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## **Gospel Choir as a Space for Racial and Religious Expression for Black Students at a Predominantly White Institution**

**Diego D. T. Pinto<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This ethnography aimed to describe the culture and philosophy of the Northwestern Community Ensemble (NCE), a predominantly Black gospel choir at a predominantly White institution. Data collection comprised standard ethnographic procedures—31 hours of observation at rehearsals and concerts as a non-participant observer; 28 hours as a participant observer; and 15 semi-structured interviews with ensemble members and support people. Data consisted of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and material culture, including concert programs, the ensemble's website and social media pages, policy documents, and other documents from the Northwestern University Archives. Analysis involved a process of open and closed coding, with Randall Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory serving as the theoretical framework. This theory effectively described the interpersonal exchanges between ensemble members and the symbols mediating those processes. The findings suggest gospel music was the unifying force that connected all elements of participation in NCE—music experience, racial identity, religious identity—and helped foster group solidarity and spiritual growth. These findings highlight the importance of social identity-based music ensembles for marginalized racial and ethnic groups at predominantly White institutions.

**Keywords:** choral culture, interaction ritual, gospel choir, social identity-based student organization, Black student organization, culturally relevant pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup> Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

### **Corresponding author:**

Diego D. T. Pinto, Henry & Leigh Bienen School of Music, Northwestern University, 70 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.

diegopinto2021@u.northwestern.edu

## Gospel Choir as a Space for Racial and Religious Expression for Black Students at a Predominantly White Institution

*Choir director Gwen presses “play” on her music streaming app. The singers cannot contain themselves and start dancing out of their seats the second Israel Houghton’s “You are Good” blasts out of the Bluetooth speaker. “Kids’ church!” Olivia yells excitedly, recalling her experience singing this song growing up in her church’s children’s ministry. On my right, C.J. uses two pencils as drumsticks and bangs on a seat cushion, while across the room, holding a textbook and a notebook, Brennan sings along while finishing up some homework. Varied and beautiful tones of black and brown skins fill the room, and a variety of hair-styles ornaments the scene. The guys wear a short haircut or short Afro with curls with faded sides and back, most with an impeccable hairline neatly styled with a t-blade trimmer. The girls wear different lengths of natural curls, braids, wigs, or weave extensions. During a quick break, one singer greets another and compliments her on her hairdo: “Girl! You did that!” Gwen recounts with much dismay a recent episode when a random White lady tried to touch her freshly done braids. The other girls laugh and say, “Oh, no ma’am!”*

“There are, like, ‘six’ Black people on campus. What am I going to do?” These were the words of Blake, a singer in and executive board member of the Northwestern Community Ensemble (NCE).<sup>2</sup> She transferred to Northwestern University, a predominantly White institution (PWI), during her sophomore year and faced early on the challenges of building close relationships and finding a sense of belonging. While longing for deep, meaningful relationships and fearing isolation are common attitudes during the young adult years (Erikson, 1968), college students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups may face additional challenges in PWIs. For instance, observations of and experiences with racism may increase stress in students of color and affect their commitment to the institution (Johnson et al., 2014). Furthermore, a lack of cultural representation in college spaces may lead students from marginalized ethnic groups to feel “absent while present” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017).

Black<sup>3</sup> student enrollment at U.S. postsecondary institutions represented 12% of all undergraduate students in fall 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). Although that number has increased from 9.6% since 1976, Black student representation remains drastically low in many postsecondary institutions. At Northwestern University, Black or African American students comprised 6% of the undergraduate enrollment in fall 2020, White students 42%, and Asian students 19% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b).

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<sup>2</sup> Given the historical significance of this organization, its real name is being used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> The data do not specify the number of nonresident aliens (i.e., international students) or students of Hispanic ethnicity who also identify as Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a).

For many Black students, one way to cope with feelings of isolation and marginalization at a PWI is to join a Black student organization (Deckman, 2013b; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harrison, 2015; Museus, 2008; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). One category of student organizations found in colleges and universities all across the United States is gospel choirs. A survey of music department chairpersons from 34 U.S. colleges and universities showed that 99% of collegiate gospel choir members at HBCUs and 82.4% at PWIs were Black students, and most of those gospel choirs were student organizations (Young, 2005). The present study focused on one such student organization, the Northwestern Community Ensemble (NCE), a student-led, primarily Black gospel choir at Northwestern University, a primarily White institution. This study explored the culture and philosophy of NCE, examining the relationship between singers' identities and their participation in the ensemble.

### Definition of Key Terms

In this article, *culture* refers to “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general” (Williams, 1985, p. 90). Elements representing NCE's culture include but are not limited to rituals, beliefs, procedures, and habits. *Philosophy* describes “a system of principles for guidance in practical affairs” (Dictionary.com, n.d.-b). NCE's philosophical underpinnings include the ensemble's perceived values, purposes, and mission. The term *predominantly White institution* (PWI) is commonly used in the United States to describe colleges and universities where White students comprise most of the student enrollment (i.e., 50% or greater; Brown & Dancy, 2010). However, Bourke (2016) emphasized that the term also highlights the historical and current role of race and racism in those institutions. In this paper, *PWI* refers to colleges and universities characterized by either numerical or sociocultural dominance of White students and Whiteness.

### Review of the Literature

Previous studies have shown that students from marginalized racial or ethnic groups perceived their campus racial climate more negatively than White students attending the same institutions (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The lowest levels of satisfaction tended to be among Black students, even compared to other marginalized groups (Ancis et al., 2000; Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). One reason for students' negative perception was the lack of a sense of belonging (Harper et al., 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Vaccaro and Newman (2016) documented that the definition of belonging varied between privileged and minoritized college students. While all students saw belonging as feeling comfortable and “fitting in,” only minoritized students associated belonging with respect, safety, building deeper relationships rooted in authenticity and self-awareness, and feelings of not being “the only one.”

To improve the experiences and well-being of students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, postsecondary institutions have implemented strategies including offering

ethnic studies courses (Nuñez, 2011) and sponsoring multicultural centers and social identity-based student organizations (Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus, 2008; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Besides helping students of color feel welcome (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), identity-based student organizations provided cultural validation (Fiorentino, 2020; Museus, 2008) and opportunities for students' self-awareness of their racial backgrounds (Means & Pyne, 2017). Fiorentino (2020) sought to understand whether membership in a student organization focusing on music students from marginalized identities influenced students' experiences of belonging and citizenship in a PWI. Membership in the student organization helped mitigate the students' feelings of marginalization and isolation. The two participants in Fiorentino's (2020) case study—both undergraduate music students of color who were members and founders of the organization—acknowledged the student organization's role in supporting and validating its members.

Ethnic student organizations have focused on music performance as a means of social integration and cultural validation. At the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, Harvard's oldest Black student organization and the institution's largest multicultural organization, students achieved their mission by "working together as a collective to promote the uplift of the black community through music, dance, and writing" (Deckman, 2013a, p. 281) with a focus on music and dance from across the African diaspora. Results from Deckman's (2013b) ethnography revealed that participants valued the organization's musical and social aspects, and the ensemble director believed it was crucial to keep a balance between both.

Researchers have suggested that participation in gospel choir helped foster African American college students' social integration at PWIs (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Strayhorn (2011) explored the experiences of 21 African American students who sang in a gospel choir at a PWI. Participation in the gospel choir helped students establish a sense of belonging, reduce feelings of marginalization and social isolation, and develop ethnic pride. Singing songs that highlighted Afrocentric musical features and addressed the "struggles for freedom and justice" (p. 144) helped choir members to educate themselves and the community about Black culture "while developing pride in their own ethnic identity" (p. 144).

