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Young Black Women's Sense of Belonging in Urban Open Green Spaces: A Comparative Analysis
Case Study

By

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THESIS

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I would like to thank my amazing support system of family and friends in the Midwest and in California, whom I am very blessed to have. Thank you all for the constant support, encouragement, and love that I will forever and always cherish. I love you all tremendously! Thank you to my wonderful committee for guidance, support, and mentorship throughout my academic journey. Deep gratitude also goes to the young Black women who shared their time, stories, and lived experience during this study, and future generations of young Black women whose stories are still waiting to be heard. Above all, I thank the Lord for His blessings, strength, endless and constant love and support, guidance, and for being the ever-present light of my life.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Chyler C. Hughes

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Abstract

Urban open green spaces are more than passive and active amenities; they are unique, multilayer landscapes that can affect one's sense of belonging. Yet, within the literature, little research has been done that centers on young Black women's relationships with urban open green spaces. This comparative analysis case study will examine young Black women's sense of belonging in urban open green spaces. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study examines the lived experiences, narratives, and voices of young Black women as they interact with and define belonging within urban open green spaces in Davis and Sacramento, California. Through observations, interviews, and autoethnography, this study uncovers the everyday realities young Black women face when navigating these spaces. In doing so, this study focuses on participants' sense of belonging, connection to the space, representation, and safety. Ultimately, this thesis brings awareness and recommendations to change urban open green spaces that will enhance sense of belonging for young Black women.

Keywords: Belonging, Black women, Urban open green spaces, Community gardens, Urban parks, Black feminist thought, Intersectionality, Representation, Safety, Urban agriculture

Chapter One: Introduction

Our natural world can be viewed as a place one can go to be at peace, take a deep breath, or simply enjoy the beauty nature has to offer. From a simple breeze as one walks outside, to a bed of native plants painting the landscape in various colorful hues, one can find various (urban) open green spaces within our natural world, inviting and even enchanting. These spaces also offer many mental, physical, and emotional health benefits has people who spend time in these spaces are (Lee and Maheswaran 2010; Victorson 2024; Roberts, Omidvar, and Bratman 2023; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014), including decreased mortality rates, increased social connection, and an increase in psychological wellbeing.

However, for some Black Americans, there is a lack of access to these spaces that can foster safety and connection (Sykes 2022), which in turn can create a lack of community, representation, or care, and can contribute to poor mental and physical health.

Negative views of nature by Black Americans can be dated back to colonialism (Micheletti 2020; Davis 2018; Sykes 2022; Starkey 2005) and extended to current environmental injustices in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; Wen et al. 2013; Cox and Tamir 2022; Sykes 2022). Much academic literature has focused on Black Americans and nature as a whole, as well as the environmental injustices in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. Yet, academics have written less regarding Black women and their sense of belonging in green spaces. Specifically, very little research has been done on young Black women and their relationships with urban open green spaces.

With this context in mind, young Black women are an important demographic to focus on because their age, gender, and race directly impact their sense of belonging within these spaces. Since there is very little literature about young Black women in urban open green spaces, this gap might reflect whether they are using these spaces at all. This opens up bigger questions about how urban open green spaces work, including who they are for, where they are built, and who actually has access to them. It also forces us to look closely at the design of these parks, who they were originally made for, and what occurs within these spaces. Especially between the ages of 18 and 25, young Black women are trying to shape their identities while navigating the world. As some young Black women may face negative stereotypes and microaggressions, finding places that offer genuine belonging, safety, community, and connection can be a challenge. Their age, race, and gender position them in a way where they can be highly visible yet overlooked at the same time. This creates a much more complex relationship with urban open green spaces. Ultimately, focusing on this specific demographic broadens our perspective on who urban open green spaces are really for.

This study aims to understand the sense of belonging for young Black women, ages 18-25, in urban open green spaces through a comparative analysis between an urban park in Yolo County, CA, and community gardens in Sacramento County, CA. It will look at the intersectionality of race, gender, and age and explore the factors that contribute to or detract from a sense of belonging in urban community gardens and parks. This study will also identify improvements or changes to urban green spaces that could enhance sense of belonging.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Within this chapter, there are four distinctive subsections that will establish the theoretical frameworks for this study. The foci are Black Americans' historical relationship with the environment, a comparative analysis of urban parks (UP) and community gardens (CG), health disparities, and the sense of belonging for Black women. These four focal areas connect the historical and socio-spatial identities of Black women in relation to urban open green spaces.

Black Americans' Historical Relationship with the Environment

To understand the historical relationships between Black Americans and the natural world, we will first examine the words that will be used during this chapter and throughout the study. Terms such as nature, environment, land, and ownership can often be used interchangeably, yet they mean different things. The term “nature” is usually thought of as untouched wilderness that can also be used for relaxation and leisure (Finney 2014), while the term “environment” can refer to everyday spaces where people live, work, and survive (Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022). Similarly, the words “land” and “ownership” must be distinguished. Land often represents a personal connection to a physical space, which can be spiritual, have an ancestral connection, or shared agricultural knowledge (White 2018). Ownership creates more of a legal and financial system that has historically excluded marginalized groups, as this section will discuss (McKittrick 2006). It is also important to distinguish between rural and urban spaces, as each space carries a unique history of environmental and racial dynamics. Rural spaces are historically tied to agriculture, while in

urban spaces, challenges such as redlining and inadequate green spaces arise. Both rural and urban spaces have shaped how Black Americans interact with the natural world and environment.

The nature of the world we see today has been predominantly dominated by Anglo-Europeans from the 15th century to the early 20th century. European merchants first traded products such as cloth and metal for gold and spices and eventually began to shift to the enslavement of African people, viewing them as commodities. It is estimated that around 12 million African people were forcibly displaced during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (Micheletti 2020). Once in America, those enslaved were forced to work and live under grueling conditions, subject to violence and abuse, and for some, death. Many would escape into the outdoors to be free from their captivity. Some escaped to freedom while others were captured, either to return to the plantation or killed for their attempted escape. As nature brought much despair, it also brought freedom and refuge for those able to escape slavery, as Maroon communities were formed and spiritual and medicinal practices were developed (Davis 2018; Sykes 2022; Starkey 2005). Maroon communities were communities established by those formerly enslaved who escaped captivity and built their own, free settlements. This juxtaposed view of nature is still seen today. Such memories can invoke certain associations, thoughts, and concepts regarding nature, some positive while others negative, for Black Americans.

As slavery concluded, those once enslaved still faced hardships regarding their relationship with nature. As Reconstruction began, land became the focus for African American families. The false promises of “40 acres and a mule” led to many African Americans becoming sharecroppers as they performed taxing duties similar to slavery, yet received minimal to no

wages in return. Black leaders, Booker T. Washington, Fredrick Douglass, and W. E. B. DuBois advocated for land ownership and rights for African Americans (Starkey 2005). After political and economic debates, the Homestead Act of 1862 was signed. The act was considered open to all citizens, yet many were excluded, including Indigenous Peoples, women, and many in the South, including Black Americans (Finney 2014).

As the 19th and 20th centuries progressed, more challenges divided Black Americans from the environment. One of the main challenges were Jim Crow laws. These laws were made deliberately to further ensure that Black Americans did not have power in the changing country and to evoke fear. The laws also distanced Black Americans away from predominantly white spaces, including the environment, as they were restricted to certain places, and fear and racial violence increased to keep “social order”. The Ku Klux Klan added to this separation as they lynched Black Americans, hanging them from trees. An image that was too familiar to Black Americans, especially those living in the South. Many viewed the outside world as a place of danger and fear, and white men as violent, deeply affecting the relationship Black Americans had with the environment (Starkey 2005). Yet another means of exclusion was the Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act of 1964 was established to preserve the nation’s most “natural” areas. This act invited all to enjoy the beauty of nature yet did not consider those left out, lands stolen, or equality, and portrayed a view of the wilderness being for white middle and upper classes (Davis 2018; Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022). The neglect of inclusion in environmental spaces did not stop at natural parks, but also in many of the neighborhoods where people of color lived.

By the late 20th century, structural environmental racism has impacted many communities of color. This form of racism is the social outcomes and instituted policies that use race to target certain communities for land usage or expel hazards into the environment (Davis 2018; Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022). Such examples include the dumping of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the 1970s, affecting one of the poorest communities in North Carolina, which was predominantly Black Americans (Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022), and more recently, the Flint, Michigan water crisis as the city has predominantly Black American residents (Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022). Although environmental justice efforts have been in practice since the late 1960s, many communities of color are still impacted by environmental racism.

This continuous legacy of exclusion created the "nature gap," or what Robbins et al. (2022) describe it "adventure gap", that being the persistent divide between people of color and their participation in nature. This gap can be viewed within the United States National Park Service (NPS) founded in 1916. As Davis (2018) details, more than a century of predominantly white leadership resulted in visitor demographics that failed to reflect the true diversity of the United States population. Sykes (2022) explains that this deficit is shaped by two distinct factors: historical racial exclusion and institutional policies that have openly distanced Black Americans from nature. Ultimately, a dominant narrative that encouraged Eurocentrism and whiteness yet excluded Black Americans has constructed the image of who nature is for (Sykes 2022). A narrative that many still view and believe today.

With the deep and sensitive history of the environment and nature, many Black Americans find difficulty connecting to the environment as barriers of access, fear, and safety are of major concern (Sykes 2022, Finney 2014). In her 2014 book, *Black Faces, White Spaces*,

Carolyn Finney explains how the “histories of what is seen and unseen” with our natural landscapes can invoke geographies of fear, thus creating a further disconnection between Black Americans and the environment. This disconnection occurs at the National State Park level to predominantly Black communities.

Comparative Analysis of Urban Parks (UP) and Community Gardens (CG)

Introduction

Faced with historical exclusion from “traditional natural” settings, many Black Americans often look to their urban communities for environmental spaces. However, even there, some Black Americans do not have access or have a sense of place. The Pew Research Center reported in 2022 that Black Americans are more likely to live in suburban and urban areas: 41% of Black Americans live in urban communities, and 40% of Black Americans live in suburban communities (Cox and Tamir 2022). Many urban and suburban areas have urban green spaces, including parks, greenways, and community gardens. Although these green spaces are in urban and suburban communities, many with diverse populations, they are not all easily accessible and equally distributed. Income, age, gender, race, disability, and other factors often affect where green spaces are and who has access to them (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; Wen et al. 2013).

Other factors contributing to this uneven development are the ties to who, what, and how the land is used, the history of the land development, and public policies (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; Sykes 2022). People of color (POC), including Black Americans, and those earning low wages are most impacted. As stated, environmental injustices and racism also

impact predominantly communities of color and those earning low wages. These injustices lead to health disparities for those residing in these communities.

The landscape of a city is a constant negotiation between public need and private intimacy. Every city must navigate how it manages land, yet the urban green space within the city is rarely homogeneous. There are various types of urban green spaces that exist within cities. These green spaces include urban parks, community gardens, green roofs, rain gardens, vacant lots, brownfields, greenways, urban landscaping, and home gardens. For this study, urban parks and community gardens are the focus as they function and operate under different frameworks that will be discussed in this subsection. These specific green spaces can be viewed as sites of historical alienation within the Black community, but can also create collective agency and cultural preservation, which can impact belonging.

This subsection is a comparative analysis that will define urban parks and community gardens, compare the frameworks of belonging for each urban green space, focusing on ownership and planning, purpose and access, and activity. Additionally, this subsection will synthesize key similarities and differences of urban parks and community gardens, and how these spaces can contribute to belonging.

Urban Parks

Urban parks can be defined as accessible open green spaces within a city or town. They are primarily viewed as spaces of recreation and leisure and are accessible to all for public use (Zhao et al. 2024, Konijnendijk et al. 2013, Chiesura 2004, Komarolya and Sho 2025, Benton 2024, González et al. 2023). Urban parks are also viewed through the lens of beautification (Walker and Duffield 2007). This idea of urban parks as beauty was introduced in the 19th

century by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted, credited with the design of urban parks in the United States, saw that cities needed “lungs” during an age of mass industrialization and urbanization 1858. With mass production and pollution occurring, Olmsted emphasized the importance of public health, with access to fresh air, trees, and grass. This view of public health fed into the aesthetics of urban parks, capturing their beauty. Acclaimed urban parks we now have today, such as Central Park in New York City, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, Massachusetts, were all built in the 19th century (Benton 2024), creating the foundational roots of urban parks in the United States that we now see today.

However, Olmsted’s public health vision was first a vision to foster a proper society for immigrants and the working class (Taylor 1999). He intended for the spaces, such as Central Park, to serve as a place for personal development where immigrants and the working class could behave properly in society (Taylor 1999). Additionally, Olmsted viewed these spaces as a place where one could reflect and a place of social order, as he did not initially support recreation within parks.

