

YOU ARE GOLDEN.

A report on affirming Black students to achieve student and campus success.



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The Cultural Attaché

Photographs by Christian Rodriguez

ORIGIN | SOARING | THRIVING



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“Surviving is important, thriving is elegant.”

MAYA ANGELOU

INTRODUCTION: A WORD

Retention is an old name for an old thing. When I first set out to collaborate on this project about counter-storytelling, shifting narratives and perspectives, retention among Black students, and working alongside the Black Thriving Initiative, I could not help but think about how incredibly rewarding, but also crippling it is to continually push and create dialogue for Black students to thrive. Black students are thriving already: the very fact they've been accepted into college is a sign of their achievement, endurance, goals, aspiration, and pride. Many students have circumvented adversity or are first-generation—and to have arrived is remarkable on its own.

So, when retention rates are low among Black students at an institution, it speaks to a wider issue about how Blackness is received on that campus and how the world reflects it back. The socio-cultural-economic factors that affect Black students in the world do not suspend themselves upon their entry into the institution.

A shift needs to occur in campus culture, climate, minds, and people—these words may sound separate, but they are constantly in unison, forming, and informing the whole.

Rendering this report, I grappled with the historical weight put onto Black students to procure an environment in which they thrive. Expecting Black students to spearhead campus issues around retention or racism is again, an old name for an old thing. Black students, and many students of color are expected to fix and create spaces for themselves on campuses. Partially, this is out of necessity and survival. If not them, then who? Well—everyone.

The wellness of any campus relies on a concerted effort to prioritize belonging. It has been said that a Black Thriving Initiative sets up a paradigm of an either/or, them and us mentality. That misunderstanding needs to shift, and it needs to shift now with messaging from the campus administrators and faculty. However, this is a tall order. Education is fraught with too much to do and not much time to do it in. And to boot, a constant lack and strain of resources and funding.

Stripping down to the reality and not the ideal is part of the process. What is the required percentage of students “retained” to project that a campus and Black students are “thriving?” Of course, there is a data-driven percentage, but that does not absolve the campus from making changes throughout that last and affect the holistic experience of its student residents now and later. Once Black students choose to attend Cal Poly Pomona, how will their experience of that campus change, get elevated, or distilled into futility? Having a campus that lacks an understanding around the cultural and emotional intelligence of Black students is just another roadblock to their success. Continue to have the hard conversations around race, and microaggressions, but we must honor those conversations in real life and not just from those who have done the work, day in and day out already. During my tenure, I met great and grand

students, but those students will phase out in the next 1 to 5 years and a new crop of students will arrive to uphold the mantle, yet again. The problems will persist if the campus culture, climate, minds, and people have not committed to the initiative beyond 2025, especially if the campus expects its Black alumni to have a stake in the future of the campus and academic life.

The students are not the constant. The campus and its staff, faculty, and administrators are though. Or at least, they should be. The mission, too, is constant. Black students should not be expected to overturn decades-old societal problems in four to five undergraduate years. Furthermore, it is quite unfair that Black students should shoulder that burden. Though their feedback and activism are crucial, the onus is not on Black students to initiate Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) work; they are in college to complete their degrees, learn more about themselves, enjoy some freedom, learn important life skills along the way, and contribute greatly to our society and culture. And by prioritizing those things, they organically collaborate with DEIB efforts and campus activism. If we are expecting Black students to carry on the work of future retention on a campus while impeding their college experience, then they should be compensated properly for their work.

And yet still, I witnessed a crop of students who act out of passion and the necessity to continually uplift their community. *Black students and the select staff and faculty will do the work whether the campus is doing it or not.* The community service and social justice work they are forging should be part of any student experience. But again, to expect Black students to retain the campus and retain themselves, simultaneously, is unjust and systemically racist.

If we are going to combat racism within higher education, and champion Black student success, that success extends beyond the students. Success stories vary widely, and it is paramount that a top-down, down-up, and sideways culture change occur. But how can that occur when we live in a society that performs racism day in and day out? Campuses do not exist outside of the world. But in fact, are a place that students come to feel safe. And for many, that safety is something experienced for the first time.

As we think about the retention and thriving efforts of Black students, it is crucial they are not marginalized as charity cases, by difference, or by being singled out. Retention requires a full understanding around the totality of their being on the campus and its overall relationship to the success of every student on campus, in collaboration and solidarity across ethnic groups.

This report highlights the narratives behind those students who are an inspiration to our future. As a renowned biodiverse campus, it is time that Cal Poly Pomona's human diversity and care stays at the forefront as well.