Gospel music has been considered "a profound statement of black culture" (Williams-Jones, 1975, p. 384). Expanding on the extant literature on the lived experiences of Black gospel choir members at PWIs is crucial to broadening our understanding of gospel choirs' role at colleges and universities and the significance of gospel music for Black students at PWIs. The purpose of this ethnography (Spradley, 1979) was to describe the culture and philosophy of the Northwestern Community Ensemble, a predominantly Black gospel choir at a predominantly White institution. The following research questions guided this study: (a) How are the ensemble's culture and philosophy manifested? (b) How do the singers' identities and cultural background shape their participation in NCE? (c) How does participation in NCE shape the singers' identities and their experiences at a PWI?

## Theoretical Framework

A holistic study of a choral culture must consider not only music and singers' interaction with music but also the processes and interpersonal interactions in those spaces. Collins (2005) stated, "Rituals generate symbols; experience in rituals inculcates those symbols in individual minds and memories" (p. 44). In other words, singers' collective experiences with and through symbols in the choral rehearsal may lead to a shared experience unique to that ensemble. Collins (2005) developed a micro-sociological theory (concerned with small-scale, face-to-face sociological interactions) called *interaction ritual theory*, which describes how individuals develop emotional energy and feelings of group membership (or group solidarity) when involved in certain interpersonal exchanges. A small body of education research has featured interaction ritual theory as a framework to examine a fourth-grade language learner's interactions with their peers in a multilingual classroom in Luxembourg (Wilmes & Siry, 2018), students' perception of emotional climate in a preservice secondary science teacher education class in Bhutan (Rinchen et al., 2016), and the relationship between eighth-grade students' engagement with science and learning environments in a U.S. private school (Olitsky, 2007).

Interaction rituals (IR) involve emotional, behavioral, and cognitive connections between individuals (Collins, 2005). There are three stages in interaction ritual theory. In the first stage, *ritual ingredients*, individuals come together (group assembly or bodily co-presence) with a common goal or mutual focus of attention (an event or activity) while sharing a mood or emotional experience. Clear boundaries or barriers exclude outsiders from participating in the interaction ritual or from successfully achieving a sense of group membership. The interactions progress to moments of shared excitement and enjoyment (emotional entrainment, shared emotion, or feelings of intersubjectivity), leading to the second stage called *collective effervescence*, which is characterized by moments of exhilaration (Collins, 2005). Even though those moments are short-lived, they lead to prolonged results. These results are part of the third stage, ritual outcome, which include group solidarity or feelings of membership and emotional energy in the individual. Other outcomes include symbols of social relationship or sacred objects (tangible or intangible representations of the group) and standards of morality towards the group and its symbols.

Using firefighters' training as an example, Collins (2005) explained, "'Training' is not simply a matter of learning; it is above all establishing identity with the group who carry out their skills collectively. Maintaining collective identity is an ongoing activity, an IR chain" (p. 91). In that sense, when choir singers attend a rehearsal, they are not merely learning music and preparing for a performance. Through successful interaction rituals, singers develop a collective identity as members of the ensemble. Continuous attendance at rehearsals and prolonged interaction between the singers foster the development of their collective identity. I adopted interaction ritual theory as a theoretical framework to help understand the social interactions in NCE, the role of music in those interactions, and the personal and collective outcomes of those interactions. Race and religion represent some of the most

complex issues in the United States, particularly considering that people's racial and religious experiences are not monolithic. Interaction ritual theory can effectively explain which racial and religious symbols are significant to a group and the unique ways group members may use those symbols and make them their own to develop and maintain their collective identity.

## Site and Context

### *Northwestern Community Ensemble*

This study focused on the Northwestern Community Ensemble (NCE), a student-led gospel choir at Northwestern University. The choir was founded in 1971 during a time of significant racial distress and a moment of collective Black resistance on Northwestern's campus. On April 22, 1968, members of For Members Only (FMO) and the Afro-American Student Union (AASU)—Black student organizations at Northwestern University—presented a statement and petition demanding better conditions for Black students at the university (*Black student statement and petition*, 1968; Wilson, 2018). Because the university did not promptly respond to the demands, over 100 Black students occupied the bursar's office on May 3, 1968 (Wilson, 2018). The 38-hour protest ended when students and the school's administration reached an agreement (“Black students win many demands,” 1968). The event became known as the Bursar's Office Takeover. One of the demonstration's achievements was the establishment of the Black House—a house on campus that serves as a social and cultural hub for Black students (Wilson, 2018).

Three years after the takeover, Eileen Cherry, FMO's Cultural Affairs coordinator, brought together 15 singers to perform at an FMO-sponsored fundraiser on campus (Wilson, 2021). After a successful event, Cherry met with two other Black Northwestern students, Clifton Gerring III and Lurell Stanley Davis, and they decided to form the Northwestern Community Ensemble. The group's creation came in response to collective interest in a Black choir at Northwestern and the need for a safe space for Black students who felt unwelcome in other choral groups (Northwestern Community Ensemble, n.d.). The first audition was held on May 8, 1971, and the group had its first performance the following fall. An announcement in the university's newspaper read:

Northwestern's first black choir, the Northwestern Community Ensemble, will sing gospels, spirituals, hymns and anthems in “An Evening of Music” at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Alice Millar Chapel. Tickets are \$1 and available at Scott Hall Activities Office and Black House, 619 Emerson (Taylor, 1971, p.7).

The ensemble's successful first year paved the way for a vibrant legacy on Northwestern's campus and in the Evanston community, including frequent participation at church services at Evanston's Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church (Northwestern Community Ensemble, 1972).

After 50 years, NCE has continued to offer a space where Northwestern students could

gather to worship God and enjoy each other's company while singing gospel music. The organization's constitution (Northwestern Community Ensemble, 2017) stated:

The purpose of NCE is to serve God and to give students and the surrounding community a chance to worship God and Jesus Christ, and to experience both in concert form and worship. Also [sic] to teach students different section parts and how to sing in concert with others. (p. 4)

The students handled all operations in NCE. Ensemble members elected all executive board members except the choir directors. During this study, the executive board invited one choir director based on their previous musical experiences; that director, in turn, invited other experienced choir members to co-direct. The opportunity to engage in decision-making affecting all processes set NCE apart from participants' previous ensemble experiences and other ensembles led by university-appointed faculty or staff. Rosa (sophomore, 2nd-year member) explained, "I feel we're freer to give recommendations and work together through things." Vocal coach David pointed out that the "element of student voice would be significantly lower" if NCE was a for-credit course rather than a student organization. "Because of that," David added, "some people may want it to remain that way." Participants seemed to not only value student engagement and leadership but also to protect that structure. Speaking about the choir director position, choir director Gwen (senior, 4th-year member) shared, "The dedication that you have as someone who is a working person with a job and potentially a family or starting a family or whatever is not the same as a student that's in it." Student leadership has been a fundamental aspect of NCE, and participants believed it should be preserved.

All students were welcome to audition and join the choir, though a special effort to recruit Black students was evident. Pianist and choir director Patrick (freshman, 1st-year member) spoke of his first encounter with members of NCE's executive board at the student organization fair:

They were screaming, like, "Hey, you're Black. Do you like Black people? Do you like music too?" I was like, "Yeah, I like all that." They're like, "You should join our choir." And I was like, "Okay, but I'm not singing, so I'll play the piano for you."

Rehearsals took place every Saturday at Alice Millar Chapel's choir room from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. NCE held two major annual performances. For the winter concert, the choir hired a professional gospel artist to perform with them. Gospel artists who performed with NCE in recent years included Fred Hammond, Marvin Sapp, and Tye Tribbett. The group had also participated in annual campus events, including the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Candlelight Vigil and *Harambee*—the kickoff to Black History Month at Northwestern University.