The Olmsted Brothers continued the family legacy as his successors. The pair focused on designing various regional parks with distinct typologies. This included larger county parks to smaller neighborhood recreational spaces, such as playfields (Cranz and Boland 2004). This also included spaces that were designed for specific genders and classes. The Olmsted Brothers envisioned different forms of recreation for different demographic groups. Larger parks were designed for more leisure, as wealthier families and women could frequent the spaces, playgrounds became popularized for children to use, and scenic “breathing places” created

enjoyment for those within the space (Olmsted and Nolen 1906). This specific landscape was created to help provide an escape from the city, where the middle class and their children could socialize (Schenker 1996). Smaller recreational spaces were built in the working-class and immigrant areas and primarily prioritized recreation. The Olmsted Brothers designed these spaces for working-class boys and men to essentially mold them into American society (Spencer-Wood and Blackburn 2017).

Over time, this primary focus on beautification for the wealthy transitioned toward the incorporation of active recreation during the 20th century, a trend that continues today in the 21st century. Such recreation includes swimming pools, tennis courts, playgrounds, open fields, and basketball courts, among others, that vary from park to park.

As these spaces grew in popularity over the centuries, historically, Black people did not have equal or safe access to these spaces. As stated in the previous subsection, Black people had contested relationships with the land, including public parks. In some cases, this contestation is deeply embedded in the physical foundation of creating urban parks, as seen in the mid-nineteenth-century destruction of Seneca Village. A thriving, property-owning Black community, Seneca Village was completely displaced through eminent domain to construct Central Park in New York City, demonstrating how the very creation of public green spaces has historically relied on the removal and displacement of Black people. Access to these spaces was controlled and policed, denying Black people the opportunity to utilize them. Racial laws and segregation played a vital role in determining park access. Following the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) Supreme Court ruling, the “separate but equal” legal doctrine was established to exclude people of color, including Black people, out of white spaces, including green spaces such as

parks. Some parks created “Negro spaces” or other parks for Black people, yet these spaces, if they were built at all, were often deprived of recreational resources found in white parks, such as tennis courts (Weyenth 2005, O’Brien 2016). Ultimately, this systematic disinvestment further distanced and stripped Black neighborhoods from access to green spaces. The restrictions, environments of unwelcomeness, and strategic systematic exclusion did not increase the presence of Black people in parks but rather reshaped who these spaces are for.

Community Gardens

Community gardens can be defined as green spaces where people and nature come together for cultivation (Firth et al 2011). These spaces have a specific interest and focus on land cultivation for food production within a public space that is accessible to those residing within the same community (Draper and Freedman 2010, Ferris, Norman, and Sempim 2002, Ohmer 2009, Kurtz 2013, Okvat and Zautra 2011). Yet, some scholars argue that community gardens may have lost their “community” meaning as people are finding community does not mean friendship and goes beyond neighborhood proximity (Firth et al 2011, Pudup 2008, Draper and Freedman 2010). This raises concerns regarding whether these spaces reflect a shifting definition of 'community'—one that is increasingly individualized and less centered on a shared space where residents in close proximity can collectively gather.

To understand this shift toward individualization, it is necessary to examine the historical evolution of community gardens. Unlike the 19th-century 'top-down' design of urban parks, community gardens in the United States have historically emerged from the 'bottom-up' as grassroots responses to social, economic, and environmental crises. The first community gardens were formed in the late 19th century by Detroit Mayor Hazen Pingree in response to

the city's economic crisis (Kurtz 2001, Ohmer et al. 2009, Warner 2019). The Pingree Potato Patches program focused on using vacant lots for gardening to supply and provide produce for unemployed families during the Depression. (Kurtz 2001, Lawson 2005, Ohmer et al. 2009, Warner 2019). Other major cities soon followed the same model, creating individual garden plots where families grew produce. During the early 20th century, with the Great Depression and World Wars, “liberty gardens” and “victory gardens” were established to combat food hardships and shortages. These gardens were viewed as a collective national effort to feed the United States (Kurtz 2001).

Transitioning into the 1960s and 1970s, guerrilla gardening in major cities began as a response to urban decay, disinvestment, and food security in poor neighborhoods (History of the Community Garden Movement, Pudup 2008, Kurtz 2001). Modern gardens today still follow similar food security needs, but also focus on climate resilience and green infrastructure. This includes more native plants and produce, stormwater management, increasing biodiversity, and soil health, providing critical ecosystem services that are essential for urban sustainability in the 21st century. Community gardens have played a crucial role in the country as they provided food to United States residents during times of war and economic hardships. Yet, in this 21st-century context, as the literature supports, it is important to note that the 'community' may no longer be defined solely by social and neighborhood friendship, but rather by a shared collective responsibility towards climate resilience and urban ecological health and individualism.

As community gardens grew over the centuries, Black people developed a relationship with these spaces that was fundamentally different from their relationship with traditional

public parks, which were often exclusionary or highly policed. Yet, community gardens offered a chance for Black people to cultivate, grow, and foster community, and provide food for their personal networks and families. In the 19th century, enslaved Africans were granted small plots to cultivate their own food for their families (Carney and Rosomoff 2011). After slavery, land cultivation continued for Black people as exploitative sharecropping began. During the Great Migration, migrants brought these agrarian traditions into urban areas as vacant lots and backyards to establish networks of urban farming and community care (Ramirez 2015). As the decades progressed, these lots transitioned into spaces of resistance. In the mid-to late-20th century, Black communities faced redlining, urban renewal, and systematic municipal abandonment, transforming community gardens into spaces of neighborhood resistance (Ramirez 2015). Community care and aid persisted as the Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms Cooperative (McCutcheon 2019), and the Black Panther Party provided for political liberation, structural protection, and food security in the 1960s through the 1970s. From the 1980s through the 2000s, these spaces faced new challenges as cities entered financial crises, leaving behind vacant land. One example is Detroit, as the auto industry declined, leaving large vacant land (White 2018). In response, Black communities built community gardens to fight early waves of gentrification and municipal neglect (White 2018). Today, community gardens can be viewed as a space where traditions are shared and kept alive within the Black community, while also being a space where food sovereignty continues to grow.

Urban Parks and Community Garden Frameworks

To understand the belonging offered by urban parks and community gardens, I will examine the socio-spatial frameworks within each environment. While both are

urban green spaces, they operate and function differently—variations that significantly impact one’s sense of place. By focusing on ownership, purpose and access, and activity, we will examine how these structural distinctions shape the human experience.

Ownership

One of the key differences between urban parks and community gardens is ownership, planning, and management. Urban parks have more of a top-down approach as they have been historically managed by municipal towns, cities, and governments. When parks need maintenance or a new park is planned to be built, city and government officials make these decisions. Urban parks are primarily funded by taxpayer dollars and are a public good where anyone can access them.

Conversely, most community gardens operate via a bottom-up framework of stewardship. Most are located on city land, but some are also located on private land. These gardens are managed by non-profit organizations, land trusts, and local residents. Community gardens are viewed as a common space that relies on grants, donations, and member dues for their operations. Planning stems from a bottom-up approach that focuses on the community's needs, yet also presents complex internal dynamics that make each garden unique. In Western community gardens, the shared and collective framework is popularized, while international modes, such as in Europe, “allotment gardens” are prioritized as they provide individualized household foods (Lawson 2004). When these two community garden frameworks collide, such as at the International Garden of Many Colors in Sacramento, CA, where there is a high Ukrainian gardener

population, tension can arise between different cultures, views, and spatial expectations. As many Ukrainian gardens prioritize the dacha traditions from the Soviet era, the garden space can transition into a contested landscape (Cole-Weiss and de la Peña 2015).

Purpose and Access

Urban parks are public goods that primarily focus on beauty, recreation, and leisure. As stated previously, urban parks are typically spaces for beautification and recreation. These spaces are planned and viewed as scenic and aesthetically pleasing, as they have well-maintained lawns, distinct paved paths, and benches to encourage one to stop and take in their beauty. Some parks have cobblestone bridges with underpasses, lakes where multiple organisms benefit from, and even garden areas. Urban parks encourage their users to utilize the whole space via passive consumption that can include activities such as walking or having a picnic. Anyone has access to urban parks as they are available and open to the public, with a low barrier of entry. However, the main barriers to access are park hours and city ordinances. Some parks have security cameras to ensure safety, which could impact users' behaviors and their sense of belonging.

Yet, community gardens take a different approach as they primarily focus on land cultivation and food production. They also focus on collective stewardship of the land and land care. Its beauty does not come from fresh mowed lawns but rather land production, sustainability, and productivity among other elements. Additionally, community gardens shift the focus to limited access compared to parks, where everyone has access. Community gardens have a higher physical barrier than parks, hence making them more exclusive. Some community

gardens have fences and locked gates to protect their produce and to keep unwanted guests out of the area. This can be viewed as a safety measure to ensure the crops are preserved and participants are protected, but also viewed as a barrier to keep certain people out of the space, and unknowingly detracts people from that space, including those interested in getting involved within the garden.

Activity

With a recreation and leisure focus, urban parks prioritize activities that foster ease, wellness, and relaxation. Activities can include playing a sport in an open space, having a picnic, walking or jogging, lounging, utilizing park infrastructure such as playgrounds and barbecue pits, people watching, and animal watching. These are activities with a space where people are constantly moving through the space. Someone who visits the park for a walk may not return, depending on various factors such as where they live and their day-to-day schedules. Users come to use this urban space to essentially rest, unlike community gardens. Yet, some recreational activities can also provide an outlet of socialization for users.

Labor is the most prominent activity in community gardens. This green space requires constant management and care through land stewardship. Users tend to have more of a relationship with the land as they have more access to the space, unlike those who are not stewarding the land. Additionally, users spend more time within the space due to the various physical activities that occur. The user is not just a visitor; they are active stewards. Activities include weeding, seeding and transplanting, irrigation, harvesting, land management, and soil

care. This open space can create opportunities for users to build relationships due to the garden's location and the often collaborative nature of the activities that occur within the space. These interactions transition the garden from a place of only labor and stewardship to a place of socialization.

Synthesizing the Frameworks of Urban Parks and Community Gardens

While these green spaces, urban parks, and community gardens operate under different frameworks of ownership, purpose and access, and activity, they can operate as spaces that can fulfill belonging. Urban parks and community gardens function and operate as spaces where users can escape from their day-to-day lives. These spaces offer mental, physical, and social health benefits, as well as ecological support. Urban parks, being an open resource for all to use, can provide belonging through leisure and recreational activities. Community gardens, having more limited access, can provide belonging through stewardship and labor. These distinct frameworks between the two spaces display that both are needed for cities to thrive and can impact one's sense of belonging.

Health Disparities

Research found that Black Americans in some cities live closer to parks than white Americans, such as Baltimore, Maryland (Jennings and Gaither 2015; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). Though true, these parks are neglected, have minimal recreation, and are overcrowded (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). That stated, there is sufficient literature and research to attest that predominantly POC and lower-wage communities still lack accessibility to urban

green spaces and are more exposed to environmental hazards (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; Jennings and Gaither 2015; Byrne, Wolch, and Zhang 2009; Robbins, Hintz, and Moore 2022). Inaccessibility to green spaces correlates to health crises and issues as an environmental barrier can increase conditions like respiratory diseases, poor cardiovascular health, and obesity, some of which can become fatal (Jennings and Johnson-Gaither 2015; CDC 2024; Junaid et al. 2025, Grant, Croce, and Matsui 2021; Pate and Zahran 2024; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014).

Such health concerns, obesity, cardiovascular health, asthma, mental health, and mortality, among others, are health disparities that affect communities of color and low-wage communities. Youth in low-income communities are 3.7 times more likely to be obese in comparison to youth in wealthy communities (Jennings and Johnson-Gaither 2015). Childhood obesity can increase the risk of adult obesity (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). People living in disenfranchised communities are more likely to die earlier compared to those living in disadvantaged communities from obesity, heart disease, and kidney disease among other diseases (Linczer and Pablo 2023). These health disparities are spatial, as Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014) explain that physical activity is restricted in urban areas as acute “park poverty” exist within communities of color and low-income households. This unequal geographic distribution of green infrastructure directly limits access to spaces for physical recreation, environmental cooling, and psychological restoration. Consequently, the public health outcomes are tied to geographic location. When a neighborhood is structurally deprived of park infrastructure or community gardens, the built environment can become a spatial determinant that exacerbates chronic illnesses and deepens health inequities (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014).

Cardiovascular disease continues to rise and become the number one cause of death in the United States (CDC 2024; Jennings and Johnson-Gaither 2015). People of color and those living in low-income communities are more susceptible to heart disease. Black Americans are more likely to prematurely die from cardiovascular diseases (Jennings and Johnson-Gaither 2015; Javed et al. 2022; CDC 2024). Additionally, Kalra and Watson (2022) share a report by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) that explains Black people are 2.74 times more likely to have hypertension compared to white people. This percentage is further increased when Black people live in segregated areas (Kalra and Watson 2022).

Furthermore, asthma impacts 6.1 million children in the United States, and Black American children are more at risk of dying from asthma than white children (DePriest, Butz, and Gross 2018; CDC 2024; Pate and Zahran 2024). Twenty-five million Americans are affected by asthma (Junaid et al. 2025; Grant, Croce, Matsui 2021). Among those, Black Americans have one of the highest mortality rates (Pete and Hatice 2024; Grant, Croce, and Matsui 2021). Grant, Croce, and Matsui (2021) link race to racism, which is there for linked to socioeconomic status, including wealth, income, and employment, the environment, focusing on access to healthy food, air pollution, and neighborhood safety, and lastly, health care access and quality. These factors can create long-term stress and increase asthma risk (Grant, Croce, and Matsui, 2021). Overall, many people of color, including Black Americans, and low-income Americans live in communities where environmental injustices occur, which will contribute to health declines and disparities due to environmental injustice, racism, and lack of accessibility.