Onward,

Marcus Anthony Brock

PROJECT SCOPE AND APPROACH

This qualitative summer project surveyed ongoing student success concerns at the Cal Poly Pomona campus as part of the Black Thriving Initiative.

We set out to explore how Black students can receive better support throughout the Cal Poly Pomona community through two signature programs, 1) **Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat** and the inaugural 2) **Black Student Success Retreat: You Are Golden.**, aimed at self-identified Black transfer students. Additionally, during the Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat, we centered a media project that would personify the experiences and conversations with students. Through ongoing relationships and invested Social Justice Leaders (S JL) and Student Representatives, the Dean of Students Office identified and invited a select group of students per program.

Throughout the project, we spoke with many students through programming and meetings both virtually and in-person about their relationship to the campus. Through all facets of the programs, students engaged with their identity and ancestry through “Origin Stories,” as tools for transformation, excellence, and building community within the Cal Poly Pomona community. They were asked to consider how that has propelled them at this stage in their college career and within their life. Their writing and conversations captured raw sentiment and conflict, which is present through the media/portraiture component of the Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat. Through both retreats, we focused on creating a welcoming learning environment through a Harkness-style teaching/discussion approach to seek solutions, inviting students as participants and not just observers. It was critical to give students an intellectual, empathic, and courageous place for learning and community.

EMPOWERMENT & COUNTER-STORYTELLING LEADERSHIP RETREAT

There is great distance between our origin stories and our thriving stories.

On Friday, July 29, the Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat was held on campus to center and discuss cultural retention, student success, campus environment and anti-racism. In collaboration with the Dean of Students Office, 15 students, including Social Justice Leaders and Student Representatives were invited to participate in the retreat. These students were also participants in the CSU Juneteenth Symposium. Out of 15 students invited, 2 students attended. Because we spent extensive time planning how we might capture the day, it took some juggling, but was not difficult to pivot. However, students gave their all throughout the day and the schedule went as planned.

As a theoretical framework, counter-narratives are a useful tool to juxtapose student identity with society's perceptions. And as we learned through many conversations, those wrongful and misnamed perceptions and microaggressions are hindering student success. The day was two-fold, it would include a day-long retreat done in a symposium style filled with opening remarks by the Associate Dean of Students, Student Advocacy/Interim Director of the African American Student Center, two presentations, a 30-minute screening, time for observations, lunch conversations, reading and writing exercises, and final reflections.

During the retreat, we focused on four pillars that drove the presentations, conversations, and cemented the portraits and narratives:

- 1) Origin
- 2) Surviving
- 3) Soaring
- 4) Thriving

At the onset of the retreat, students created personal intentions that would drive them throughout the day. We are consciously not sharing them here, though they were shared among the group, verbally. These intentions were meant to ground them in the 10-hour day, as a deep reminder of their presence for not only attending the retreat but enduring in their social justice work. For this reason, though our attendees were a small group, they were a mighty group.

The Empowerment Retreat held rich conversations that culminated in a narrative and portrait project. To do this, we secured the New York-based photographer, Christian Rodriguez, as a collaborator. Rodriguez's work focuses on issues of immigration, cultural identity, and the Dominican diaspora. Enlisting Rodriguez was an intentional choice after learning about the campus culture prior to the retreats. His work is consistently concerned with the counter-story and has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Grub Street*, and exhibitions at NYCSalt.

Through a series of pre-meetings and campus walk-through with Rodriguez, we decided to focus on the following:

- 1) Ancestors
- 2) Hope
- 3) Dreams & Aspirations
- 4) Utopia
- 5) Reality

For a pre-shoot, we asked the invited students to bring an artifact to display in their portraits. Unfortunately, that portion did not work out as planned, especially because of the low number in attendance and summer planning. However, something great happened anyway. Rodriguez

and I decided they did not need a physical piece to adorn themselves in because they were “adorned” already, however they showed up. The second student, a Social Justice Leader, arrived later in the day, juggling multiple campus obligations, but expressing the importance of showing support for the retreat. The ASI President echoed the same sentiments. We were very proud and fortunate to have such dedication and value added to the program. This true commitment to the work forecasts the palpable energy for change students want to see at their institution—and they too, are stakeholders. So, telling students they were adorned already inspired them to think about what they were wearing or what was inside of them (their spirit and soul) that they could use in their private portrait sessions with Rodriguez. Thus, we captured their stories “in real life” and students participated in a writing exercise about their names and ancestry.