Membership in NCE was open to all Northwestern students, and at the time of this study, all singers in the group were undergraduate students. Approximately 20 singers joined the choir each year. During the 2019–2020 academic year, 19 singers were listed on the fall concert program, and 22 singers were on the path to performing in the 2020 winter concert when the event was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though nearly all NCE members were Black, non-Black students were welcome and often joined the ensemble. Only two White students joined the ensemble during the 2019–2020 academic year (one in the fall and another in the winter). The ensemble was also open to students holding diverse religious beliefs.

## Method

### *Genesis of the Study*

I first reached out to NCE because of a qualitative data collection assignment for a doctoral research methods class. After learning about the ensemble on Northwestern's student organization directory, I attended one of their rehearsals in November 2018. I had been at Northwestern for a few months, but that was the first time I was in a room where most people were Black. As a Black Christian music educator, I was struck by the ensemble's beautiful sound, the competence of their student-based leadership, their unapologetic faith, and their radiant culture. Shortly after that first encounter, I launched this ethnography.

### *Data Collection*

I began to formally collect data upon receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board in April 2019. This study was exempt from IRB oversight as it was determined "not research involving human subjects." Using standard ethnographic procedures (Emerson et al., 2011; Spradley, 1979), I observed 31 hours of rehearsals and concerts as a non-participant observer. After auditioning and joining the ensemble as a singer in January 2020, I continued to collect data as a participant observer (Spradley, 2016) for an additional 28 hours. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) with 13 ensemble members (two out of 34 members in the 2018–2019 academic year, 11 out of 22 members in the following academic year), their professional vocal coach, and the organization's advisor.

After receiving support from NCE's executive board to conduct this study, I shared my research purposes with the singers at the beginning of a rehearsal and invited them to participate in an interview. Singers signed up for an interview through a Google form or by directly scheduling an interview using the Acuity online scheduling service (<https://www.acuityscheduling.com>). The group's president frequently reminded ensemble members to sign up for an interview if they were interested. As I became more familiar with NCE's history and legacy as a Black student organization at Northwestern, I honed the focus of this study to Black students' experiences, which made more evident the need to center Black students' voices. Hence, although I interviewed one White NCE member who had signed up, I did not include that student in the final pool of participants. All other singers I interviewed identified

as Black or African American and remained in the final pool. All students interviewed in this study identified as Christian or had some connection with the Christian faith. I also contacted NCE's vocal coach and advisor by email, describing my research and inviting them to participate in an interview.

All participants in this report are represented by pseudonyms. The academic year and membership year shown in parentheses next to the choir member's name reflect when individual interviews took place. Because the ensemble had more than one choir director each year, this report shows multiple participants with that title. Most interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes and totaled over 16 hours of audio recordings. The interview with one of the choir directors was 136 minutes long. I recorded in-person interviews with the Voice Memos iPhone application and the interviews via Zoom video communication software with its built-in recording feature. For the latter, I used the audio-only recordings to generate the interview transcript. I transcribed the interviews using either the Transcribe by Wreally (<https://transcribe.wreally.com/>) or Otter.ai (<https://otter.ai>) websites, resulting in 252 pages of transcribed interviews. Other forms of data included fieldnotes and memos (Emerson et al., 2011) and material culture—concert programs, the ensemble's website and social media pages, official documents, and other records from the Northwestern University Archives.

### **Data Analysis**

I used MAXQDA software to analyze all the data, starting with a process of open coding (Emerson et al., 2011). First, I coded the interview transcripts by using “first cycle codes” (Miles et al., 2014) such as descriptive (e.g., “NCE as a Family,” “Racial [Under]representation,” in vivo (e.g., “Am I Black Enough?,” “Halftime Bible Time”), and process codes (e.g., Building Relationships). Using “second cycle coding” (Miles et al., 2014), I looked for patterns between the codes and grouped them into themes (see Table 1 on the next page for themes and respective codes). Lastly, I used a process of focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011) to analyze other forms of data, such as memos, fieldnotes, and material culture, looking for data that would confirm or disconfirm my assertions. Throughout the coding process, I wrote memos to register early insights and interpretations, which later developed into deeper assertions. I examined and interpreted the emergent themes and assertions using interaction ritual theory (Collins, 2005) as a framework to organize and understand the central phenomenon. In this study, *assertion* refers to “a declarative statement of summative synthesis, supported by confirming evidence from the data and revised when disconfirming evidence or discrepant cases require modification of the assertion” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 99).

### **Trustworthiness**

I applied several validation strategies suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) in order to achieve trustworthiness. Due to this study's qualitative nature, the findings are not generaliz-

**Table 1.** Emergent Themes and Respective Codes

Category	Themes	Codes
Religion and Spirituality	Finding Spiritual Outlet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiritual Outlet</li> <li>• “Halftime Bible Time”</li> <li>• Home Church</li> <li>• Evangelism</li> </ul>
	Achieving Spiritual Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious Agency</li> <li>• Spiritual Growth</li> </ul>
Race	Finding a Black Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racial (Under)representation</li> <li>• Comfort</li> <li>• “Am I Black Enough?”</li> </ul>
	Celebrating Blackness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Joy of Blackness</li> <li>• African American Culture</li> </ul>
	Achieving Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belonging</li> <li>• Building Community</li> <li>• NCE as a Family</li> <li>• Building Relationships</li> </ul>
Gospel Music	Gospel Music as Worship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worship</li> </ul>
	Gospel Music as Black Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black Aesthetics</li> <li>• Contemporary Christian Music</li> </ul>
	A Black Church Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black Church</li> <li>• Never Sung in a Gospel Choir</li> </ul>

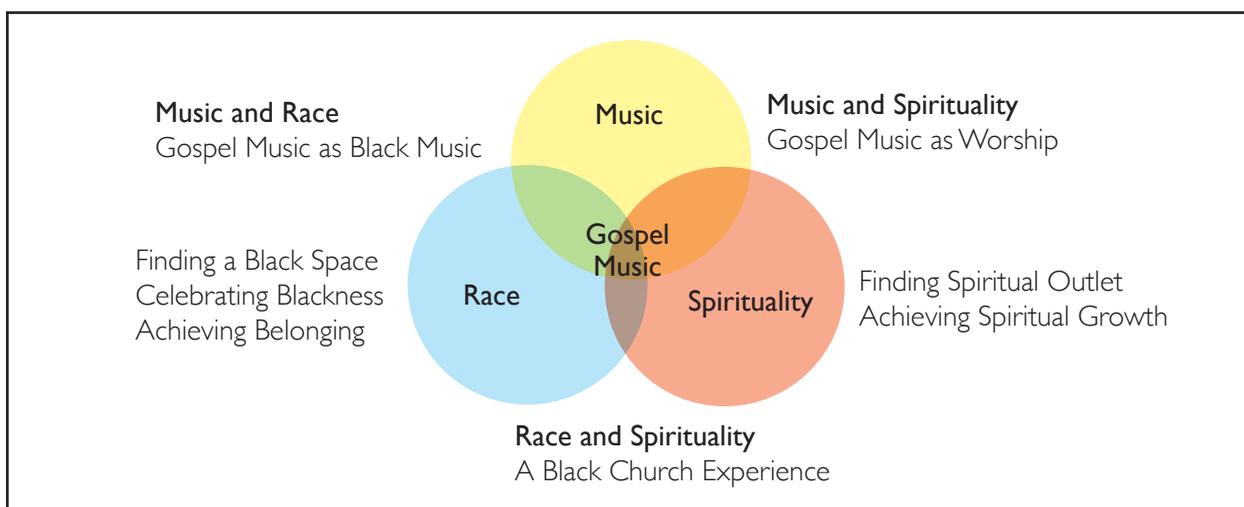
able beyond this organization and the cohort interviewed. Nevertheless, attending rehearsals and concerts for over a year—including every rehearsal in the 2019–2020 academic year—helped assure prolonged engagement and afforded me rich data to inform a thick description (Geertz, 2002) of the ensemble and its culture. Hopefully, such a strategy will help readers to make naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). I also introduced myself to the choir and made my intentions and the purpose of my presence clear in order to lessen any effect of “researcher on site” (Miles et al., 2014). Not all choir members during this study volunteered to be interviewed, and singers’ voices only represented those who participated in the study. However, I strove not to depend only on data from interviews. I triangulated with all types of data—interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and material culture—throughout the process of data analysis, actively seeking disconfirming evidence to dispute the preliminary assertions and provide more accurate interpretations.

