted their reservation policy so that any student group could use the space, though they promised the BSM would have "priority" in reserving Upendo. Soon after, white students, unconcerned with the significance of Upendo for Black students, began to reserve and use the space, previously dedicated to the affirmation of Blackness and resistance to the institution's persistent whiteness. In this way, Upendo Lounge was effectively colonized by the University, a result of what geographer Katherine McKittrick describes as the institution "repetitively constitute[ing] blackness as a discreet (and hostile) racial category that routinely 'troubles' an already settled

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<sup>219</sup> Toni Gilbert and Laura Schism, "Black protestors join procession," *The Daily Tar Heel*, 13 October 1976, 1.

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Henry Foust by Monique LaBorde, 24 November 2015, N-0036.

whiteness.”<sup>221</sup> Because the existence of Upendo Lounge undermined the normalized white supremacy of the campus landscape, the University’s administration forwarded a policy that would dilute the Blackness of the space and create the conditions for white student-led colonization. Explaining this policy decision, Director of the Carolina Union, Howard Henry, stated, “the Union should not have to ask the BSM how that space is used.”<sup>222</sup> In response, BSM president from 1983 to 1984, Sherrod Banks, told *The Daily Tar Heel*, “we will have an ambiguous term such as ‘priority’ to rely on for the existence of the BSM. It’s ridiculous.” The changed reservation policy dramatically shifted the attitudes of Black students, administrators, and faculty towards a new idea taking shape at predominantly white universities across the country: a Black Cultural Center. “We want a new facility,” said Banks. “It doesn’t matter a whole lot where it is.”<sup>223</sup>

Even before Upendo’s opening in 1973, administrators referred to the space as the University’s “Black Cultural Center,” a concept for the space which included room for exhibits and an auditorium, which it did not have.<sup>224</sup> The continued precarity of Upendo’s existence and accessibility resulted in the search for a permanent location for a Black Cultural Center, an effort that eventually separated from conversations about the future of Upendo Lounge. The movement for a permanent and free-standing Black Cultural Center began in 1984 and continued for the next thirty years when the free-standing Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History opened in 2004. Throughout, Upendo Lounge continued to serve as a gathering space for

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<sup>221</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, No. 8 (2011): 950.

<sup>222</sup> C.F. Wallington, “BSM was guaranteed space, UNC official says,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 27 October 1983, 1.

<sup>223</sup> Mark Stinneford, “BSM angered by loss of Upendo,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 12 October 1983, 1.

<sup>224</sup> Bunky Flagler, “Imagination key to Henry’s success,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 5 February 1973, 19.



the BSM, operating under the same “priority” reservation policy enacted in 1983, which limited Upendo’s potential for community building and support.

Michelle Thomas, president of the BSM from 1992 to 1993, described in an interview the three spaces on campus that were important to her as a student: “The Sonja Haynes Stone Center, eventually—the Black Cultural Center at the time—Great Hall for parties on Friday nights, and the Upendo Lounge, which were the three places where Black folks congregated on campus.” Before the interview was over, she asked about Upendo: “Is it still Black?”<sup>225</sup> Her question suggests that Black students in the late 1980s and 1990s did not believe in the permanency of Upendo as an essential social space for Black students. That even formally created Black counter-spaces lacked immutability in the way that social spaces for white students did in part explains how indelible anti-Blackness is across the cultural landscape; every Black-created space is deemed by the dominant culture to be a hazard to the maintenance of white supremacy.

### **Legacy of Upendo Lounge**

In 2003, Chase Hall was torn down and Upendo Lounge temporarily moved to the Frank Porter Graham Student Union.<sup>226</sup> After this move, the BSM was no longer given “priority” in reserving Upendo Lounge, and the space was open for reservations by any student organization. By 2007, Upendo Lounge had moved to its current home in the Student and Academic Services Building North (located, despite its name, on South Campus). At the fortieth anniversary celebration of the BSM later that year, leaders unveiled the “Upendo history wall,” an exhibit of old newspaper articles and correspondence with the University’s administration that traced the

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<sup>225</sup> Interview with Michelle Thomas by Charlotte Fryar, 26 December 2017, L-0466.

<sup>226</sup> John Ramsey, “Flying Food Heralds Farewell,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 10 March 2005.

history of Upendo Lounge.<sup>227</sup> In 2016, Upendo was renovated and rededicated as a space that the BSM had the “first right” in reserving, which gave the BSM “a permanent place to meet.” Although Upendo Lounge still has not regained its original status as a space solely for the Black student community to gather in, contemporary leadership of the BSM have stated their contentment with the BSM having “priority” in reserving the space. Kendall Luton, a graduate of 2018, described the current importance of Upendo to *The Daily Tar Heel*, stating, “Most of the spaces are filled up with only white people — and that is good and all — but it is nice to have a space of our own where we can have our thoughts and things like that, where we can just come together as a community.”<sup>228</sup>

The attacks leveraged against Upendo Lounge exposed the fears of the University that Black students, having created a formal space in which to meet and socialize, threatened white claims on the cultural landscape and would build up significant power in Black social counter-spaces. And as Black students did continue to build up and exercise such power through public protest, the University acted to minimize the potential of Upendo Lounge to serve as a space for Black students to gather, socialize, and organize. By moving Upendo around the campus and changing policies for the process of reserving the space, the University weakened Upendo’s role as a space for the Black student community, a method of reproducing anti-Blackness—using institutional mechanisms to control Black bodies within the whiteness of the campus landscapes—that demonstrates how embedded white supremacy is within the University. Although now Upendo Lounge does serve as a space in which the BSM and its subgroups can

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<sup>227</sup> Anthony McPeck, “BSM Recognizes 40th anniversary,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 12 November 2007.

<sup>228</sup> Jamie Gwaltney, “Upendo Lounge—a place to support and uplift each other,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, 2 September 2016.

meet and hold events, the current iteration of the space bears little resemblance to the dynamic Upendo Lounge of the 1970s, a shift in power that is a direct result of University-enacted policies that control Black students and the power they can exercise on the campus.