During this meeting, the two students captured were 1) Social Justice Leader, Justyn Fulton, and 2) ASI President, Aliza Ortega, who are featured in the full 31-portrait story alongside Associate Dean of Students, Student Advocacy, Armando Madrid, PhD. This was somewhat of a challenge to create the media project we had originally planned, but as we found our groove as a cohort during the retreat/symposium, the project took its own shape as evidenced in the narratives and portraits. Though a small group, we were able to capture a deep sentiment.

Before the project, we decided it was essential to build rapport with the students before the portraits were taken, thus each moment preceding the portraits created a level of comfort to capture the depth of each student’s story. A hardness and coldness were evoked through the portraits that mirrors the present barriers on campus. There is a ‘coldness’ and ‘hardness’ that exists on the campus and that ‘coldness’ and ‘hardness’ came up in multiple conversations before and after the retreat and in non-solicited conversations by students who voiced concern for the incoming students.

SPECIAL NOTE OF SIGNIFICANCE

On the portrait Contact Sheet, 011 and 017 were included at my personal request to the photographer and not in the original portrait story that Rodriguez sent over, which conveys the harsh reality that was ever-present in all conversations we had in our meetings with students. I asked for additional photos that depicted smile options, solely for the purposes of variety/collateral use by the institution, but if you look closely at the 31 selected portraits, 011 and 017 stray from the impactful narrative captured by Rodriguez.

The portraits are curated to capture hope, while also carrying the deep feelings students have about their relationship to the campus. There was a lot of pain to unpack by those in attendance, but eventually we found the joy. What we did find earlier was that there is undue and unfair pressure on Black students to achieve success while facing systemic oppression and violence in the world, and then again on the campus that they attend.

By the day’s end, students were asked to write down reflections and takeaways. They wrote down these words:

- 1) Activist not 'Actorvist'
- 2) Elevate
- 3) Hurt
- 4) Anger
- 5) Momentum
- 6) Impactful
- 7) Minority —> Majority

These simple conclusions speak volumes. While there was residual hurt, anger, and a sense of being overwhelmed throughout the day, the two student leaders felt propelled with a sense of urgency about their activism on campus and they were willing and ready to meet the challenge of participating in the work to create a better environment.

More importantly, they were ready for the campus to meet them in this charge with the resources and promises to do better, particularly because both students are in their graduating year.

“RICH IN SPIRIT” NARRATIVES AND PORTRAITS

Kendrick Lamar's 2015, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, album cover provides a back story for richness. The artwork and counter-story are a collaboration with Dave Free and photographer, Denis Rouvre. Juxtaposing his friends and family from South Los Angeles in front of the White House infers many things, but Lamar remarks that while his kin are looked down upon, he views them quite differently. To him, they are “rich in spirit.” “Spirit” and “the soul” show up constantly in the scholarship of old and new Black creators, providing entry for students to imagine themselves.

While listening to students and faculty voice their concern during the Black Thriving Initiative planning meeting, just a day before the Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat, there were multiple tones of exhaustion, frustration, anger, and heavy burdens.

Before the Social Justice Leaders sat for their portraits with Rodriguez, they free-wrote their intentions for the day, but later in the day they were asked to think about the prompt:

What does it mean to be rich in spirit?

These selected portraits from the 31 portraits are a culmination of candid conversations and presentations with administrators, faculty, and their private sitting with the photographer. After the retreat, students were asked to send recordings to the prompt as a reflection. These spoken and written narratives follow and accompany.

“RICH IN SPIRIT” NARRATIVES AND PORTRAIT



Photograph by Christian Rodriguez
Aliza Ortega, Class of 2023 – ASI President



Photograph by Christian Rodriguez | Aliza Ortega, Class of 2023 – ASI President

“Being rich in spirit is when you have internal joy, support, family, friends, God—and your heart fills fulfilled.

You may have a shack for a house, but you have your family members there and you feel happy because of the joy that’s inside your heart.”

WORDS BY ALIZA ORTEGA



Photograph by Christian Rodriguez
Justyn Fulton, Class of 2023 – Social Justice Leader

WORDS BY JUSTYN FULTON

To be rich in spirit
To move freely
To be loud
Expression
Loud and proud
I love being Black
That's my richness and my spirit
What kind of spirit do you got?
What kind of power do you got?
I know I got Black Power
I know I get all my strengths from my ancestors
My grandmas, my uncles
All my ancestors, man
That's where my power come from
That's where my richness and my spirit come from
I love being Black
Black Power
I'm not afraid to say that

You see, society got people afraid of saying that they love being black; but everybody else can love being what they want to be. But once I say I love being Black and Black Power—it's a problem. So, that's how I know that I have richness in my spirit if people are afraid of my spirit. They [are] threatened by my spirit. I get my energy from my ancestors. From my Black elders. I love my Black elders. I love the Black youth. I love my Black people. I love my kings, and my queens, and my royalty.