Considering my role as participant observer and my personal familiarity with certain aspects of the ensemble's culture, I aimed to mitigate researcher subjectivity (Roulston & Shelton, 2015) by disclosing to participants my identity as a Christian, a Black man, and a vocal music educator and how it was my goal during this study not to assume that my experiences through those identities were the same as those of the participants. My identities and cultural background helped me notice and understand elements in the ensemble's culture that could have gone unnoticed by others unfamiliar with those traditions (e.g., references to biblical texts, jargon and customs associated with the Black Christian tradition, slangs used among Black youth in America, performance practice in the gospel music tradition). Nevertheless, I employed reflective practices that were often uncomfortable (Pillow, 2003) but were crucial for challenging me to explore issues of race, spirituality, and musicianship beyond my own experiences and epistemologies. Peer debriefers in sociology, education, and music education provided feedback during the data collection period, analysis, and writing of this report. Lastly, I applied member checking by asking participants for clarification after the interviews, presenting the research findings to members of the ensemble, and sharing assertions with individual participants. I asked them to provide feedback confirming, challenging, or expanding on my assertions and interpretations.

## Findings

Through data collection and analysis, I developed the general assertion that NCE provided a unique space for students at Northwestern University to express their Black and Christian identities through singing gospel music in a community of like-minded people. I organized the themes into three categories: "Religion and Spirituality," "Race," and "Gospel Music." Figure 1 presents a model of the NCE experience, containing each of these three categories and their respective emergent themes. Because "music" was an integral aspect of each of the three categories in NCE's culture, I did not address it as a separate category. I will introduce each category by highlighting different aspects of the ensemble's

**Figure 1:** The NCE Experience Model



culture through vignettes representing a collage of episodes I have observed.

### *Religion and Spirituality*

*All singers reconvene in the choir room after sectionals to run through Chance the Rapper's arrangement of "How Great is Our God." When the voices go from unison to three-part harmonies, the singers look at each other with excitement. Once the sonic residues of the final chord fade away, choir director Gwen calls for a break. It is Halftime Bible Time. Wearing a lime green sweatshirt that says, "God is Dope," chaplain Brittany reads a passage from the Bible found in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always." Brittany adds, "Don't wait until spring to rejoice. Make a choice to worship now." The rehearsal resumes with singers refreshed by such encouraging words. At the end of rehearsal, all singers stand up and hold hands in a circle as executive board member Sarah asks the group if anybody has any praise reports. One senior shares about a post-graduation job offer. With a thankful tone, a singer shares about a school project that went well while another is excited about dropping "orgo" (Organic Chemistry) and feeling good about it. When Sarah asks who needs prayer, singers mention an upcoming school exam and healing for a family member. With heads bowed and eyes closed, singers listen and respond in agreement: "Yes, Lord. Amen."*

Participation in NCE provided students at Northwestern the opportunity to fulfill their spiritual needs within a community of Christian singers. Participants in this study came from various Christian denominations, including but not limited to Pentecostal, Non-Denominational, and Catholic, with demographic makeup spanning from African to African American to predominantly White. Amidst such varied church backgrounds, participants found common goals and values that helped them explore their religious beliefs and spirituality in a collective setting. In this section, I will describe two emergent themes: "Finding Spiritual Outlet" and "Achieving Spiritual Growth." While the former describes NCE as an external avenue for students' religious expression with other students, the latter describes participants' internal, personal outcomes from a religious experience in that setting.

**Finding Spiritual Outlet.** NCE functioned as a spiritual outlet for students who felt connected to the Christian faith. Participants often described their transcendent experiences during rehearsals and concerts. Sarah stated, "Sometimes we'd be singing, and you could feel the presence of God." Having a spiritual outlet like NCE was vital for singers to maintain their faith, particularly those away from their hometowns who were not connected to a local church. Executive board member Blake (senior, 3rd-year member) explained, "I enjoy the fact that [NCE] lets me tap into the spiritual, religious aspect of my life. I don't go to church every Sunday. [...] But my Saturdays were always dedicated to NCE." While some participants did not attend church regularly, others were a part of religious organizations or attended churches in the community. For singers who attended church or other campus religious groups consistently, NCE's uniqueness was highlighted by music's role as a means

to spirituality.

NCE's culture incorporated elements common to a church experience. Those familiar cultural elements—including prayer and Bible reading—helped singers connect to their spirituality. NCE members prayed together at the beginning and the end of rehearsals. They also prayed together before walking on the stage to perform. Sharing praise reports—accounts of blessings received from God—took place at least once during rehearsals when singers gathered to pray. Halftime Bible Time, a bible-study-like interaction, was often mentioned by participants as one of their favorite parts of rehearsal. Rosa was pleased with the opportunity for self-reflection: “[It involves] taking the words we’re singing and then looking at Scripture, relating it and then saying, ‘Okay, how can we apply this to our lives?’” These procedures were crucial in helping singers develop a special meaning—a spiritual one—to their musical experience beyond aesthetic and social aspects of music participation.

Participants talked about the emotional and psychological benefits of attending rehearsals, including finding relief from academic stress and anxiety. Eve (senior, 2nd-year member) remarked, “It’s been a really positive impact on me, especially dealing with depression and anxiety at the school. It’s always been a place that even when I’m low [...] I know, like, ‘Okay, God is here.’ It’s so good!” Being a part of the ensemble has helped her find peace during challenging times in school.

Performing gospel music to the broader Northwestern community allowed singers to share their faith with others. Because evangelism (reaching those outside the Christian faith and encouraging them to believe in Jesus) has been an integral aspect of Christianity and one aspect of NCE's mission, participants viewed it as an essential part of their participation in the ensemble. Patrick shared that part of NCE's mission has been “to create [an] ensemble—with our music, with our worship, with our praise—to be able to use our voices, use our abilities to sort of evangelize, to bring people closer to God.” According to executive board member Sarah (senior, 4th-year member), “being able to share [her] faith and the Gospel<sup>4</sup> with people that come to [NCE's] concerts” was one of the reasons she continued to participate in the ensemble throughout her years at Northwestern. Joining NCE and participating in its evangelistic mission functioned as a means for singers to express their Christian identity and to achieve a sense of fulfilled purpose by being a part of a greater mission.

**Achieving Spiritual Growth.** Participation in NCE allowed singers to grow in their faith. Participants expressed that being in college and away from their family made them realize that they should now be in charge of their spirituality. Sarah remarked, “I’ve tried to learn how to be independent in my own faith, and NCE has helped with that.” Similar to joining a church and attending church services regularly, the choice of joining NCE and committing to weekly three-hour rehearsals exemplified the level of commitment singers must make if they wanted to express their faith and spirituality in a collective setting. In

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<sup>4</sup> The use of upper-case G in Gospel refers to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

college, that was a choice only they could make for themselves.