As we examine the complex relationship between Black Americans and the environment, it is critical to question how Black Americans create and foster belonging within

urban open green spaces such as urban parks and community gardens, considering the historical relationship Black Americans have had with the land and the impacts that remain seen today.

More Than a Place: A Need to Belong for Black Women

Belonging is a word that holds significant value, meaning, and power. It is a word that can single-handedly welcome an individual, yet exclude someone else. Belonging is a word that is challenging to define, as many individuals from different disciplines, fields, and academics attempt to define it. Yet for this study, we will examine how Black women define belonging and how I situate and define belonging as a young Black woman, specifically in relation to this study.

First, we will start with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This theory, often displayed as a five-tier pyramid (see Figure 1), was founded by Abraham Maslow in 1943 in his paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". Maslow introduces five needs that drive human motivation. These needs are 1) psychological, 2) safety, 3) love, 4) esteem, and 5) self-actualization (Maslow 1943). Belonging is included in the third tier, along with love. This includes relationships and connections with others. Each need is arranged by hierarchy of prepotency, meaning the most dominant need will take priority in the consciousness of the organism until it is satisfied (Maslow 1943). For Maslow, belonging includes connections, affection, trust, and intimacy.



Figure 1: Diagram adapted from McDermid's (1960) visual structurization Abraham Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs

Yet, some scholars (Hofstede 1984, Wahba and Bridwell 1976, Taneva 2023) argue that this theory is not relevant as it does not discuss the full complexities of human motivations, such as the influence of cultures and socioeconomic status. This gap in Maslow's theory does not consider how cultures and socioeconomic statuses may shape or impact one's belonging and vice versa. Yet, what specifically is belonging? First, focusing on how dictionaries define belonging, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) states that belonging is a “possession; close or intimate relationship.” Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines belonging as “a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you.”

Within academic literature, similar definitions of belonging can be found. Themes of community, connection, and “at home” are discussed in relation to belonging frameworks, regions, and relationships (Allen et al 2021, Tomaney 2014, Duden 2024, Lambert et al. 2013). Although these themes of belonging are displayed within the literature, one main theme occurs: subjectivity. Several authors expressed that (sense of) belonging is linked to personal experiences, emotions, relationships, and perceptions. This also includes one's culture, self-awareness, community, values, and practice (Anant 1966, Hagerty et al. 1992, Allen et al. 2021, Pipitone and Jovic 2021, Saloma et al. 2021). Hagerty (et al 1992) explain belonging as a subjective feeling one has as a fundamental participant with a larger system, such as a large community and social networks, including school, work, and social environments, cultural groups, and physical places. Allen (et al. 2021) supports this idea as belonging is identified as a subjective, deep connection with/to a “social groups, individuals, physical spaces, and collective experiences.” The Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, defines belonging as an active and open practice and feeling that recognizes and honors each person as an individual who is seen, heard, and integrated into a community where they can thrive. The institute also has four core components: Inclusion, connection, agency, and recognition, which impact one's belonging.

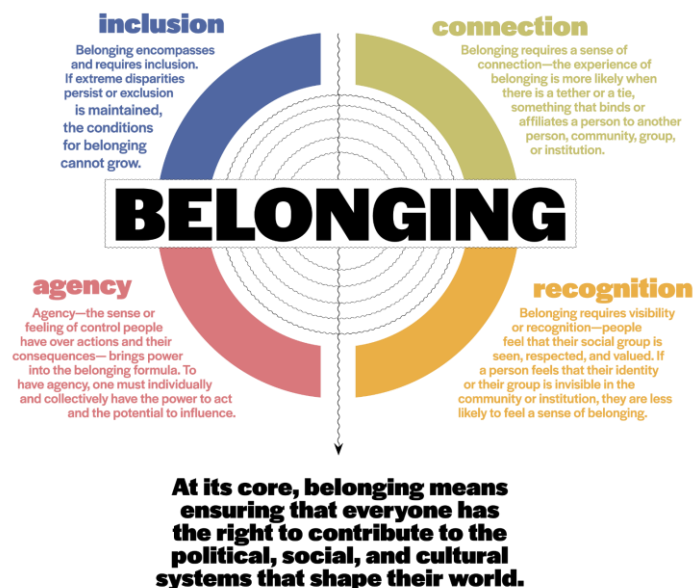


Figure 2: Framework for Belonging by the Othering and Belonging Institute (2026)

To further situate belonging within the scope of this research, we must look at how Black women define and reclaim belonging in the literature. By centering on Black feminist thought, we transition from a broad scope of defining belonging to the lived experiences and “geographies of the heart” articulated by Black feminist scholars.

Geographies of the Heart: Frameworks of Black Women’s Spatial Belonging

Black feminist thought (McKittrick 2006; Reese 2019; Collins 2000) entails the perspectives, knowledge, and lived experiences of Black women. It focuses on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality as foundations to one's experiences and spatial identity. Through this theoretical belonging lies beyond the physical presence within

spaces but is also situated and produced in multifaceted personal identities of the individual. This research specifically focuses on Black women as they have had contested relationships with land and space, spanning over centuries (McKittrick 2006; White 2018). Black women are in a unique position due to their race, gender, and other intersectionalities, yet they are often overlooked, neglected, and systematically displaced from the land. Black women also have the right to be in urban green spaces, where they reclaim the space for themselves and transform the space into a site of resilience and liberation (McKittrick 2006; Collins 2000; Reese 2019). Originally conceptualized by Walsh (2018) “geographies of the heart” positions belonging as a critical anchor in one's identity. These are the shared lives, experiences, engagements, narratives, emotions, and memories, the geographies of the heart, that *actually* make the place. This section weaves together the “geographies of heart” concepts of socio-spatial identity, collective placemaking, and land-based stewardship.

Socio-spatial Identity

Socio-spatial identity in Black feminist thought focuses on the various identities Black women hold within spaces. Crenshaw (1991), Collins (1986), and Sykes (2022) examine how Black women navigate the world through their intersectionalities. They argue that Black women are in a unique position where they interact with the world through their physical presence and their socio-identities, including their race, gender, and class, all of which can dictate how Black women are perceived and treated within spaces. This intersectionality can impact and influence their sense of belonging. This spatial tension is rooted in a long history of contested relationships, where Black women have continuously navigated the gap between their physical

presence and social acceptance. Historical lands and landscapes, such as slave plantations, serve as an example, as Black women were held captive, creating spatial trauma that has impacts today. This tension has resulted in belonging not being guaranteed as increased surveillance, policing, gentrification, and displacement restrict Black women's access to urban open green spaces (Sykes 2022; Reese 2019). As Collins (1986) describes, Black women are viewed as an "outsider within" (p S14). Unpacking this concept displays a geographical paradox that Black women face in society, which can extend to urban open green spaces, where they are viewed and treated as outsiders. This includes space designed for community and leisure. This outsider status creates a complex relationship for Black women as they must navigate the historical traumas that continue into the 21st century, such as hyper-awareness of Black movement and lack of relaxation in outdoor spaces (McKittrick 2006). A simple visit to an urban greenspace is transformed into a place where Black women must put in additional social and emotional work to "fit in" or "assimilate" as they are viewed as the "outsider within", changing their belonging within the space (Collins 1986, p S26). However, Eaves (2017) implies that belonging is constantly transformed from space to space because of various socio- identities. This shifts the focus of belonging for Black women toward a 'geography of the heart,' where Black women are able to break the spatial barriers of being an "outsider within" and create their own belonging and placemaking.

Placemaking

Despite the challenges of socio-identities for Black women, scholars, including hooks (2009), McKittrick (2006), Hunter et al. (2016), and Sykes (2022), shift the narrative from

exclusion to placemaking. Since Black women have been historically unwelcome as an “outsider within” spaces, excluded and often erased (Collins 1986; McKittrick 2006), they began to create their own spaces where they are able to thrive, express joy, and heal through placemaking. These forms of placemaking occur individually, collectively, and include the physical and socio-identities of Black women. It is Black women reclaiming spaces they were not welcomed in or *not meant to be in*.

As McKittrick (2006) describes, the very presence of Black women within spaces changes the space for not only themselves, but also for other marginalized communities. This shifts the historical socio-spatial relationships that were only granted to a specific demographic. In doing so, it creates a space of *at-homeness*, where one feels connected and immersed in the world and a *belonging to a landscape*, where one can exist as themselves and feel safe, welcomed, and at ease. Rather than being watched or controlled by social norms (Taylor 1999), the space is transformed into one where all are welcomed (Schenker 1996; Cranz and Boland 2004). bell hooks (2006) uses this concept from Scott Russell Sanders to describe her own journey of placemaking while searching for home. She is reminded of these feelings upon returning to her birth state of Kentucky, rediscovering her own belonging. The lens of placemaking moves beyond the physical interaction of a space and embraces the socio-spatial identities of Black women within landscapes such as urban green spaces.

Land-based Stewardship

With socio-spatial identity and placemaking, Black women have been able to transform their relationship with the land into land-based stewardship. White (2018) and Reese (2018)

display how land cultivation and stewardship are places where Black women have been able to create belonging. White (2018) uses collective agency, understanding that marginalized communities' actions and relationships can change the land, shifting how it was viewed as a place of labor, disconnect, and trauma, and now a resource used for reclamation and placemaking. Reese (2018) also supports this idea of land stewardship as a reclamation, as Black food geographies are an example of Black life and agency. Black communities engaging in land cultivation continue to shift the historical relationship of the land to one where, in the present, despite the injustices and inequalities, it creates a space for Black land care, knowledge, reclaiming, and empowerment (Carter, Broad, and Reeves 2024; Touzeau 2019). Land-based stewardship moved the Black community, more specifically, Black women, into a space where they are not the “outsider within” but valued, welcomed, and needed.

Throughout the subsection, we have seen various definitions and inputs about belonging. Belonging is beyond whether you have a physical connection to a space; it includes one's socio-spatial identities, one's own unique placemaking, and connection to the space you are in. As we conclude, this study will define belonging as a sense of comfort and connectivity, where one can be their authentic self, not having to change, alter, hide, or assimilate parts of their identity within a space. You are welcomed, wanted, and secure in your relationships and connections. To further understand how “the geographies of the heart” are present in our everyday environments and spaces, we must look at how urban open green spaces can impact a young Black woman’s belonging. Specifically, do young Black women in Yolo and Sacramento County, CA, have a sense of belonging in urban open green spaces such as parks and community gardens?

Gap in Literature

There is a generalization of Black Americans in green spaces in research; however, there are few studies that focus on Black women, more specifically, young Black women and their sense of place and belonging in urban open green spaces. There is research concerning women of color and belonging in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), higher education, mental health, and health equity, and some related to urban communities. Yet, in the literature, not much is provided specifically focusing on Black women in urban green spaces and their sense of place and belonging.

Sykes's (2022) research shows the intersectionality of being Black and a woman in green spaces. Sykes (2022) discusses their needs to be more research on the intersectionality between Black women and how their race and gender impact their relationship with the environment and nature. She interviews both Black and white women, asking them questions about their experiences in Franklin Park in Boston, Massachusetts. Focusing on racialized emotions, intersectionality, and environmental justice, Sykes reports that Black women respond to racialized emotional labor either with mediation of structural and/or racism and hyper awareness of Blackness (Sykes 2022). Many of the Black female interview respondents revealed they did not belong in the outdoors due to their identities. The white female respondents revealed that their race has not contributed to their sense of place and belonging in accessing Franklin Park. Her findings concluded that socio-racial access to outdoor recreation spaces among Black people needs to be further studied (Sykes 2022).

While Sykes (2022) study highlights the need of studying socio-racial access to urban open green spaces in a general sense, this study will specifically focus on young Black women

(ages 18-25) as they are late adolescents transitioning into early adulthood. This specific age group and stage in life details many significant milestones for late adolescents, including starting higher education, moving from their hometowns, and starting their professional careers. In this transitional period of gained freedom and identity formation, many young adults begin an active search for individual placemaking and belonging within various spaces.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Objectives

This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature identified by Sykes (2022) by examining Black people and their socio-racial access to belonging in urban open green spaces. My research question is, do young Black women have a sense of belonging in urban open green spaces? The research approach best used for this study is a qualitative approach, as it will allow for reflective and insightful perspectives on the lived experiences of young Black women within these spaces. In order to answer this question, this study will look at the intersectionality of race, gender, and age to better determine sense of belonging. It will explore the factors that contribute to or detract from a sense of belonging for young Black women in an urban park in Yolo County, CA, and community gardens in Sacramento County, CA. Further sub-questions will seek to answer what it means for someone to feel or be connected to an urban open green space and what contributes or detracts from one's sense of belonging. From the qualitative data collected from participatory observations, interviews, and autoethnography, this study will examine the relationship young Black women have with an urban park and community gardens, including their interactions within the physical space and socio-spatial dynamics that shape their experiences. This study will identify improvements or changes to urban green spaces that could enhance sense of belonging. This study will also compare and contrast sense of belonging in an urban park and community gardens. I seek to understand how we can begin to address, create, and foster equality for all, even in urban open green spaces. Black women should feel as if they have a sense of place and belonging, whether that be in higher education or at an urban greenspace. Representation within these spaces matters and can be transformative.