I love them all.

So, richness and spirit for me? It's all about Black Power and unity.



Photograph by Christian Rodriguez
Justyn Fulton, Class of 2023 – Student Justice Leader

“YOUNG, GIFTED, AND BLACK”

It was Lorraine Hansberry who coined the term, “Young, Gifted, and Black” months before she passed away. In 1964, she left the hospital to speak to the winners of a creative writing contest speaking those enduring words:

“I wanted to be able to come to you and speak to you on this occasion because you are young, gifted, and black. In the year 1964, I for one, can think of no more dynamic combination that a person might be.”

(American Masters/PBS, Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart, 2018)

Thus, letting students know that they are Young, Gifted, Black, and Golden is a way to affirm their greatness, their family, and their ancestors. It is Ethnic Studies in practice. Nina Simone writes the record, “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” as an homage to Lorraine Hansberry after her death, then performing it for Black college students to remind them, “your soul’s intact.”

After finishing the first retreat and debriefing, the transfer students would require a different experience and approach. Students often attend college to get even closer to their history, their culture, their desires for changing the world, and ultimately themselves. Students cannot achieve that in a hostile environment where they are fighting for mere survival. If they are fighting for mere survival, how can we expect them to soar or thrive?

BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS RETREAT: YOU ARE GOLDEN.

To be golden is not gilded, but solid throughout. Sturdy. Lasting. Generational.

On August 18, we hosted the inaugural Black Student Success Retreat: You Are Golden. After discussions with senior administrators and students, it was decided that the retreat for the transfer students would focus on **Sense of Belonging**. It was crucial to not pathologize the students, especially incoming students who are not yet aware of campus politics or the campus culture. The Dean of Students Office identified a group of students with 15 spots available for attendance. The retreat was attended by 5 students and 2 senior administrators.

Literature, media, documentary, and brave discussions were engaged to add a supplement to the transfer experience and empower them moving forward. We sent the following invitation to the students:

You Are Golden.: A Day to engage Black Student Success & Belonging at Cal Poly Pomona.

In preparation for embarking on this exciting next stage in your education, The African American Student Center cordially invites you to feel rich in your identity, build community, share stories, laugh boldly, and to shine brightly in this joyous occasion: because you are golden.

The one-day treat began around 8 am, lasting until 5 pm. We began with various references and the Negro National Anthem/"Lift Every Voice and Sing." After meetings with The Centers for Transformation, Retention, Empowerment, and Equity (TREE), we also found it imperative that welcoming transfer students should be momentous and joyous. During the retreat, the students were introduced to discussions, free-writes, media, readings, tools for student success, and dialogue with Social Justice Leaders. Additionally, they were given a tour of the African American Student Center and were able to have a conversation with a senior administrator face-to-face about support options on campus for their student success.

Not surprisingly, as the day carried on, the students fell into the same discussions that had been held during the Empowerment and Counter-Storytelling Leadership Retreat. This revealing moment reinforced the notion and deep awareness that race and class do not occur in a silo without a storied history, but these are thoughts and feelings that Black students continually have in the world, even upon entering new spaces.

DISCUSSION OUTCOMES

During a roundtable discussion, we asked students what are "roadblocks to their success." In no order, they said: 1) Money, 2) Doubt, 3) Fear, 4) Spectacle, and 5) Support.

Money: Students expressed concern over funding, resources, and employment to ensure their success in school. Students also expressed the need to get in and graduate as soon as possible to get a job and alleviate financial strain.

Doubt: Students discussed their own preparedness and/or ability to push through their academics. But, were also aware of their intelligence and ability to endure.

Fear: Like 'Doubt,' students expressed fear over the unknown, or their expectations as Black students entering college, or being on the receiving end of anti-Blackness.

Spectacle: Self-identity in comparison to how Blackness is portrayed in the media, especially with the resurgence of activism, recorded killings, and anti-racism efforts post-2020.

Support: Students want to know they have support in the campus culture through staff, faculty, and their peers.

Regarding 4) **Spectacle**, the students were introduced to W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of **double consciousness**. This led to further discussion about code-switching inside the classroom, on campus, at their places of employment, and/or in public spaces.