Many participants emphasized the ensemble's extramusical role and the impact participation had on their spiritual growth. The centrality of the religious themes embedded into every song and the procedures in place during rehearsals and concerts allowed singers to achieve spiritual growth. Gwen articulated, "It's not trivial. [NCE is] not just a performance group. It's something that makes me a better Christian, it makes me a better person, it makes me a better friend." Participants' spiritual experiences in NCE have allowed them to enjoy personal growth that positively affected other areas of their lives.

## Race

*"Make sure y'all keep that beat subdivision in mind," Gwen reminds the singers, explaining the 12/8 meter in John P. Kee's "Clap Your Hands." After singing the last phrase in the chorus, "Clap your hands and say, 'Amen,'" a couple of times, everybody is ready for a break. It is time for a game! As the singers walk to an open space, a few first stop by the snack table and grab some Cheez-Its, Oreos, Doritos, and home-baked chocolate chips cookies. "Let me explain how this will go down," Geoffrey says and goes over the game rules in which each person should say their name and make gestures with their hands, feet, or the whole body. When some singers use famous hip hop dance moves as their gesture—including the "Dougie" and the "Milly Rock"—all other singers mimic and laugh hysterically. As everybody walks back to their seats, Geoffrey reminds everyone to pay their dues, noting, "Y'all, we need food for the concert!" "Soul food?" one singer asks, and Blake responds, "Black people food." "Mac and Cheese?" somebody else asks. After a short pause, Blake explains, "Nah. Another type of Black people food."*

Participation in NCE provided Black students at Northwestern the opportunity to express their Black identity within a community of Black singers. The emergent themes explored in this section include "Finding a Black Space," "Celebrating Blackness," and "Achieving Belonging."

**Finding a Black Space.** As a Black student organization at a PWI, NCE afforded Black students the valuable opportunity to be in a space where most people looked like them, in contrast to experiencing the feeling of being "the only one" in most academic spaces on campus. Executive board member Amaia (senior, 3rd-year member) explained her approach to socializing on campus: "The way I navigate Northwestern is [by] immersing myself into Black spaces as much as I can." She added, "You stick to what you know, you stick to what's safer for you." The intentional pursuit for Black spaces positioned students to collectively express their Black identity in an environment where they felt safe and gave them some level of control over their own experience on campus.

Participants described feeling comfortable in NCE and often credited such feeling with

Black representation. Kelly (freshman, 1st-year member) shared, “I have met some good friends [in another Christian student organization], but NCE is probably the one [organization] where I feel most comfortable.” During member checking, Kelly expanded, “Being around other Black people at a predominantly White institution makes me feel comfortable, welcome, and like I’m in the right place.” Black representation in NCE was crucial for participants to find comfort by expressing their Black identity. Esther (senior, 1st-year member) explained, “[NCE is] a group of your peers that look like you; there’s just an increased comfortability.” While Esther also felt safe in other spaces on campus, being a part of a welcoming Black organization such as NCE made her feel more comfortable expressing her true self.

NCE has been a diverse Black choir. In this study, participants described their identity as African American, African, first-generation African American (born in the U.S. of African parents), or Caribbean. Participants who identified as Black but not African American also described their nationality (e.g., Nigerian, Jamaican) or specific ethnic groups. A respect for singers’ diverse backgrounds and diverse expressions of Blackness was evident. For instance, during my time as a singer in NCE, the repertoire included songs from Black Christian traditions outside the United States, including “Caribbean Medley,” recorded by African American gospel artist Donnie McClurkin, and “African Medley,” recorded by African American gospel artist Tye Tribbett.

Some participants expressed their concern with tensions within the broader Black community at Northwestern and its apparent divide. For instance, participants described the feeling of not being “Black enough” based on unrealistic standards and expectations by some members of the Black community. Executive board member Katie (junior, 3rd-year member), who used to be very vocal about issues of race and diversity in her high school, explained that she did not feel the same enthusiasm in college: “Here [at Northwestern], I feel silenced because I am not Black enough to the general group.” In contrast, participants shared that NCE is a space where their individual expression of Blackness was respected and welcomed. Katie remarked, “We don’t talk about who’s Black [enough] or who’s not. We don’t make those distinctions, and I feel like...that’s a safer place for me to be myself.” Sarah shared her perception of how NCE compared to the broader Black community: “I don’t think [NCE] is a reflection of what the rest of the Black community looks like. I think we’re actually a reflection of what we could look like.” As a safe and welcoming Black space at a PWI, NCE allowed Black singers to express their Black identity without fear of rejection or judgment.

**Celebrating Blackness.** Despite the challenges of being Black at a PWI, participation in NCE allowed Black students to celebrate their Black identities, enjoy positive and uplifting moments, and share emotional experiences rooted in Black pride and joy. Gwen explained that such experiences were extended to the broader Black community at Northwestern and helped display a holistic representation of what it means to be Black:

[Many people] come to our choir concerts just to have fun, even if they're not Christian but to just, like, hoot and holler with us and stomp around and be joyful and Black in spaces that tell us Blackness is a constant struggle, and Blackness is, you know, sadness and pain and all of that. But also, there's so much joy in Blackness and love in Blackness and community in Blackness, and that really gets embodied at our concerts.

Participants often mentioned how much fun they had in NCE, and expressions of Black American culture often ignited episodes of collective joy and facilitated rapport building between choir members. For instance, rehearsals always incorporated elements from Black music. One common vocalise consisted of the first phrase of the song “My Way” by rapper Fetty Wap. Another warm-up comprised a high-to-low glissando using the words “soul train.”<sup>5</sup> Occasional use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) was evident during conversations or even when a singer wore a t-shirt to rehearsal that spelled and defined the word “periodt.”<sup>6</sup> At another rehearsal, that same singer wore a t-shirt that read, “I LOVE MY BLACKNESS AND YOURS,” with fonts that resembled the colors and ornaments on a dashiki. Such intentional gestures celebrating Blackness were consistent with NCE's positive and uplifting culture.

**Achieving Belonging.** NCE's culture allowed Black students at Northwestern to achieve a sense of belonging beyond mere group membership. Patrick shared, “To have that sense of belonging and to know, without any shadow of a doubt, that people want me to be here is a great feeling.” The depth and quality of the bond developed between ensemble members allowed them to feel like they belonged to the group and to know those relationships and welcoming attitudes surrounding them were genuine.

According to participants, the ensemble rarely gathered outside of weekly functions as a group. Nevertheless, the prolonged interactions during rehearsals and concerts helped singers build a sense of community and closeness. On concert days, singers usually spent as much as six hours together. Kelly recalled the weekend of her first performance with the choir: “This particular weekend, I spent so much time with them, like, 13 hours total [laughs], and I even feel—just for those few days—I got a lot closer to people in there.” Each gathering involved opportunities for social interactions—planned or spontaneous—helping participants create special bonds.

Participants often used the words “community” and “family” to describe their feelings of belonging in NCE. While they enjoyed the act of singing together, the meaning attached to the collective singing was also associated with the bond they developed. Eve shared her

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<sup>5</sup> Soul Train was a television show that featured music and dance of the African American tradition (IMDb, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> “*Periodt* comes from *period*, used as an interjection to show a statement is final, that there is nothing else to be said or debated. Conversation over. No more discussion [...]. *Periodt*, pronounced and spelled with a final *T*, is generally credited to Black English.” (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a)

excitement about attending rehearsals: “I’m coming to hang out with my brothers and sisters!” Eve felt connected with other ensemble members despite the level of their friendship, and such a bond between singers in NCE represented their achievement of a sense of belonging.