Research Design

A qualitative approach and methodology were selected for the research to understand how young Black women's intersectionality of race, gender, and age impacts their sense of belonging within urban open green spaces. Specific qualitative research design methods included interviews, participatory observation, and autoethnography. This approach prioritized the lived experiences, voices, and individual knowledge of each participant, as it is essential for understanding belonging and the various intersectionalities of each participant's identity. This study uses a mix of qualitative research approaches, including case study, ethnography, and phenomenology. Case studies can be specific to a single community or system, allowing for a more in-depth connection with a real-world context (Creswell and Poth 2018). Ethnographies are used to understand a culture or a group, spatial behaviors, and interactions (Creswell and Poth 2018). Phenomenology captures the lived experiences of the individual, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and navigate their surroundings and seek meaning (Creswell and Poth 2018; Van Manen 1990).

Research Setting

This study was conducted within Yolo and Sacramento counties in Northern California. The locations for this study were Central Park in Davis, CA, and two community gardens with the Del Paso Heights Growers' Alliance in Sacramento. An urban park and community garden were selected for this study, as stated earlier, they operate and function differently due to their ownership, purpose, and accessibility, and the various activities that occur within the sites. Factors that were considered for selecting the research sites were the demographics of the area (ex: race, age, and gender), proximity to other infrastructure such as businesses, apartments,

and schools, convenience, and existing relationships. Central Park is located in downtown Davis and is the city's first park. Built in 1937, the park functions as an urban open green space where college students, other community members, and visitors can lounge and play on its 4.5-acre lawn, visit the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame, and attend the weekly Wednesday and Saturday Farmer's Market. Central Park also has two playgrounds, picnic tables, restrooms, and walking paths. This location was selected due to its proximity to UC Davis and Downtown Davis, as the city is a college town. This proximity brings people of various ages, races, gender into Central Park, from UC Davis students to local and visiting people and families. This provides

The Del Paso Heights Growers Alliance is a nonprofit grassroots organization with three locations in the greater northern Sacramento region. Their mission is to "build sustainable neighborhoods and circular economies through policy, advocacy, and experiential education" (Del Paso Heights Growers' Alliance 2024). With these foci, this nonprofit aims to foster sustainable neighborhoods and economies. The organization has three pillars, food sovereignty, health, and climate equity, which strive to make impactful change and connections in their communities. Their core values are empowering community economic well-being; environmental justice and restoration; preservation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) cultural practices and traditions; care to promote healing and performing arts; STEM; poverty intervention; and childhood experiences (Del Paso Heights Growers' Alliance 2024). The alliance has a total of three community gardens in the Del Paso Heights community where staff and volunteers steward the space with activities such as seeding, transplanting, crop rotation, harvesting, composting, and various garden workshops. There are three official board members and three to six frequently returning volunteers. The two community garden locations selected

for this study are the International Garden of Many Colors and the Suga' Cane Community Garden. The two locations were selected due to the demographics of the community, as the Del Paso Heights neighborhood is a majority Latinx and Black community. Historically, many Black families called Del Paso Heights home, and as the years progressed, the community continued to diversify (Black Child Legacy 2025).

Data collection

Participatory observations

This research used participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography. Participant observations were used to gain a better understanding of the physical locations and social interactions within them. This includes observing who was and was not within the spaces, what activities and events occurred, and the overall atmosphere of the space. Additionally, this includes participating in activities within the space. In Central Park, this included going to the Farmer's Market and purchasing items, sitting on the park benches and concrete tables, and lounging on a picnic blanket on the lawn. In the community gardens, this included volunteering with other community members and volunteers. In both spaces, fieldnotes were collected. Fieldnotes in Central Park were written in a small notebook at the park while participating in the space. Field notes at the community gardens were collected after the volunteer workday on a Google Doc sheet. Ten observations at Central Park occurred at Central Park during weekdays and weekends between January 2026 and February 2026. A total of six observations occurred during the community garden workdays. Four observations occurred at the International Garden of Many Colors, and two observations occurred at the Suga' Cane community garden.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a better understanding of each participant's experiences within the spaces, as well as how their own intersectionalities and identities influence their views and relationships within the spaces. Semi-structured interviews allow for more in-depth discussions with more flexibility and probing (Hay and Cope 2021, Creswell 2013). A total of fourteen young Black women were interviewed. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. Each participant gave verbal consent to be interviewed and for the interview to be recorded. Interviews were conducted in person at the researcher's office and Central Park, and online via Zoom. Participants were asked introductory questions about their relationship with Central Park and the community gardens. This then transitioned into questions that focused on belonging in Central Park and the community gardens, see appendix. Participants were selected via a preliminary online survey they filled out and using the snowball method.

Inclusion criteria for this study consisted of participants that identify as Black women, were between the ages of 18 and 25, and had visited at least one of the research locations once, ensuring that they had an existing relationship with the sites. Participants were selected via a preliminary online survey they filled out and by using the snowball method. Participants for this study were recruited through a multi-stage sampling strategy designed to capture a diverse range of spatial experiences. Data collection began with initial field observations, then a preliminary survey recruitment flyer was posted online, and flyers were distributed near the location. To expand the participant pool, a snowball sampling method was deployed, allowing early informants to refer peers who met the study's demographic criteria. Finally, this was

supplemented by word-of-mouth recruitment and sampling that leveraged the researcher's pre-established personal and community networks. Utilizing these inside connections facilitated trust and rapport, which was vital for eliciting deep, nuanced narratives regarding identity and spatial belonging. To mitigate potential bias, these insights were balanced against broader community perspectives, as the majority of the interview pool consisted of community members with no prior relationship to the researcher.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography was used as I, the researcher, also fit within the demographics of my participants. This allows me to acknowledge my own positionality and reflexivity and how my own lived experiences and intersecting identities have influenced the spaces of this research (Hay and Cope 2021; Edwards 2021; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). This transitions me as not just a researcher but also a participant. I was first introduced to autoethnography in my geography methods course, which I took winter quarter of 2025. In that course, I learned and read more about autoethnography and found that it would be a method I would like to use in this study. As mentioned, fieldnotes were written for the participatory observations at Central Park and the community gardens. Once the fieldnotes were written, I then wrote about my feelings, thoughts, and takeaways within the space. This included a total of twenty-six fieldnote observations with interwoven autoethnographic reflections for Central Park. For the community gardens, this included a total of eight Google Docs pages with autoethnographic reflections at the end of each observation reflection. This was conducted between January 2026 to February 2026. To ensure a systematic approach was used, this study utilizes the

autoethnographic frameworks of Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) as they explain that “they (autoethnographers) must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. This can be accomplished by comparing and contrasting personal experience with existing research, interviewing cultural members, or examining relevant cultural artifacts Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). As a young Black woman within the urban open green spaces, my own lived experiences and reflections provide an insightful insider view. Yet, to ensure this was a systematic approach, other young Black women were interviewed, and my fieldnotes and their interview transcripts were compared and contrasted.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach (Hay and Cope 2021) to unveil patterns within the semi-structured interviews and observations. I first familiarized myself with the data by transcribing all of the interviews and reading through my field notes observation. Then, I began to generate initial codes by examining each of the participants’ transcripts, focusing on the participants' lived experience and relationships with the urban open green spaces, yielding a total of 72 initial codes. From the initial 72 codes, recurring and similar words and phrases were grouped together until seven main themes were developed. From this, I began to review the seven main themes with the dataset to ensure that they accurately represented the narratives of the participants, allowing four overarching themes to be derived. From there, the four overarching themes were named to reflect the spatial and social dynamics each one represented. Finally, writing the report involved contextualizing the themes with

findings from participant experiences and narratives with frameworks from Black feminist thought.

Validity and Limitations

To ensure and establish the credibility and validity of this study, this research follows procedures outlined by Creswell and Miller (2000): data triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity. Data triangulation is used in this study as multiple qualitative data collection tools are used, including participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography (Creswell and Miller 2000). Member checking was also used in this study as themes and interviews from young Black women reflect their lived experiences (Creswell and Miller 2000). Lastly, the researcher's reflexivity is used in this study as I explain my own positionality, cultural identity, and background, and how this shapes my analysis of the data collected (Creswell and Miller 2000).

There are specific limitations for this study. First, this study is conducted within Yolo and Sacramento counties, reflecting the Northern California demographics. This study focuses on a specific age group and demographic that can offer depth and understanding of how young Black women navigate urban open green spaces. The weather is another limitation as the study was conducted in winter, where the forecast included rain, fog, and overcast. Furthermore, the sample size of the study reflects the in-depth frameworks of ethnographic and phenomenological data collection (Creswell and Poth 2018). The limited interview size allowed for more in-depth, personal insights, yet more interviews may have possibly broadened the overall viewpoints of the urban open green spaces. Lastly, the overall timeframe of this study was limited as data collection was conducted within a two-month period.

Positionality and Ethical Concerns

I am in a unique position to conduct this research, as I am the same demographic as my participants and I have an agriculture and natural resources background. As a young Black woman who has worked at a teaching greenhouse as an undergraduate student at a historically Black university, I did not see many young Black women come to the greenhouse unless for class or an event. In my graduate experience, I frequent the local parks I live by in Davis, CA, and I am a Lead Student Farmer at UC Davis. In these spaces, I do not see many young Black women either. These positions allow me to conduct this study with a unique perspective that includes my socio-spatial interactions within urban green spaces.

This study was conducted under the approval of UC Davis's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This included approval to conduct research on human subjects. An initial review application was completed to determine which documents were required for the study. Once completed, the initial review application determined that a consent form and protocol were required for the IRB package in addition to the interview questionnaire survey. A recruitment flyer was also uploaded to the package. As the age range of this research was 18-25, minors were not interviewed, and the nature of the interview questions was not expected to cause unease; however, it is a possibility. Participants of this study could stop the interview at any time. This is an exempt study as this research does not involve any high-risk participants, including pregnant women, those imprisoned, or children. Additionally, any personal identification collected from the participants was destroyed at the end of the study.

Chapter Four: Study Findings

This chapter brings together the qualitative data collected from participatory observations and interviews with fourteen young Black women. It explores how these participants navigate urban open green spaces, specifically focusing on their interactions with Central Park and the Sacramento community gardens. Observations will be discussed first, following interviews, organized by four main themes: belonging, connection to space, representation, and safety. Participant recommendations for changes in Central Park and Sacramento community gardens and closing reflections will conclude the chapter.

Observing Central Park, Davis

Participatory observations are one primary method used for this study. This includes going to the research locations and participating in activities within the space while also observing what is occurring within the space. Observations were conducted over two months at the research sites. Participatory observations at Central Park in Davis, CA, were conducted between January 2026 and February 2026. Observations occurred throughout weekdays and weekends, Sunday through Friday, and at different times of the day. During these observations, I focused on the physical landscape of the space, the weather, weekend and weekday observations, and the demographics within the park.

Physical Layout of Central Park

Before conducting this research, I visited Central Park several times for various reasons. Some visits were intentional, such as meeting friends and going to the Farmer's Market, while

other visits were more spontaneous. As mentioned earlier, Central Park is located in downtown Davis. It is close to the UC Davis campus and the financial hub of the city.

While observing the space prior to the study and during this study, I noted the physical characteristics of the park including 4.5 acre lawn in the center of the park, two playgrounds, a splash park, the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame, a green awning on the east side of the park where the Saturday and Wednesday Farmer's Market is, a garden on the western side of the park, a short, gray cobblestone wall near the garden, a small concrete stage south of the park, a public restroom, trees on the north side of the park, concrete picnic tables, and benches around the perimeter of the park. During the observations, I moved throughout the park to gain a better understanding of the park and how the space was being utilized.

Weather

Weather conditions impacted how the public interacted with the park. I observed the space during the Davis winter seasonal spectrum of rain, lower temperatures, fog, overcast, and sunshine. As expected, rainy conditions resulted in less engagement and interactions at the park. During the rain, more people, including myself, utilized the large green awning on the eastern perimeter to seek shelter. As there were no benches where I was observing under the awning, I sat directly on the concrete pavement for my observation. Interestingly, dog owners continued to walk their pets through the space even during steady rain; however, for most people, clearer and drier weather brought them to the park. More people occupied the park when the weather was sunny, clearer as well as fog and overcast.