When asked what tropes in the media they feel are negatively associated with Blackness, the student attendees remarked the following:

- Black Matriarchs
- ABW (Angry Black Woman)
- Hardship and Struggle
- Drugs

This is not an exhaustive list, but this small sample conveys how poor representation can lead to feelings of 'not belonging.' We need better representation on and off the campus, but this fact is a reminder that Black students, and other underrepresented students have these associations via poor representation before their arrival, which has a great effect on their well-being, sense of self, the microaggressions they experience, and ultimately their student success.

SPECIAL NOTE OF SIGNIFICANCE

During the retreat, the Senior Coordinator of Student Retention, Wendy Córdova, M.A. galvanized and made a special request for Social Justice Leaders to make an appearance at the "You Are Golden." retreat. Without hesitation, they heard that incoming Black students were on campus and took up the invitation. This change in the program schedule added a significant value to engage with upper class peers, creating connections.

POST-RETREAT FEEDBACK SURVEY [SAMPLE]

As you think about shaping the Student Success Retreat for next year, here are sample questions you might consider:

Thank you for participating in the Black Student Success Retreat: "You Are Golden." Wishing you well on your continued journey at Cal Poly Pomona.

With that said, we'd love to hear any feedback you might have about the program as we think about how to engage and improve the experience for incoming transfer students. Your answers are anonymous, but feel free to self-identify if you choose.

Sample Questions:

- 1) What was your overall impression of the program?
- 2) What does Black Student Success mean to you? What does it look like on a college campus?
- 3) What were some key takeaways of value for you during the program?
- 4) What extra-curricular activities are you interested in?
- 5) What were your expectations?
- 6) Additional feedback about your experience?

PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To reach Black students in the classroom, they need a full campus life as well. Or better, a connection to it, especially where commuter campuses are concerned. To reiterate thoughts from the introduction, it is important that anti-racism is not performative. Education remains largely represented by white faculty. Unless Black students are attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), they are much less likely to encounter Black educators, and other educators of color throughout their time in college.

Environmental and pedagogical recommendations for engaging Black Student Success:

- Form strategies and committees for Anti-Racist and Anti-Classist Grading Policies
- Hire, retain, and respect Black faculty on the campus; these faculty members are linked to the success of Black students on campus
- Name and address unspoken racism across ethnic groups and anti-Blackness
- Continue to hire and fund tenure lines for diverse faculty in both Humanities and STEM where possible; Black students should see themselves in any and every version
- Encourage faculty to insert or re-write the anti-racist/bias/inclusivity statement on their syllabus that addresses the ongoing and present concerns of the campus; there are no one-size fits all statements; it should respond to the needs of the modern world and the institution itself
- Involve Ethnic Studies/Black faculty early in the planning process for the Black Student Success Retreat, gauging any interest in guest lectures or promoting courses
- Purchase and distribute a common read for students during the Black Student Success Retreat, in addition to the campus common read
- Assess the relationship among faculty and students, and how to heal the animosity
- Bridge the history of Ethnic Studies with where the world is today
- Continue to build coalitions with Social Justice Leaders, ASI student reps, and the Orientation program

SUMMARY & LIMITATIONS

Both retreats were not well-attended in numbers, especially these being mid-summer and inaugural programs, but we were impressed with the dedication of those who attended and their encouragement for new and old students to keep fighting the good fight.

Moving forward, it will be important to think through the experience of the students and keep this strategic vision moving past 2025, continuing a lasting connection with the campus and the students in a cyclical way that builds a global community.