### **Gospel Music**

*It is a cold Sunday evening in March. Cahn Auditorium is packed. I have been here before for another event, but one aspect is pleasantly different this time: there are lots of Black people of all ages. The emcee, David, walks on stage, and the piano plays softly in the background, filling the atmosphere with ii<sup>7</sup>-V<sup>7</sup>-IM<sup>7</sup> chord progressions and melodies beautifully ornamented with passing tones and appoggiaturas. “Praise the Lord everybody,” David greets the audience, “Do I have any believers in the house tonight?” The audience responds in agreement with claps, shouts, and amens. As David shouts the name of different locations in Chicagoland, the audience reacts euphorically. Some people even came all the way from Chicago’s South Side. As David transitions into the concert, the other instruments—guitar, bass, and drum set—join the piano, and the music gets louder and louder. People in the audience stand up, clap, and shout enthusiastically. Like in a traditional Black church choir processional, the choir moves to the risers coming from the stage left wing in a celebratory fashion, wearing beautiful purple robes that match the school’s color. Clapping on two and four while one singer plays the tambourine, the choir sings John P. Kee’s “I Believe.” The energy spreads through the entire auditorium, and the audience claps and sings along passionately. This college campus auditorium is now fully transfigured. It feels like church. A Black church.*

Race and religion have been fundamental aspects of NCE since the group’s early years, and music—specifically Black Christian music—has been the vehicle driving the ensemble’s philosophy. An early document describing the ensemble stated, “The group intends to continue its mission of filling a spiritual void and working toward liberation through song” (Northwestern Community Ensemble, 1972, p.2). This study’s findings suggest that gospel music was the unifying force that connected the singers’ racial and religious identities through culturally relevant processes and repertoire. The three themes presented in this section explore intersections among music, spirituality, and race: “Music and Spirituality: Gospel Music as Worship,” “Music and Race: Gospel Music as Black Music,” and “Race and Spirituality: A Black Church Experience.”

**Music and Spirituality: Gospel Music as Worship.** As a sacred music genre, gospel music allowed NCE singers to experience spirituality through music. Katie shared, “There was some moment in high school where I really decided that gospel music was the way that I best connected to God.” While a desire to continue singing after high school motivated

Katie to join NCE, her love for gospel music and the spiritual experience it provided encouraged her to return each year.

Participants emphasized the distinction they made between the physical act of singing and the spiritual act of worshiping God through songs. Executive board member Geoffrey (junior, 3rd-year member) believed such distinction was part of the group's culture: "I would say that we are not only a performance group but also a spiritual community as well because that is a really big aspect of what we do—not only sing but [also] worship." In some cases, it was evident that the singers' worship mindset influenced the musical outcome. For example, during a pre-concert run-through, vocal coach David noticed the choir sounded significantly better when singing one of the songs and asked the singers why that was so. "We are actually worshiping," one singer said out loud. Attaching spiritual beliefs to the singing experience allowed singers to create meaning around a musical experience that was spiritually, emotionally, and aesthetically satisfying.

The spiritual and aesthetic experiences gospel music provided seemed intimately intertwined at times. Geoffrey remarked, "I love the music that we do. I love gospel music. It's so enriching—spiritually, musically—just hearing the different chords and progressions: it slaps<sup>7</sup> every time." The experience through gospel music, a sacred music genre significant to participants, helped them simultaneously fulfill their spiritual and artistic needs.

**Music and Race: Gospel Music as Black Music.** Participants recognized and valued gospel music's stylistic features and its roots in the African American music tradition. On one occasion, when executive board members were discussing the songs for an upcoming concert, they watched a YouTube video of the song "O Come to the Altar." Though members of Elevation Worship, a contemporary Christian worship band, originally wrote and recorded this song, the version NCE members watched was arranged and performed by Trey McLaughlin and the Sounds of Zamar, a contemporary gospel group. While the video was playing, one of the executive board members smiled and said, "This is Black people appropriate." During the interview, Geoffrey, who was present during the exchange, remarked:

Contemporary Christian [music] is just code for White people Christian music as opposed to Black people Christian music—which is gospel—and "O Come to the Altar" is a White people Christian music song. Then, Black people took it and made a gospel version and then slap[!], you know what I mean?

Geoffrey's comment displayed his appreciation for the gospel music stylistic features in that arrangement in contrast with the pop-influenced original recording. Gospel music features in that arrangement included call and response, lead singer's variations and improvised melismatic ornamentation (known in gospel music as "runs"), and an emphasis on the choir singing three-part harmonies. Those features were significant to participants' connection to

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<sup>7</sup> "Slap is slang verb meaning 'to be excellent or amazing.' It's especially used to refer to a song someone finds extremely good, as in *This song slaps!*" (Dictionary.com, n.d.-c)

gospel music as a genre and as an identifier in the African American culture.

**Race and Spirituality: A Black Church Experience.** As a cultural element often associated with American Black churches, gospel music in NCE provided a familiar environment to singers with a Black church background. Blake remarked, “That’s one of my favorite parts of the Black church—the music and the worship and what not. So, that is part of why I love [NCE] so much.” C.J. (senior, 1st-year member) elaborated:

Like in church, we all get together, sing *Igwe*,<sup>8</sup> dancing up and down the aisle, shaking the tambourine, giving each other hugs, high-fives. That’s just like, you know, that’s the joy of gospel music to me.

For singers with no previous Black church experience, singing gospel music in NCE allowed them to connect with such an experience for the first time. Derek (junior, 3rd-year member) remarked, “For some reason, I was just never in a church choir. I feel probably that’s because where I’m from, [Chicago suburbs], it’s a very White place. So, it’s not very gospel-oriented, you know what I mean?” By singing gospel music in NCE, Black Christian students at Northwestern could connect or reconnect to symbols that facilitated their religious and racial identity expression.