Weekday Observations

Spatial involvement and engagement varied from weekdays to weekends. During the week, fewer people were at the park compared to the weekend. During the week, with sunshine, there were around twenty to thirty people who were within the space or moved through the space. When it rained, around twenty people used or moved through the space. The Wednesday Farmer's market brought in more people to the park, between fifty and sixty people; however, the Saturday Farmer's Market had more people there. The weekdays consisted of people utilizing the benches and concrete picnic tables to eat lunch, a dessert, or just take in the space. Only groups of three, two, or one person used the picnic tables and benches. At times, some children were playing on the playgrounds as presumably family members watched them. There were not many people utilizing the center of the park where the lawn is located. Few people walked across the lawn but did not stay to enjoy it. Several people passed through the park walking their dogs. One owner played with their dog on the lawn. During the week, most people move through the park instead of staying stationary within it. The park operates as a gateway and a convenience for people to go to their next location, whether it is the UC Davis campus or a business downtown. During the week, I sat in various spots around the park to gain a better understanding of the space. While doing so, in addition to making field observations, I allowed myself to be in the space, uninterrupted, and to take in what was happening around me. I focused on how green the grass was, how the sun shone down on the park, who moved within the space and stayed stationary, and participated the Wednesday Farmer's Market by looking at the various booths and vendors.

Weekend Observations

On Saturdays, however, the park, in many ways, transforms as the Farmer's Market brings in a diverse demographic of people, including families with children and college students. Around seventy to eighty people were there as more spaces of the park were utilized, including the lawn where people had picnics, lounged, engaged in casual sports, and children played with various toys. The benches and picnic tables were also occupied more as people used the space. The Farmer's Market has various booths that community members can engage with and purchase items, including produce, trinkets, and political information. These booths bring in more people as they can purchase various items and learn more about current political discussions. While within the space, I browsed through the Farmer's Market to see what was being sold and sampled some goods, including apple cider, I sat on benches and took in the environment with leisure approach. I also brought my picnic blanket and lounged on the lawn as I reflected in the space and later conducted an interview.

Central Park Demographics

The demographics of those who occupied the park throughout the week did change depending on the day. As stated, more individuals and small groups occupied the park during the week, while larger groups and families occupied the park during the weekend. While observing the park, I noticed that the park was racially diverse, as I saw people of various races within the park overall. However, for this study, I was specifically focused on whether young Black women were in the space and how they were using the space. During my ten observations, I saw on average one or two Black women within the park. These women

appeared to be of various age groups, most appearing to be younger. This is a stark difference compared to the other demographic of people who are within the park. It highlights who is represented within the space and the underrepresentation of Black people, more specifically, Black women, within the space.

Observing Community Gardens in Sacramento

Participatory observations at Del Paso Heights Grower's Alliance garden at the International Garden of Many Colors and Suga' Cane community gardens were conducted between January 2026 and February 2026. A total of six observation were conducted. Most observations occurred on Saturday mornings or afternoons to maximize the likelihood of observing active community engagement with the Del Paso Heights Growers' Alliance events. During these observations, I focused on the physical landscape of the space, the weather, what activities occurred within the space, and the demographics of the community gardens.

Physical Layout and Site Overview

The International Garden of Many Colors is located in the Del Paso Heights community in Sacramento, CA. Next to the garden are affordable apartment complexes and a city park. There is another community garden across the street that is operated through the city of Sacramento. This garden was created after the city deemed the International Garden of Many Colors was not up to code, having several safety concerns. With the support of community members and organizations, the garden was restored. The 2.7-acre garden has over 40 plots that local international residents use to grow culturally significant produce. The Del Paso

Heights Grower's Alliance has a plot towards the front of the garden. At this location, several produce items are grown, such as lemons, peppers, and tomatoes. The garden plot also has anaerobic and worm compost. For this study, only the Del Paso Heights Growers Alliance plot was observed. The garden and plot are locked; therefore, access to the space is limited. Suga' Cane community garden is also located in the Del Paso Heights community. The garden is located in the backyard of a family home. The main focus of this garden space is the small greenhouse where an array of crops is grown, including produce and flowers. With the garden being located on private, gated property, there is limited access to the space.

Community Garden Demographics

The demographics of the two gardens were almost consistent as the same people visited both gardens. Mainly older, middle-aged men of various races volunteered at the two gardens continually. Occasionally, other demographics of people came to the space to volunteer, such as women of various ages. I did not see any young Black women volunteer with the International Garden of Many Colors, excluding myself, during the duration of this study. The soft launch at Suga' Cane brought in a diverse range of people to the garden. This included city members and partnerships, and community members with families, as there was a high presence of children. Around twenty-five plus people were at the space, that being the highest number of people at the gardens during this study. During the duration of this study, two young Black women were within the space. Overall, the two green spaces reflected diverse racial and age representation, yet the lack of young Black women within the spaces still highlights who is within the space and who is not.

Weather and Seasonal Context

Similar to Central Park, the weather affected who was within the community garden spaces. I observed the two locations during the Sacramento winter seasonal spectrum of low temperatures, fog, overcast, and sunshine. As expected, sunny conditions led to more people in the garden, while foggy, cooler conditions resulted in fewer people. The weather conditions did not impact the winter activities that occurred within the garden, such as harvesting crops.

Community Gardens Observations and Activities

Spatial involvement and engagement varied from each location. Overall, at each location, there were not many people within the space unless they had a connection to the Del Paso Heights Growers Alliance. For the people connected to the alliance, their focus was on working on the gardens of the alliance. At each space, there were workdays that occurred. At the International Garden of Many Colors, the primary focus of the workdays was harvesting lemons, pruning the lemon tree, moving the worm compost, building a new worm compost, and building and turning the anaerobic compost. This included demonstrations and the use of tools to steward the space from shovels to pitchforks. Volunteers, around three to six, often worked together on tasks to complete them, such as two to three people pruning the lemon tree, and two to three people moving the base of the worm bin containers. The overall atmosphere of the space was positive as people shared their knowledge and learned from others. People were willing to learn about the space and complete the tasks that needed to be done. Conversations and laughter filled the air in addition to the gardening noises that

accompanied it. At times, outside of the garden where the apartment complexes are, did get a bit loud, but that did not impact the environment within the garden space.

At the Suga' Cane garden, the primary focus of the workdays was to prepare the greenhouse for operation and a soft launch. This included shoveling gravel into the greenhouse for flooring, evening it out, and also shredding cardboard for the worms. Wheelbarrows, soil rakes, and an electric shredder were used. For the soft launch, it was quite successful as there was a drum circle, a seeding demonstration I led, community members seeding various crops, live music, and snacks. Given my background in agriculture, I was responsible for leading the seeding demonstrations, allowing me to facilitate an experiential learning environment. Community members seeded flats of various vegetables and flowers and place them into the greenhouse. The overall atmosphere of the space was positive as community members participated in garden activities, listened to music, and enjoyed snacks.

Discussion

Comparative Analysis Discussion: Central Park vs Sacramento Community Gardens

Examining both Central Park and the Sacramento community gardens, there are several differences and similarities, some of which are influenced by the location of each space. Central Park is a public park within the City of Davis where anyone can enjoy and utilize the space. Whether you are a community member or visiting the city, the park has no gates to keep people out or anything in. Visitors are allowed to move through the space freely and utilize the amenities at the park. The park is an open-access park that is open 7 days a week, and every part of the park can be utilized by those who visit the park (ex: playgrounds, restrooms, splash

pad, lawn). The main function of the space is leisure, recreation, and commerce, as people enjoy the lawn and the Farmer's Market.

The International Garden of Many Colors and the Suga' Cane garden in Sacramento are more localized and private spaces where access is limited to only the people who have a connection to the Del Paso Heights Growers' Alliance. The gardens focus on intentional, scheduled volunteer workdays to bring people together, mainly Sacramento residents. The main function of the space is agricultural, as it cultivates the land for produce, as multiple crops are grown, and agricultural systems such as compost are present.

Weather

The weather also influenced how the two spaces were used. In Central Park, the winter rains heavily impacted those who used the space, as the large lawn and play structures are exposed to the elements. A storm drain was built into the lawn to mitigate flooding in the area. The green awning that the park has only covers the concrete area where the Farmer's Market is, and there are no benches for people to sit on. While observing the community gardens, the weather did not impact the work that occurred within the spaces. Since it did not rain, typical garden activities were able to continue, such as pruning and seeding.

Activities and Observations

The specific scheduling of these events on weekends played a major factor in how people used the green spaces. Both the Farmer's Market and greenhouse soft launch held on Saturdays allowed for diverse groups of people to attend the events, as most people do not

work on the weekends, and schools are closed. The Saturday Farmer's Market brought in community members and visitors as they were able to purchase and consume goods, buy produce, and use the amenities of the park. The greenhouse soft launch brought many community members to the green space to garden and socialize. Both events encouraged the involvement of all ages to participate, resulting in people of various ages engaging with the spaces, from children to older adults.

In Central Park, the minimal presence of Black individuals was not entirely unexpected, as I had not seen many Black people within the park before this study. The U.S. Census Bureau also reported a 2.5% Black population for the city of Davis in 2024 and the white population as 53.7%. Despite this statistic, I expected to see more young Black women in the park due to its close proximity to the UC Davis campus and the downtown financial hub. However, as I observed this urban green space, only one to two Black women were visibly present, as other races occupied the space more.

In the community gardens, the lack of Black representation, specifically more young Black women, was more unexpected. As the Del Paso Heights neighborhood is historically Black and is highly racially diverse, including the areas around the neighborhood, I expected to see more young Black women within the space. There is a Black presence within the community, although the presence of young Black women within the gardens is minimal. This might be due to who already has access to the garden spaces, as the International Garden of Many Colors has a high number of older immigrant gardeners, or an overall lack of awareness that these gardens exist. The volunteers already at the gardens knew about the garden from word of mouth, a flyer created by the Del Paso Heights Growers Alliance, or preestablished relationships. These

observations reflect who was within these urban open green spaces and what factors potentially influenced this.

Closing Reflections

The observations at Central Park and the two community garden spaces gave me more insight into how both spaces were being used and by whom. In Central Park, the weather impacted who was within the space and how the space was being used as rain deterred people from visiting the park. At the community gardens, the weather did not impact the usual winter garden activities as volunteers still showed up to steward the land. The demographics of each place were different, as at Central Park, mainly smaller groups or single individuals occupied the park during the week. This transitioned into larger groups and families during the weekend. In contrast, at the community garden spaces, mainly older men occupied the gardens as they engaged in various activities such as moving worm compost. Central Park operates as a place of leisure and commodification with the Farmer's Market, while the two garden spaces function as spaces of production and labor. With in-depth interviews from participants, I am able to learn more about the dynamics of each space.

Interviews

Interviews served as another primary method for this study. This includes interviewing young Black women who have visited at least one of the research locations, Central Park, the International Garden of Many Colors, and the Suga' Cane garden. Young Black women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five were interviewed. The majority of the participants were

university students, one was in a career, and one was unemployed. A total of fourteen interviews were conducted over three months, starting in January 2026 and concluding in March 2026. Twelve participants who have visited Central Park were interviewed. Two participants who have visited the Suga' Cane garden were interviewed. There were no participants interviewed who had visited the International Garden of Many Colors.

From fourteen interviews, 72 initial codes were generated. From those codes, four themes were derived: belonging, connection to space, representation, and safety. Alongside the interview data, I also included my own autoethnographic reflections. I will discuss my personal lived experiences within the research locations to help provide a broader image of how young Black women experience these spaces. I decided to take this approach to further situate the autoethnography research method of this study. This section analyzes participants' responses across the four core themes, examining their lived experiences within the specific urban open green space they visited.

Theme One: Belonging

As belonging is the main focus of this study, participants were asked several questions about belonging, including how they define it. Belonging was often identified as feeling welcomed or “at home”; you can be your authentic self, you are safe, and not under surveillance. Participants expressed that spaces where they can have peace, individual freedoms, and self-expression are all related to belonging. Participant two defined belonging as “having freedom of expression, and you can be yourself, not hide yourself, and it is judgment-free” (Interviewee two, personal communication, January 23, 2026). Participant twelve defined

belonging as “feeling at home and not realizing I’m not the minority” (Interviewee twelve, personal communication, February 23, 2026). Several participants used the words and phrases “community, at-home, comfortable, and seeing others who look like me” to describe belonging. Participant four connected belonging to UC Davis, stating that “I deserve to be there” (Interviewee four, personal communication, February 6, 2026). When participants were asked if they had a sense of belonging in Central Park, six participants said yes, four participants said yes and no, and two participants said no. These mixed responses reflect that belonging is individual and subjective. Some participants shared that being a UC Davis student serves as a segway for them to access the space, and seeing other students there enhances their sense of belonging. People who are friendly and the overall space itself also enhance one's belonging. However, some participants shared that the park can be culturally and racially isolating as it lacks demographic representation.

Participant nine shared that some people will judge you based on the color of your skin or what is represented in the media (Interviewee nine, personal communications, February 15, 2026). This participant shared that while at the park, some people mocked her friends (who are also young Black women) and her, which upset them. Participant five expressed that she did not belong well, explaining that Central Park is “not her space” (Interviewee five, personal communication, February 6, 2026). Additionally, Participant six said in Davis, overall, it has been difficult to adjust to as there are not many Black people are people who share a similar lifestyle, value, and identity as her. When participants were asked if they had a sense of belonging at the Suga’ Cane garden, the response was overall positive as participants expressed that they felt like they belonged due to getting to know people, seeing familiar faces, and learning how to

seed. Participant three expressed that she also did not belong due to not coming from an agricultural background, but that was “very small” (lack of belonging) (Interviewee three, personal communication, February 5, 2026). To further gain a better understanding of how young Black women interact with urban open green spaces, participants were asked if they ever felt the need to change or hide parts of their identity to achieve acceptance within these environments. The responses express mixed, contested feelings from the participants. Some participants are hyper-aware of their appearance and how that may be reflected within the predominantly white park. This created emotional and psychological labor to not be viewed as a threat, as participant seven makes sure not to have their hood up and referenced Trayvon Martin as a factor influencing how she represents herself within the park. Participant four shared that she doesn’t want to be the “loud Black person” or loudest in the park out of respect (Interviewee four, personal communication, February 6, 2026). Several participants also expressed codeswitching and filtering themselves while at the park. Additionally, some participants felt strongly about not changing or hiding parts of their identity, expressing that they never change or hide parts of their identity and that they never would. At the Suga’ Cane community garden, one participant said that she never had to change parts of herself, while the other expressed the need to be less loud.

Events and Activities

Several events and activities within the green spaces enhance a sense of belonging for participants. At Central Park, the main event the participants discussed that enhanced their sense of belonging was the Farmer’s Market. Other events that participants included were

getting frozen yogurt at Yolo berry as it is across the street from the park, the Davis Night Market, the Davis Craft and Vintage Fair, university clubs, Picnic Day, and music concerts. At the Suga' Cane garden, participants felt the garden work, such as shredding cardboard for worm compost, dancing, and music, enhanced their sense of belonging within the space.

Researcher Reflections

Within these spaces, I felt similar to other participants. In Central Park, I felt somewhat of a connection to the space as there were other people there from various ages and demographics that I enjoyed seeing. I enjoyed the Farmer's Market as well, and being in company with other people. Yet, I do not have a strong sense of belonging in the park due to not seeing other people who look like me. At the two community garden spaces, I felt more of a sense of belonging since I have a background and expertise in agriculture and seeing more diverse people within the garden spaces. I enjoy stewarding and taking care of the land, and activities that enhanced my belonging within the spaces. It is great to have a space where I can continue to learn and practice my agriculture skills. In both urban open green spaces, I did not feel the need to change or hide anything about my identity to feel accepted. I tend to naturally codeswitch and I am less talkative when there are a lot of new people in a space that I do not know. The Farmer's Market, the summer evening picnics, and Yolo berry enhance my sense of belonging at Central Park, while just being in an agricultural space, helping and guiding others at the Sacramento gardens, enhanced my sense of belonging. The role of being an expert and welcoming others made me feel more connected to the garden and step into the role of leadership in the space.

I can hypothesize that the sense of belonging would be much lower if these activities and events were not found in Central Park. As most participants said they have a sense of belonging in Central Park, this is highly connected to the location of the park in relation to UC Davis, the identities of the participants, and their interactions with the space. I hypothesize that without the greenhouse soft launch, the Suga' Cane garden would still create and foster a sense of belonging for young Black women and other BIPOC people as the primary function of the space is production.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study displayed that sense of belonging with the research locations is individualized, subjective, and contested. Central Park itself did not create belonging; however, the various identities of participants and interactions with the space did. Being a UC Davis student, having friends to share the space or visiting the space, and community involvement, such as the Night Market, created a space of belonging for young Black women. Events such as the Farmer's Market also enhanced sense of belonging. However, some participants expressed having no sense of belonging at the park due to a lack of representation, judgment, and not being viewed as a place for them, as one participant expressed. Without the agents that make Central Park what it is, such as the Farmer's Market, Yolo berry, the Davis Night Market, and the presence of UC Davis students, the park loses some social components that many participants said enhance their sense of belonging. Thus, belonging in Central Park is layered, complex, and subjective.

At the Suga' Cane garden, participants expressed having a sense of belonging related to the garden. Agricultural work, with collective learning from all of the activities, volunteers, and seeing people from various backgrounds, created more of a sense of belonging. The space was viewed as inviting and welcoming, with familiar faces to the music and snacks provided. The space opened its doors to whoever was willing to enter. The space encouraged and empowered people to learn and engage with it and with agriculture, regardless of skill and expertise. The soft launch did enhance who was within the greenspace and how many people were there. As Central Park and the Sacramento community gardens function as distinct spatial environments, the factors that impact one's sense of belonging are different. These factors impact young Black women in various ways, resulting in a sense of belonging being subjective. This supports the ideas from the literature that explain belonging in subjective (Hagerty et al. 1992; Allen et al. 2021) and that factors from Black feminist thought such as “the geographies of the heart” (Walsh 2018) are impacting and influencing young Black women’s sense of belonging in urban open green spaces.

Theme Two: Connection to Urban Open Green Spaces

The second theme for this study is the connection to urban open green spaces. Participants were asked to define what being connected to a place meant to them. Recurring words and phrases shared by the participants were “decompress, recharge, and breathe” when describing their connection to a place. This included “good memories” and positive encounters, culture, and not having to worry if something would happen there. Only one out of the fourteen participants expressed that they have not felt connected to a place. Segueing

specifically to urban open green spaces, participants were asked how connected they felt to the green space they visited. For Central Park, most participants expressed that they did not feel a strong connection to the park, as participant eight expressed she would not go out of her way to show someone the park. Some participants felt moderately or somewhat connected to the park but felt more connected to the nearby Arboretum and had positive memories of the park. Most viewed the park as a transactional space as it is located close to the UC Davis campus and the business of downtown Davis. The majority of the participants felt little to no connection to the park itself; however, social factors such as socializing with friends and the Davis Night Market made some participants feel more connected than others.

At the Suga' Cane community garden, participants felt connected and not very connected as they met new people and planted seeds. Participant fourteen did not feel very connected due to “not having much time to talk to others” and the weather as it made her hot (Interviewee fourteen, personal communication, March 2, 2026). Participant three shared that the other people within the space were very open and welcoming as she talked to many people she did not know (Interviewee three, personal communication, February 5, 2026).

Disconnection to Space

For disconnection within Central Park, participants felt strongly as some shared personal stories and experiences. A lack of racial representation is one cause of disconnect within the park. Being the only young Black woman or Black person within the park made some participants feel different and hyper-aware of their race. Participant one reflected on her time within the space and being the only Black person in the space (besides me, the interviewer).

She explained that sometimes being the only Black person in a white space slips her mind, but at Central Park, she felt different from the majority of the people there (Interviewee one, personal communication, January 22, 2026). Another cause of the disconnect is the physical structure of the park. Participants shared that the parking lot, loud roads, and lack of activities to do within the park impacted their connection to the space. Furthermore, Participant thirteen expressed a loss in the community when a local man, nicknamed “Compassion Man”, was stabbed and killed during the city’s 2023 stabbing incident. She expressed that “seeing such a positive and kind person in the community gone feels sad to go back (to Central Park) (Interviewee thirteen, personal communication, February 23, 2026).

Contrary to Central Park, at the Suga’ Cane community garden, the two participants expressed not feeling disconnected.

Elements that Draw Participants to Urban Open Green Spaces

Features that draw participants to urban open green spaces focus heavily on safety, relaxation, and ease of access. Nature features were frequently mentioned as greenery, trees, plants, and the overall beauty of urban open green spaces drew in participants. Infrastructure such as benches, good lighting (especially at night), a clean environment, location, and accessibility are also factors that draw participants into urban open green spaces. Additionally, participants are drawn to spaces that are open, friendly, and inviting. Seeing families and children playing in Central Park reminds one participant of home, bringing in a sense of comfort. Others are drawn to the space because of specific events such as the Farmer’s Market and other outdoor activities. For community garden spaces, participants are drawn to the space

as it is multi-purposeful and feeds people. Additionally, the beauty of the space makes one participant want to return.

Elements that Detract Participants from Urban Open Green Spaces

Conversely, certain physical and social interactions within these spaces detract participants from urban open green spaces. Participants are detracted from spaces that are dirty, unkempt, forgotten, and not lively. Too much concrete within is viewed as “a mall” to one participant. Other elements, such as loud noises from cars and no place to barbecue, also detract participants. . Central Park offers a variety of food vendors, most being costly or encourages people to utilize the lawn for a picnic. Barbecues are significant in Black and Latinx communities as they bring people together, have historical connections to ancestors, are traditional as they generate generational knowledge, and are a sign of joy and pride. Furthermore, crowd size within the space can draw or detract participants from the space as too many people can be overwhelming and harder to find a quiet place. Some participants also expressed that larger crowds of people who do not look like them pushed them away from the space. In a predominantly white town such as Davis, participants have expressed that people stare at them too often and for too long. For the young Black women participants, this is not viewed as a positive but rather as judgment and surveillance. None of the community garden participants expressed anything that detracts them from the space.

Visibility Within Central Park and Community Gardens

Lastly, visibility plays a critical role for participants' connection to Central Park and the Suga' Cane community Garden. When participants were asked "how seen do you feel in this green space as an individual" and "if they ever feel aware of how others may identify them as a member of a larger group", interviews concluded that green spaces can be socially complex for young Black women as they must navigate hyper-visibility and a lack of individual representation. Several participants reported feeling seen due to their culture, race, skin tone, or hair styles such as braids or an afro. Participant ten expressed that she is very seen because she is the only Black person there. She further expressed that she felt observed and that people appear curious as to why she is at the park (Interviewee ten, personal communication, February 16, 2026). Participant eight felt similarly, as she catches a lot of people's attention and would prefer not to (Interviewee eight, personal connection, February 13, 2026). Participant nine hypothesized that people are curious due to not seeing Black people often and thinks her hairstyle is intricate (Interviewee nine, personal communication, February 15, 2026). Participant six explained she "does not feel seen at all", as "there is nothing in the park geared towards her, such as Black farmers at the Farmer's Market" (Interviewee six, personal communication, February 7, 2026). Participants at Suga' Cane felt partly seen and very seen because of their interactions with other volunteers, personal connections, and representing UC Davis.

When asked if they were aware of how others may identify them as a member of a larger group, all participants from Central Park said yes. This is a stark contrast from Suga' Cane as the participants expressed feeling not sure or not. The Central Park participants explained they are constantly aware of how they are perceived, as many do not want to be perceived as a threat or targeted. Some shared that while at the park, specifically at the Farmer's Market, they

are prone to change how they may be perceived. Participants explained they try to make themselves smaller, are more hyper-aware of where she positions her hands, so it does not appear as if she is stealing, and leave shopping bags open as they shop due to being falsely accused of stealing in the past. Participants expressed being stared at by others from various races. Participant six explained, “receiving glares from older white people that are not subtle” (Interviewee six, personal communication, February 7, 2026). Most participants appeared to display care about how they were being viewed within a larger group, while a few expressed a lack of care unless antagonized and did not let this impact who they are. At Suga’ Cane, participants were not aware of how others viewed them as members of a larger group. “No, not sure” was the response of participant fourteen (Interviewee fourteen, personal communication, March 2, 2026), and participant three said, “no” (Interviewee three, personal communication, February 5, 2026). This was due to everyone being of “different backgrounds,” which made it feel as if they were “all a united group coming together for the effort (gardening).”

Researcher Reflections

As this section concludes, I will reflect on my own connections to Central Park and the community gardens in Sacramento. I do not feel strongly connected to Central Park as it is not a location I frequent often. I enjoy how accessible and its close proximity to campus, yet I do not have a personal connection to the space. For the community gardens, I did not feel very connected to the Suga’ Cane garden, as it was in someone’s backyard. I felt more connected to the International Garden of Many Colors as I have volunteered there before this study, and it is

more of a public space compared to Suga' Cane as private. Not seeing many Black people, let alone young Black women, at Central Park makes me feel disconnected to the space. Furthermore, this disconnection extends to downtown Davis, as I had a very negative experience downtown because of my race. This has altered the way I viewed the downtown area, and I am more hyper-aware and hyper-vigilant of who is in the space and near me. At the community gardens, I did not feel disconnected, only nervous when meeting new people, which went away.

I am drawn to spaces that are welcoming and inviting, clean, with nature, and where there are activities you can engage with. I am detracted from spaces that are not welcoming and inviting, where people stare too often and too long, there is not much to do in the space, and it is not safe. I feel quite seen at Central Park because most of the time I am the only Black woman there. I feel more seen because of the way my hair is styled when I wear my twist out, as my hair has volume and people stare. Also, when I wear something more form-fitting, I notice more people tend to stare. I feel seen at the community garden spaces in more of an expert, resourceful way, as there are not many volunteers within the space, and I help guide people with tasks since I have a background in agriculture, and I have been to the spaces before. I am very aware of how I am perceived at all of the research locations because of my skin tone. Despite it being 2026, we still live in a world and society where people are prejudiced and unfortunately, I have a target on me because I am Black. However, within the Del Paso Heights community, I feel more at ease and welcomed, as other people of color are there.