### Discussion: NCE as an Interaction Ritual Chain

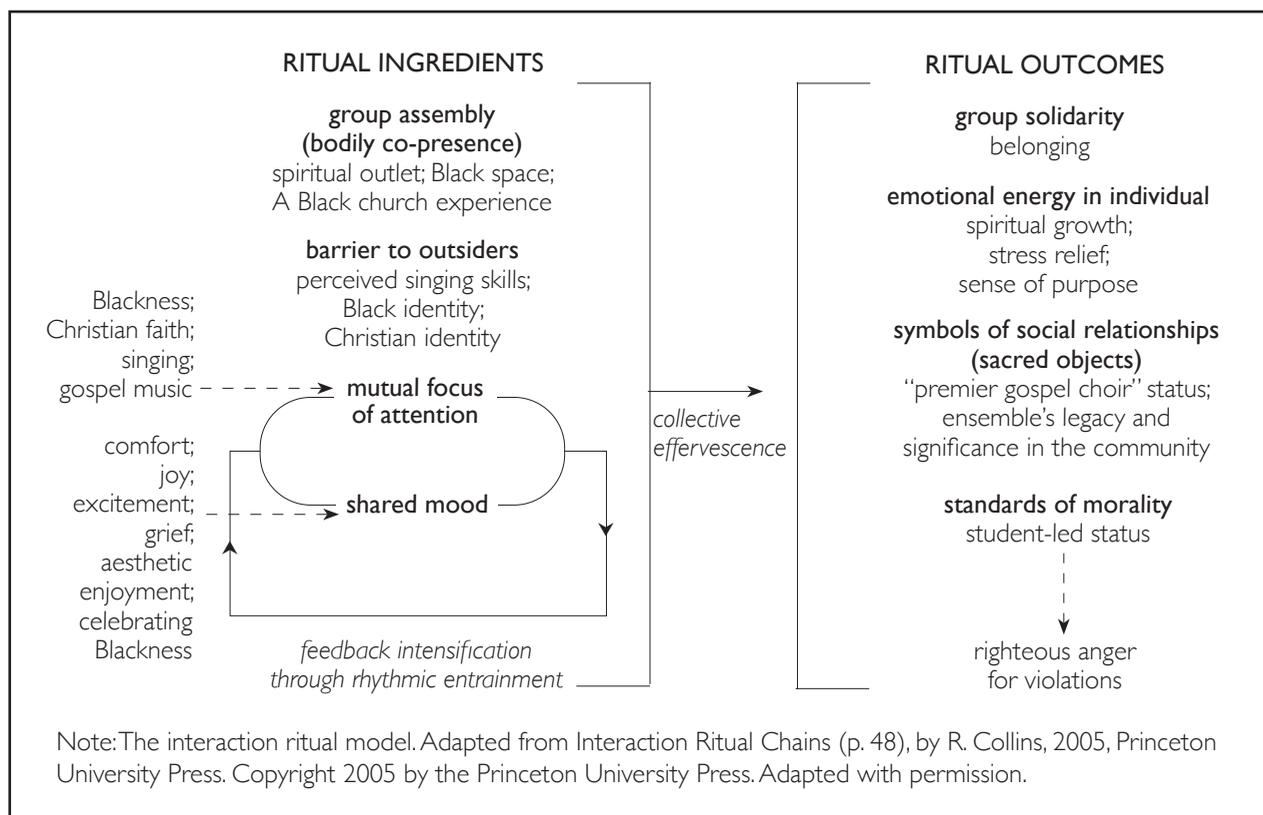
Examining NCE through the lens of interaction ritual theory (Collins, 2005) illuminated how the elements mediating interactions between individuals in a group or setting—*ritual ingredients*—may result in emotional gains for the individual and feelings of membership between those involved—*ritual outcomes*. Figure 2 on the next page presents Collins’ (2005) model, to which I have added the findings in this study as examples of ritual ingredients and ritual outcomes. Specific illustrations of interaction ritual elements drawn from observations and participants’ voices are shown in Table 2 on the next page. In NCE, consistent group assembly in weekly rehearsals allowed singers to experience *bodily co-presence*, a ritual ingredient that is the starting point for each subsequent step in the interaction ritual chain (Collins, 2005). The significance of bodily co-presence for NCE members lies in the singers’ opportunity to share a physical space with other Black students in a predominantly White institution and the exercising of the Christian tradition of gatherings for worship. In the Bible, Jesus encouraged his followers to gather in fellowship: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matthew 18:20). When singers were physically together, they could see one another and perceive each other’s actions and reactions. Such perception was a crucial prerequisite for emotional entrainment between singers.

The role of racial identity, religious identity, and music background in NCE’s culture

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<sup>8</sup> *Igwe*, recorded by Midnight Crew, is a popular Nigerian gospel song that combines Igbo, Yoruba, and English.

**Figure 2:** Interaction Ritual Model



**Table 2:** Interaction Rituals in NCE (Examples from Observations and Interviews)

IR Element	Observed Examples	Supporting Quotes
group assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>rehearsals</li> <li>concerts</li> </ul>	<p>“Even if I have a busy schedule or if I’m tired and I don’t feel like going or whatever, whenever I go or whenever I finally get there, then it’s fun.” (Derek)</p>
barrier to outsiders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>perceived singing skills</li> <li>racial identity</li> <li>religious identity</li> </ul>	<p>“I didn’t think that there was room for people who didn’t have spectacular voices.” (Esther)</p>
<b>Ritual Ingredients</b> mutual focus of attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blackness</li> <li>Christian faith</li> <li>singing gospel music</li> </ul>	<p>“NCE is here to provide a space or like a haven for college students to kind of express their religion and also their love of music at the same time.” (Blake)</p>
shared mood/ emotional experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comfort</li> <li>joy</li> <li>excitement</li> <li>grief</li> <li>aesthetic enjoyment</li> <li>celebrating Blackness</li> </ul>	<p>“One of my favorite things about the group is that we’ve had a good time, we’ve had fun. It hasn’t been all stress.” (David)</p>

Continued on the next page

<b>Collective Effervescence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• moments of collective exhilaration</li> </ul>	“When [choir member] left [...], we were all crying and praying. That’s a real community to me.” (Patrick)
group solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• belonging</li> </ul>	“It just completely changed my life at Northwestern, because NCE was my first family.” (Blake)
emotional energy in the individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stress relief</li> <li>• spiritual growth</li> <li>• sense of purpose</li> </ul>	“NCE gives my day some purpose, it gives me something to do, people to see.” (Kelly)
<b>Ritual Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “premier gospel choir” status</li> <li>• legacy and significance in the community</li> </ul>	“I’ve always had that respect for NCE and what they have been able to do for Northwestern and the Evanston community.” (David)
standards of morality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student-led status</li> </ul>	“There was talk about bringing alumni back that lived in the area, but [...] that would have changed the dynamic of the choir.” (Gwen)

reflected two interaction ritual ingredients: *barriers to outsiders* and *mutual focus of attention*. There were no formal barriers in NCE since all students at Northwestern were welcome to join the ensemble. However, not being a singer, a Christian, or Black could have discouraged one from joining the ensemble. These aspects are noteworthy because they were embedded in the ensemble’s culture; all interactions in NCE were focused on one or more of them. NCE members created meaningful connections and develop rapport by focusing on Blackness, the Christian faith, singing, and gospel music. Collins (2005) explained, “In actuality, the group is focusing on its own feeling of intersubjectivity, its own shared emotion; but it has no way of representing this fleeting feeling, except by representing it as embodied in an object” (p. 37). As the one aspect connecting all others, the gospel music genre was a crucial ingredient that contributed to NCE members experiencing feelings of intersubjectivity and shared emotion.

Participants’ feelings of comfort, the ensemble’s culture of celebrating Blackness, and the singers’ worship mindset while singing exemplified the *shared moods* or *emotional experience* in interaction ritual theory. Participants’ emphasis on how much fun they had at rehearsals, their transcendent experience, and the reverence I observed during prayer also portrayed shared emotional experiences between ensemble members. The intensifying interaction between these shared moods and the aforementioned mutual focus of attention resulted in moments of “high level of emotional entrainment” (Collins, 2005, p. 81), labeled in interaction ritual theory as *collective effervescence*. Exhilarating episodes of collective laughter, tears, or dancing and shouting during performance illustrated some of those moments in NCE.

While collective effervescence is ephemeral, it may have prolonged effects (Collins, 2005). In NCE, singers' spiritual growth and relief from stress and anxiety aligned with a ritual outcome described as *emotional energy in the individual*. According to Collins (2005), emotional energy is what individuals seek in the first place. He stated, "Situations are attractive or unattractive to [individuals] to the extent that the interaction ritual is successful in providing emotional energy" (Collins, 2005, p. 44), and that might explain why many singers continued to participate in the ensemble week after week, year after year.

Achieving a sense of belonging related to *group solidarity*, another outcome of successful interaction rituals. Interviewees' use of words such as "community" and "family" exemplified the depth of their relationships with other singers and their connection with the ensemble. Being a part of this ensemble with other Black Christian singers was not solely a means to display or express that preexisting identity, but "a way of strengthening it, re-creating or even creating it" (Collins, 2005, p. 83). In that sense, participants' preexisting identities (e.g., racial and religious identities) also contributed to singers' development of a shared identity as ensemble members.

Participants' description of NCE as Northwestern's premier gospel choir and their pride in the organization's history, legacy, and significance to the Northwestern community aligned with the *symbols of social relationship* (or *sacred objects*) described by interaction ritual theory. This ritual outcome related to how NCE members used those highly valued symbols to represent how they wanted to be seen by the community. Participants' protective attitudes towards the aspect of student leadership represents the *standards of morality*, the last of four ritual outcomes in interaction ritual theory. Such attitude, along with feelings of group solidarity and respect for symbols of social relationships, gives insight into NCE's longevity and the continuity of its culture and philosophy across generations of singers.