Conclusion

This section has unveiled that urban open green spaces are complex areas that can impact young Black women's connections to these spaces. There is a dichotomy between how young Black women feel connected to Central Park and the Suga' Cane community garden. In Central Park, young Black women must face and navigate the park under conditions where they are hyper-visualized by others within the space, such as stares, for some, having to alter and change parts of their identity, and where overall Black representation within the space is lacking. In return, young Black women are forced to guard and protect themselves within the space, as that is meant to be used for leisure and relaxation. The park is transformed into a space where they are hyper-aware of their presence and how others view them, creating a disconnect between them and the park. Not all connections are viewed as explicitly negative, such as reminders of home and the Farmer's Market; some elements, including noise pollution and hyper-surveillance detracts young Black women from Central Park. Again, the park is viewed as a transnational space and a place of convenience rather than a place of interpersonal connection to young Black women.

The Suga' Cane community garden reflected a space where young Black women were empowered and welcomed. The participants did not feel disconnected to the space as they engaged in agricultural activities such as seeding and moving gravel. Participants expressed that nothing detracted them from the space and felt seen due to interactions with others within the space. There was no mention of feeling under surveillance or hyper-awareness of their identities in the space and how others may perceive them. This could be due to the demographic of the community and volunteers, including having a young Black woman co-lead the soft launch event, and the location and size of the garden being smaller and more secure

compared to Central Park, as a large space that anyone has access to. The space allowed young Black women to truly be themselves and connect to the space. Participants did not see the place as a convenience but as a community, a learning opportunity, and a space to just exist.

Central Park and the Suga' Cane community garden function as different urban open green spaces that directly impact young Black women's connection to the place. Elements such as physical layout, racial representation, and social interaction play a vital role in determining a participant's connection or disconnection to an environment. From navigating defensive, hyper-aware body language to meeting new people while seeding, the participants of this study reveal that urban open green spaces are complex, socially produced landscapes where belonging and connection are dependent on both the physical and social climate. Ultimately, young Black women feel most connected to urban open green spaces where they are actively welcomed rather than surveilled. These are spaces that reflect representation of people who share their identity, and where they are able to be their authentic selves but also where activities make them part of the space. This supports what Collins (1986, p S26) explains as additional social and emotional work Black women put into not be viewed as the "outsider within".

Theme Three: Representation

The third theme for this study reflects the representation of young Black women in the urban open green spaces. When participants were asked if they think young Black women are represented within Central Park, the majority said no. Several participants recall not seeing many or any young Black women within the space. They were "nowhere to be found as our presence is not prominent or acknowledged," says participant six (Interviewee six, personal

communication, February 7, 2026). The 2% Black population was brought up by participant nine, expressing that there are not a lot of Black people in Davis in general. Participant seven described that “nothing about it (Central Park) says it's for us (Black people),” the park as neutral and not race attached (Interviewee 7, personal communication, February 12, 2026).

Participant eleven said that mainly the “Earth Black people” are drawn to space and create a freedom that brings forth creativity and authenticity (Interviewee eleven, personal communication, February 18, 2026). Other participants explained that they were not sure if young Black women were well represented within the green space, since it is just a park, and the park would need to have an event or activity where other Black people are present. Interestingly, participant ten explained that the lack of young Black women is “part of our own (young Black women) doing and not exploring” (Interviewee ten, personal communication, February 16, 2026). The Suga’ Cane garden reflects a different reality. Both participants agreed that young Black women were represented within the space, as participant three focused on how young Black women were viewed in this space. This participant expressed that having a young Black woman run the green space at the greenhouse of launch was inspiring, as she was calm, collective, open, and willing to help others and was a great representation of young Black women (Interviewee three, personal communication, February 5, 2026). Participant fourteen shared that anyone is welcome in the space regardless of race.

A follow-up question focused on how participants' experiences within the space were impacted. For Central Park. Most participants shared that how young Black women are represented either did not have a large impact on their experience within the space or felt

uncomfortable or not connected to the space. This impacted the connection participants have with the space. Participant ten shared that nine times out of ten they are the only Black person at the park, and “to make it worse, the only Black woman there” (Interviewee ten, personal communication, February 16, 2026), highlighting how lack of representation can be isolating. Participant fourteen at Suga’ Cane shared they felt “very good” as anyone is welcomed there (based on her observations), and people were helping (Interviewee fourteen, personal communication, March 2, 2026), while the participant three shared she wants to be a good representation for young Black women and have more grace when working with children.

Lastly, participants expressed feelings of happiness, joy, and solidarity when they saw other people within the urban open green space who shared the same background and demographic as them. In both Central Park and the Suga’ Cane community garden, some words and phrases used to express their feelings and thoughts were sense of connection, surprised, unspoken Black solidarity, really nice, feels good, excited, wants to talk to them more, welcoming, interested, great, happy, positive reaction, and reminds her of home. Some participants referred to seeing people who share a similar background or demographic as her as a “90s sitcom montage where everyone is having fun” (Interviewee seven, personal communication, February 12, 2026) and “WOW, I see my people” as they are surprised and interested (Interviewee twelve, personal communication, February 23, 2026). Only participant six expressed not seeing anyone of the same background and demographic as her besides Black families and spouses, but none “existing in the space by themselves” (Interviewee six, personal communication, February 7, 2026).

Researcher Reflections

I felt that both Central Park and the community gardens do not have a good representation of young Black women within the spaces. I almost never see young Black women in either space, and if I do, it is only one or two at most. The majority of the time, I am the only young Black woman in the spaces. This makes me question and wonder why more young Black women are not within the spaces, especially since Central Park is close to campus. There is no major impact on my experience within the space, as if I wanted or needed to go to the park, I still would, yet I question what can be done to bring more young Black women into the space. I feel similarly about the community gardens, as I know the Del Paso Heights neighborhood is historically Black but now has a higher Latinx population, and Grant High School is in the neighborhood. It would be nice to see more younger women within the community in the spaces. When I see other young Black women within the green spaces, I am happy and excited because it is rare to see someone who shares the same background and demographic as me. Representation matters, and even just seeing one other person who looks like me can make a great impact!

Conclusion

In conclusion, this theme reflects how representation is a critical factor for how young Black women connect and experience urban open green spaces. A lack of representation in Central Park creates a lack of connection to the space, which deters young Black women from the space. Yet, for the Suga' Cane garden, diverse participation in volunteers and inspiring leadership enhances representation within the space. My presence within the space shaped

how participant three viewed the space and her experiences there. She expressed that my presence was inspiring and that she also wanted to be a good representation (of young Black women). Her reaction captures the essence of how participants feel when they see others who share the same background and demographic as them, as here is joy, happiness, and unspoken solidarity shared. These findings conclude that representation is a powerful tool that can directly shape how young Black women interact in urban open green spaces. By focusing on the intersectionalities of race, gender, and age (Crenshaw 1989), this study shows that urban open green spaces where there is diversity can create a stronger connection to the space. As McKittrick (2006) further explains, the physical presence of Black women within spaces such as Central Park and the Sacramento Community gardens begins to create a placemaking and belonging to a landscape that changes their relationship in such places.

Theme Four: Safety

The fourth and final theme for this study is safety. Safety is a concern for all of our day-to-day lives and is essential for spatial engagement. For many people of color, especially those with multiple intersectionalities, including race, gender, and age, safety is a key component of environmental access and spatial mobility. To understand how safety impacts young Black women in Central Park and the Sacramento community gardens, participants were asked to rank their safety on a scale of one to ten, with one being not safe at all and ten being completely safe, including when they are alone in the spaces and during different times of the day.

Safety in Central Park and Suga' Cane Community Garden

On a scale of one to ten, with one being not safe at all, ten being completely safe, participants were asked to rank how safe they felt at Central Park and the Suga' Cane garden, focusing on when they visited the spaces by themselves and during different times of the day. For Central Park, the average daytime safety rating is seven out of ten. Participants felt safe as there were other people around, activities within the space, very open, and light outside. Some participants who rated safety a ten out of ten explained that Davis is very safe compared to where she lives and since it is light outside, they are not too worried about their safety. Other participants explained that their safety is not higher due to anything that can happen within the park, increased law enforcement in the area, and participant one expressed that the world is a "pretty freaky place" (Interviewee one, personal communication, January 22, 2026). The average nighttime safety rating is 5 out of 10. Almost every participant who answered this question dropped their safety rating between day and night. This is due to a multitude of reasons, including less lighting at night, racialized hyper-visibility, increased homeless population, other people walking around, and unwanted and negative interactions. Participant eight explained that she had to reconsider when she went to the park due to an interaction she had with a white man, whom she presumed was possibly on drugs. This encounter made her rethink how she moves through downtown Davis as a whole. On average, participants' perceptions of safety in Central Park dropped two points as the day transitioned into night. This transition from daytime to nighttime safety explains that young Black women are aware of how public environments, such as parks, can impact their right to peace and safety. The sun plays a

role in safety and security during the day, as visibility is higher. Once the sun goes away, the darkness of the park is exposed, and increased vulnerabilities arise.

Conversely, at the Suga' Cane community garden, participants expressed that they felt safe, as both participants ranked the garden a ten out of ten. The participants explained that they felt comfortable in the environment and felt safe as people were smiling, happy, and curious. In this space, participants were not hyperaware of their safety, unlike in Central Park. The garden became a sphere where young Black women are able to lower their guards and experience peace. Since none of the participants visited the location at night, as there are no night volunteer hours, participants were only able to discuss their safety during the day.

Researcher Reflections

Reflecting on my own safety within the spaces, I share a similar ranking and thoughts as the participants. In Central Park, I ranked daytime safety an 8 as the area felt safe due to it being daytime. There were also other people there enjoying the space, so I did not feel unsafe. I ranked nighttime as a 5 because Central Park is not a place I would go to at night, since it is dark, and I do not know what people could be in the area or space, which can lead to unwanted interactions. When leaving downtown Davis at night, I walk past it; however, I do not stay there at night. For the community garden spaces, I only visit the spaces during the day, as that is when the volunteering occurs. Overall, my safety in both gardens is a seven out of ten due to not knowing the gardens at first, and keeping in mind that I do not know what could happen in these locations. It was not surprising that safety dropped in Central Park by nightfall. Most people tend to associate nighttime with more danger than daytime. It was surprising that some

participants gave the safety of Central Park during the day a ten out of ten. In the current state of the world we live in, I personally do not see many places scoring a ten out of ten for safety, especially an urban open park. Additionally, I was surprised that none of the participants mentioned that the stabbing from a few years ago had made the park unsafe for them. I was surprised that the Suga' Cane interviews ranked the community garden a 10 for the same reasons I shared for Central Park.

Conclusion

This theme revealed that safety for young Black women within urban open green spaces is connected to the temporal and social relationships of the space. As mentioned, during the day at Central Park, participants felt safe due to various factors such as daytime visibility and the city of Davis being overall safe. However, as nightfall approaches, this sense of safety and security decreases at an average of two points due to the darkness and unwanted social interactions. This contrasts with the Suga' Cane community garden as it received a ten out of ten for safety, as the environment was deemed safe due to smiles and environmental familiarity. Safety in urban open green spaces includes physical factors and social factors, both of which determine how young Black women move within these spaces.

Participant Recommendations for Changes in Central Park and the Sacramento Community Gardens

Participants were asked if any changes to Central Park or the community would make it feel more welcoming. The majority of the participants felt that Central Park needed more

culturally inclusive events, such as a Juneteenth event and artwork within the space. This included a recurring event throughout the year to bring more Black women into the park and enhance a sense of belonging within the Black community. Some expressed that having more clubs and general events would help the city use more public space, such as Central Park, where people can meet up and explore the town. Participant eleven said that Davis needs more Black events in the space, especially for Black History Month, more Black statues, more speaking engagements, and restaurants such as pop-up booths. This participant expressed that she feels seen and heard in Black spaces but Davis is not very welcoming as a young Black woman. More landscaping and land acknowledgements and Black contributions and acknowledgements were also recommended. Something that stuck out was participant eight explaining that Davis needs a cultural reevaluation, which would include mandatory African and African American courses and sociology courses about race. She explained that this would be a great avenue for learning about topics that can be seen as uncomfortable. Overall, in Central Park, participants want more culturally inclusive and engaging events there, which will bring more Black people, specifically young Black women into the space. In the Suga' Cane garden, participants felt similar to those at Central Park. Participants said that they would like to see more programs and events geared towards Black women, including having more expert young Black women in agriculture help within the space and represent Black leadership. Participant three expressed that having more people from the UC Davis Student Farm would be beneficial, as they can instruct events and provide collaborative hands-on work within the space.

Researcher Reflections

I feel similar to the participants about changes I would like to see within the urban open green spaces. I agree that Central Park needs more cultural events with spaces that are not only geared towards the Black community or young Black women, but also other minority groups that tend to be overlooked and overshadowed. More Black events are needed in space, especially Black holidays, as there were no Black holidays, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, celebrated within the space this year. I also did not see any Juneteenth celebration within town last year. There should be recognition and events for these holidays every year, not sporadically. More outreach to campus, especially during the academic term for collaborations, would be great to bring more diversity to the space. A “Davis got Talent” talent night during warmer months would be a great way to bring in community members of different backgrounds into the park. For the community gardens, I share the same thoughts as the participants that more outreach to more universities would be a great way to bring in more diverse, college-aged people into the space. More collaborations with local organizations, schools, and universities, such as UC Davis and Sacramento State, would be beneficial to bringing more young Black women and other diverse people into these gardens. Landscape Architect design students often work in the International Garden of Many Colors but bringing in more agricultural classes or food-based classes, such as Food and the City, a graduate class offered at UC Davis, would be beneficial. Lastly, hosting more community events within the space, similar to the greenhouse soft launch, will draw in more people to both garden spaces. This could be a “Garden party” where community members are encouraged to volunteer and

learn more about the garden spaces, or a community potluck, “float party” near the gardens, and harvest party when various crops are ready to be harvested.

Closing Reflections

As this section concludes, we are left with an understanding that urban open green spaces are much more than just places of nature and perhaps rest, leisure, and production. These spaces also function as complex landscapes where belonging, connection, representation, and safety must all be considered as interconnected elements that impact belonging. For young Black women, these connections require mental, physical, and emotional labor and agency as their identities and presence can bring a hyper-awareness or a sense of safety and inclusion.

As the literature in Black feminist thought (McKittrick 2006; Collins 1986; Crenshaw 1989; Finney 2014; hooks 1990) supports, the intersectionalities of race, gender, and age impact one’s spatial belonging in urban open green spaces. Central Park’s lack of diverse representation made some participants feel as if they did not belong at the park while at the Suga’ Cane garden, seeing people of various races, with at least one being of the same race as the participants, made young Black women feel more connected to the space (Finney 2014). Gender and how the participants felt they were perceived within the urban green spaces reflect how some young Black women in Central Park felt hyper-surveilled and needed to change or alter parts of their identity. At Suga’ Cane, this hyper-surveillance was not present as participants did not express being potentially viewed as an outsider but rather accepted and welcomed (Collins 1986). Lastly, the age range of young Black women reflects a period in their

lives where they are seeking spaces that are welcoming, community-building, and where they can be themselves. In Central Park, participants shared that this can be challenging due to a sense of disconnection from the space, while at the Suga' Cane garden, participants expressed not feeling disconnected as the space was welcoming, transforming it into a place of collective healing (hooks 1990).

Young Black women should feel as if they belong in these spaces because they do. They should feel welcomed and valued within the space, regardless of whether there are events that encourage them to be within the space and not feel as if they need to change or alter parts of their identity and feel safe within these spaces. With intentional changes, these spaces can begin to be further transformed into a space that reflects, creates, and fosters a sense of belonging for young Black women.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

To conclude, this study focused on young Black women's sense of belonging in urban open green spaces. Through participatory observations, interviews, and autoethnography, I found that young Black women's sense of belonging in Central Park and Sacramento community gardens is subjective, fluid, and not solely based on access to green spaces. The physical layout of the space, personal belongings, personal connections, racial representation, and safety are key factors that can impact one's relationship to the space, mainly positively or negatively.

Based on site observations and participant interviews, it became evident that urban open green spaces in the region do not have high numbers of young Black women within the spaces. As expressed, one specific space had none at all. This absence and small number leaves a question remaining...*why*? This lack of presence could be tied to several physical and geographical factors, including site location, ease of access, and the broader city and neighborhood demographics. I speculate that the lack of young Black women in Central Park is due to the low overall Black population in Davis. I further speculate that there are not many young Black women because they are not interested in the space or urban green spaces, they are occupied with other life duties, perhaps a career, education, and their family. I further question if the lack of representation of young Black women in the park deters them from the space, as they may or may not feel as if they belong. In the gardens, I speculate that the lack of young Black women within the community garden spaces could be due to not knowing about the garden space and being occupied with other life duties, such as a career, education, family,

or not being interested or informed about gardening. Another potential factor could be the growing Latinx population within the community.

Limitations

Several limitations arose during this study. A time constraint was one limitation, as field work needed to be completed by a certain timeframe to ensure there would be adequate time to analyze data. The timeframe of observation is also a limitation as less people frequent urban open green spaces in cooler months compared to warmer months. Another limitation was finding young Black women within the research locations. As no young Black women were within the initial research location, the International Garden of Many Colors, I included two other sites, one of which was a park, which created the comparative analysis of the two new research sites. The snowball method was successful in finding more young Black women to interview, as during observations at the new sites, there were still few young Black women at the research locations. These factors reflect the sample size conducted for this research. Finally, my own positionality as a young Black woman with an agricultural background positioned me as an insider to this research.

Methodological and Theoretical Contributions

The research design of this study offers several strengths that enhance the validity and the depth of the findings. With the research approaches used, this study was able to focus on the lived experiences and narratives of young Black women in urban open green spaces, a demographic not addressed in the literature. A strength in this study is the mutual trust and

participant comfort during the fieldwork. As I am the same demographic as the participants, they felt comfortable and secure enough to share their experiences and personal narratives within the urban open green spaces. This led to enhanced authenticity of the data.

Furthermore, the research methodologies selected for this study worked well together.

Participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and my own autoethnographic reflections created a more in-depth and enriched understanding of the relationships young Black women have within urban open green spaces. Each method complemented one another as they unveiled the spatial, emotional, and social components of the research locations. Together, this allowed for the study to address the gap in the literature regarding young Black women and their sense of belonging in urban open green spaces

Future Research Questions

Several questions remain unanswered regarding this study, opening paths for future research: First, would the outcomes of this study differ significantly if it were conducted elsewhere, outside of the Northern California region? Specifically, how would these socio-spatial relationships change if this research were replicated within a predominantly Black city or town? Furthermore, if this research were conducted during the peak summertime rather than the winter, how might that seasonal shift impact the four core themes of belonging, connection to space, representation, and safety? Do other young BIPOC women have a sense of belonging in urban open green spaces? Do Black people overall have a sense of belonging in urban open green spaces? Lastly, focusing on various environmental typologies, how might this be conducted in other urban open green spaces and agricultural spaces, such as a nature reserve

and an urban farm? How might this study be conducted in a rural environment? These questions persist as there is still much research that needs to be conducted regarding belonging, urban open green spaces, young women, and people of color.

Appendix A:

Park questionnaire

Initial Introduction

(Introduce researcher, purpose of the research, and verbal consent will be asked before the interview takes place)

Hello, thank you for joining me today, and for your interest in participating in this research study.

Introduce Researcher:

My name is Chyler Hughes, and I am a graduate student in the Geography Graduate Group at UC Davis.

Introduction to the study and purpose of the interview:

For my master's thesis, I am seeking to understand how sense of belonging in urban open green spaces impacts young Black women, ages 18 to 25. The purpose of this interview is to better understand young Black women's sense of belonging in urban open green spaces, such as the park we are in today. This study will look at the intersectionality of race, gender, and age to better determine sense of belonging. It will explore the factors that contribute to or detract from a sense of belonging for young Black women in urban community gardens and parks. This interview can identify improvements or changes to urban green spaces that could enhance sense of belonging.

Informed Consent

(I will hand the participant a physical paper copy of the informed consent for them to read. A digital form will be emailed to the participant before the interview.)

Have you read the informed consent form that I shared with you earlier via email? If not, please take a few minutes to read the form. I can answer any additional questions you may have.

To be clear, any identifying information will be stored separately from your interview. Identifying information will be coded for the duration of the study and stored in a secure, locked box in a locked room on UC Davis campus. After this study is completed, identifying information will be destroyed.

Do you have any additional questions regarding this study?

Do you consent to participate in this study?

1. INTRODUCTION

First, I would like to start off this interview learning more about you and the time you spend here at this park.

Q1: Would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself, such as your background (can be race/ethnicity, status in life, etc), and what you do when you're not in this space?

- Probe: Where did you grow up?
- Probe: What does a typical day look like for you?

Q2: How and when did you first hear about this park?

Q3: What would a visit to this park look like for you?

Q4: What do you enjoy most about this park? If anything at all, what makes this urban green space special to you?

2. THEME: BELONGING

Now, I would like to transition to questions that focus on belonging.

Q1: When I say the word "belonging," what does that mean to you?

- Probe: What does it mean to feel connected to a place?
- Probe: What draws you or detracts you from an urban open green space, such as this one (community gardens, urban farms, parks, open green fields, etc)?

Q2: When you are in this green space, do you feel a sense of belonging?

- Probe: Do you feel as if you belong or do not belong? Will you please explain?
- Probe: Are there any particular activities or events that happen here that you are drawn to, or that you find enhance your sense of belonging?

Q3: How connected do you feel to this green space?

- Probe: Has there been a time you have felt connected or disconnected to this green space? Will you please explain?
- Probe: Is there anything about the physical space itself that you feel connected to? (if needed, give examples: planter areas, quiet reflective areas, the soil, views...).

Q4: How do you think young Black women are represented within this urban space?

- Probe: Do you feel that young Black women are well represented? Why or why not?
- Probe: How does this impact your experience?

Q5: What feelings or thoughts do you have when you see other people in this space who share a similar background or demographic as you?

Q6: Have you ever felt the need to change or hide parts of your identity to feel accepted in this urban open green space? If so, what were those parts?

- Probe: The way you talk.
- Probe: The way you act.
- Probe: What you wear.
- Probe: How you style your hair.

Q7: How seen do you feel in this green space as an individual?

- Probe: Do you ever feel aware of how you or others may identify you as a member of a larger group?

Q8: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being completely safe and 1 being not safe at all), how safe do you feel in this space, especially when alone or during different times of the day?

Q9: What, if any, changes to this urban open green space or community would make it feel more welcoming for young Black women?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience being in this green space as a young Black woman?

Appendix B:

Community gardens questionnaire

Initial Introduction

(Introduce researcher, purpose of the research, and verbal consent will be asked before the interview takes place)

Hello, thank you for joining me today, and for your interest in participating in this research study.

Introduce Researcher:

My name is Chyler Hughes, and I am a graduate student in the Geography Graduate Group at UC Davis.

Introduction to the study and purpose of the interview:

For my master's thesis, I am seeking to understand how sense of belonging in urban open green spaces impacts young Black women, ages 18 to 25. The purpose of this interview is to better understand young Black women's sense of belonging in urban open green spaces, such as the community garden we are at today. This study will look at the intersectionality of race, gender, and age to better determine sense of belonging. It will explore the factors that contribute to or detract from a sense of belonging for young Black women in urban community gardens and parks. This interview can identify improvements or changes to urban green spaces that could enhance sense of belonging.

Informed Consent

(I will hand the participant a physical paper copy of the informed consent for them to read. A digital form will be emailed to the participant before the interview.)

Have you read the informed consent form that I shared with you earlier via email? If not, please take a few minutes to read the form. I can answer any additional questions you may have.

To be clear, any identifying information will be stored separately from your interview. Identifying information will be coded for the duration of the study and stored in a secure, locked box in a locked room on UC Davis campus. After this study is completed, identifying information will be destroyed.

Do you have any additional questions regarding this study?

Do you consent to participate in this study?

1. INTRODUCTION

First, I would like to start off this interview learning more about you and the time you spend here at this community garden.

Q1: Would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself, such as your background, and what you do when you're not in this space?

- Probe: Where did you grow up?
- Probe: What does a typical day look like for you?

Q2: How and when did you first hear about this community garden?

Q3: What would a day of volunteering at this urban open green space look like for you?

Q4: What do you enjoy most about volunteering here? If anything at all, what makes this urban green space special to you?

2. THEME: BELONGING

Now, I would like to transition to questions that focus on belonging.

Q1: When I say the word "belonging," what does that mean to you?

- Probe: What does it mean to feel connected to a place?
- Probe: What draws you or detracts you from an urban open green space, such as this one (community gardens, urban farms, parks, open green fields, etc)?

Q2: When you are in this green space, do you feel a sense of belonging?

- Probe: Do you feel as if you belong or do not belong? Will you please explain?
- Probe: Are there any particular activities or events that happen here that you are drawn to, or that you find enhance your sense of belonging?

Q3: How connected do you feel to this green space?

- Probe: Has there been a time you have felt connected or disconnected to this green space? Will you please explain?
- Probe: Is there anything about the physical space itself that you feel connected to? (if needed, give examples: planter areas, quiet reflective areas, the soil, views...).

Q4: How do you think young Black women are represented within this urban space?

- Probe: Do you feel that young Black women are well represented? Why or why not?
- Probe: How does this impact your experience?

Q5: What feelings or thoughts do you have when you see other people in this space who share a similar background or demographic as you?

Q6: Have you ever felt the need to change or hide parts of your identity to feel accepted in this urban open green space? If so, what were those parts?

- Probe: The way you talk.
- Probe: The way you act.
- Probe: What you wear.
- Probe: How you style your hair.

Q7: How seen do you feel in this green space as an individual?

- Probe: Do you ever feel aware of how you or others may identify you as a member of a larger group?

Q8: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being completely safe and 1 being not safe at all), how safe do you feel in this space, especially when alone or during different times of the day?

Q9: What, if any, changes to this urban open green space or community would make it feel more welcoming for young Black women?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience being in this green space as a young Black woman?

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