## Conclusion

The purposes of this ethnography were to examine the culture and philosophy of the Northwestern Community Ensemble (NCE), a primarily Black gospel choir at a PWI, and to understand the role of singers' racial and religious identity in their participation in the ensemble. Through the lens of interaction ritual theory (Collins, 2005), the analysis showed that singers' interpersonal exchanges through symbols in NCE's culture (e.g., singers' Black and Christian identities, singing gospel music, a shared sense of joy and comfort) contributed to a sense of belonging, perceived spiritual growth, stress relief, and a sense of fulfilled purpose. These findings add to a limited body of research on the experiences of Black students in collegiate gospel choirs (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011) and the significance of race (Deckman, 2013a; Deckman 2013b), spirituality (Pope & Moore, 2004), and culturally relevant music (Strayhorn, 2011) as means of cultural expression in ethnic student organizations.

NCE members enjoyed gospel music for music's sake and also valued how that music culture fostered the expression of their racial and religious identities. This holistic interaction

with music is consistent with the notion that “people make music meaningful and useful in their lives” (Wade, 2004). The ensemble supported the experiences of Black students at Northwestern University, allowing them to find cultural representation and achieve a sense of belonging at a PWI. These findings are in line with previous studies exploring the role of social identity-based student organizations at PWIs (Fiorentino, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus, 2008; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), including how participation in a gospel choir helped Black college students achieve social integration (Harrison, 2015) and develop ethnic pride (Strayhorn, 2011). Those in higher education might evaluate their community’s needs and consider supporting the creation and promotion of social identity-based organizations focusing on music performance. University music faculty might offer support by advising student-leaders and choir directors, facilitating workshops with choristers, and providing access to choral libraries and facilities for rehearsal and performance. Future research might investigate the experiences of students from other marginalized racial and ethnic groups in student-led collegiate music ensembles, particularly ethnic student organizations, and the role of culturally relevant music in their experiences.

For over 50 years, NCE has allowed Black students at Northwestern University to find a space to fully express their racial and religious identities through collective singing while building community with like-minded peers. The personal and collective benefits of participation in NCE and the ensemble’s significance in the Northwestern community highlight the critical need for spaces where college students from marginalized groups can engage in artistic endeavors that help fulfill their needs for socialization and cultural expression. Supporting student engagement in such organizations may afford students from marginalized groups the opportunity to participate in meaningful music-making experiences that enhance their overall college experience and affirm their identities.

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## Supplemental Materials

### Interview Protocol—Choir Members

1. Tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What's your major? How long have you been at Northwestern?
2. Could you tell me about some musical experiences you've had as a singer or musician before college?
3. Are you currently part of any other performing ensemble?
4. How long have you been in the Northwestern Community Ensemble?
5. What made you join the group?
6. What do you enjoy about it?
7. How has participation in the ensemble affected you?
8. How would you describe NCE to somebody who has never been to a rehearsal or concert?
9. How does NCE compare to other choirs you have participated in?
10. Do you see any difference between NCE and other gospel choirs?
11. What is the purpose of the group?
12. I am interested in learning about the collective identity of people in this choir.  
How do you describe your identity?
13. Why is the choir important enough that you make time for it in your busy schedule?
14. What's your favorite part about NCE?

15. Are there any challenges?
16. Is there anything about your experience in this choir that I didn't ask but you would like to talk about?

### **Interview Protocol—Executive Board**

1. Tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What's your major? How long have you been at Northwestern?
2. Could you tell me about some musical experiences you've had as a singer or musician before college?
3. Are you currently part of any other performing ensemble?
4. How long have you been in the Northwestern Community Ensemble?
5. What made you join the group?
6. Why do you continue to participate in the group?
7. What do you enjoy about it?
8. How has participation in the ensemble affected you?
9. How would you describe NCE to somebody who has never been to a rehearsal or concert?
10. What is the mission of the group?
11. What is the philosophy of the group?
12. How did the group start?
13. Why did you want to take on a leadership role?
14. What is the role of the executive board?
15. Do you see any difference between NCE and other gospel choirs?
16. What is the purpose of the group?
17. What is the purpose of the group for you as a singer? Other singers?
18. What is the purpose of the group in the community? Significance?
19. How would you describe your role in the group?
20. I am interested in learning about the collective identity of people in this choir. How do you describe your identity?
21. What's your favorite part about NCE?
22. Are there any challenges?

23. Besides singing, what is your favorite part of the rehearsal?
24. Where do you hope to see the group ten years from now?
25. Is there anything about your experience in this choir that I didn't ask but you would like to talk about?

### **Interview Protocol—Vocal Coach**

1. Tell me about yourself. What do you do? What's your relationship with the Northwestern Community Ensemble?
2. How long have you known of NCE, and how long have you been associated with the group?
3. How did you start working with NCE?
4. What do you enjoy about the group? What do you enjoy about working with NCE?
5. How would you describe NCE to somebody who has never been to a rehearsal or concert?
6. What is the purpose of the group?
7. What is the mission of the group?
8. How did the group start?
9. Do you see any difference between NCE and other choirs? What about other gospel choirs?
10. How would you describe the musical style and genre performed by NCE this year? How does it compare with previous years since you've been working with them?
11. What has changed and what has not changed since you started working with NCE?
12. What aspects of your musical background do you feel have prepared you to do this work with NCE?
13. What is the significance of the group in the community (Northwestern, Northwestern Black community, Evanston, Evanston Black community)?
14. I am interested in learning about the participants' identity (how they identify as individuals and as part of a broader group or community). How do you describe your identity?
15. What aspects of your own identity are the most significant in your work with NCE? How?
16. What's your favorite part about NCE?

17. Are there any challenges?
18. What can other groups learn from NCE?
19. Is there anything about your experience in this choir that I didn't ask but you would like to talk about?

### **Interview Protocol—Advisor**

1. Please tell me about yourself. What is your role at Northwestern? What's your relationship with NCE? Weekly meetings?
2. How long have you been working with the group?
3. How did you start working with NCE?
4. What do you enjoy about the group? What do you enjoy about working with NCE?
5. How would you describe NCE to somebody who has never been to a rehearsal or concert?
6. What is the purpose of the group?
7. What is the purpose of the group in the Northwestern community?
8. Do you see any difference between NCE and other student organizations at Northwestern?
9. What has changed and what has remained the same since you started working with NCE?
10. Community members have joined the group in the past. Is that currently possible?
11. What aspects of your professional and personal background do you feel have prepared you to do this work with NCE?

**Participants**

Pseudonym	Year in School*	Year in NCE*	Function+	Music Background
Amaia	Senior	3rd	executive board member	no formal music participation background
Blake	Senior	3rd	executive board member	school music, church music
C.J.	Senior	1st	director	school music
Derek	Junior	3rd	singer	school music
Esther	Senior	1st	singer	church music
Eve	Senior	2nd	singer	school music
Geoffrey	Junior	3rd	executive board member	school music, church music
Gwen	Senior	4th	director	school music
Katie	Junior	3rd	executive board member	school music, community music
Kelly	Freshman	1st	singer	school music
Patrick	Freshman	1st	pianist/director	school music, church music
Rosa	Sophomore	2nd	singer	school music, church music
Sarah	Senior	4th	executive board member	school music, church music
David	(not a student)	8th	vocal coach, concert emcee	singer, pianist, choral music educator
Rayne	(not a student)	3rd	advisor	-

\* Year during interview

+ All members of the executive board also performed as singers