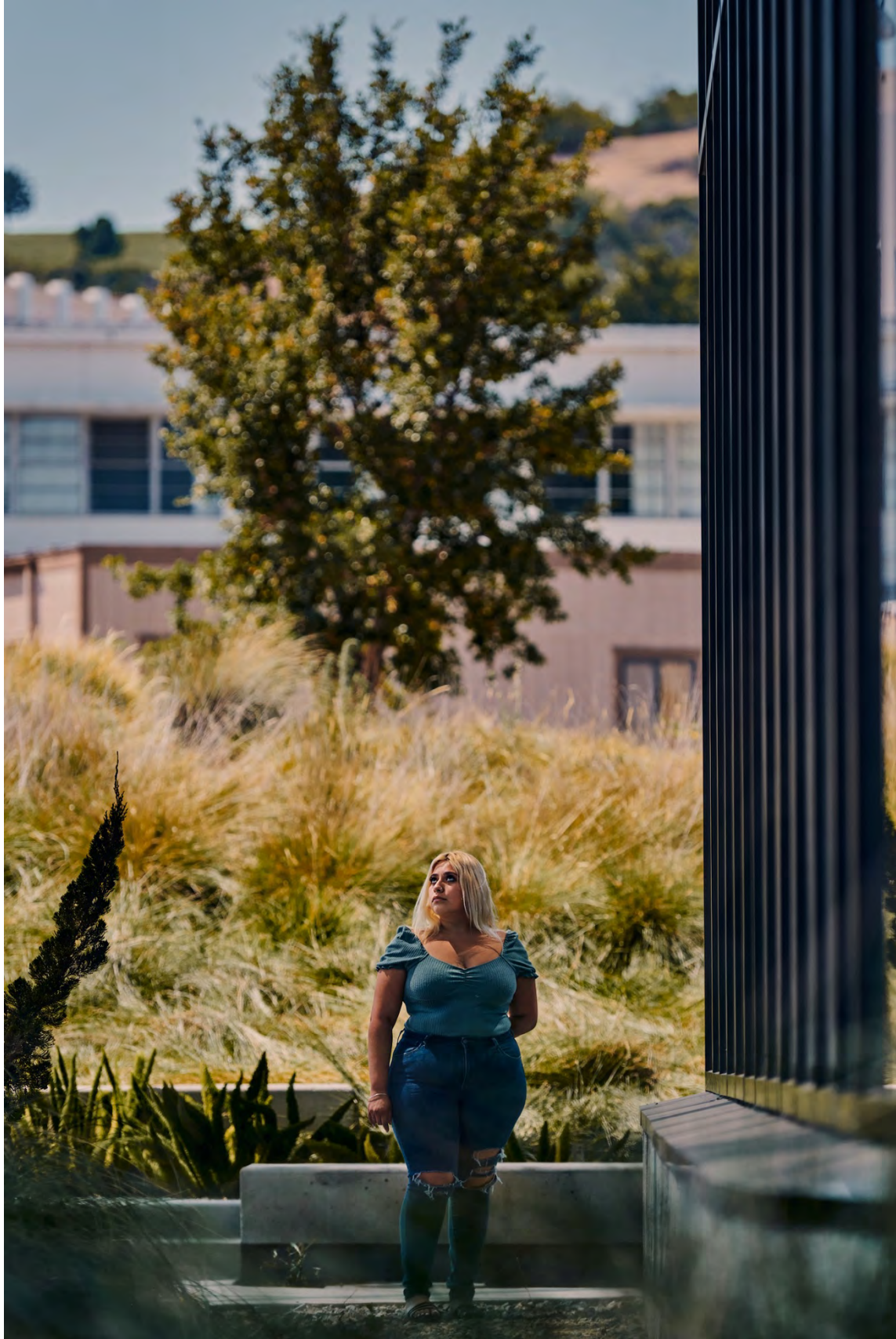
Moving forward, possibly try to photograph students again in the future. During the academic year, it may be more feasible to have students bring in artifacts they could use for a future campus portrait session with the Black Thriving Initiative. Possibly, place these portraits and stories in the African American Student Center as historical record and evidence of not only that data behind the strategic vision, but evidence of lineage. Thus, when future students look at the portraits and the wall of the African American Student Center or flip through a book with narratives in portraits in ten years, this work will endure as a reminder that they were and continue to be “young, gifted, and Black.”

A FINAL THOUGHT: JOY AND JUSTICE

When discussing the history of namesakes and origin stories, Justyn Fulton '23, remarked that his name meant 'Justice.' Aliza Ortega '23, mentioned that her name meant 'Joy.' We were short on people, but we were not short on ideas, energy, and will. How could we be short on anything when joy and justice entered the room?

Joy and Justice showed up; Joy and Justice showed out. They are both the story and the counter-story.

It was immeasurable to work with such remarkable young minds.



Photograph by Christian Rodriguez
Aliza Ortega, Class of 2023 – ASI President

FURTHER READING

"Of our Spiritual Strivings," *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois

"Love as the Practice of Freedom," bell hooks

"The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde

"Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde

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African American Student Center
Cal Poly Pomona Dining
Kellogg West Student Workers
Information Technology

WITH GREAT APPRECIATION

for

Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone
"Young, Gifted, and Black"

Marcus Anthony Brock

Marcus Anthony Brock is an Afrofuturist, college professor, writer, and teacher-scholar from Compton, California who has worked at the cross-sections of education, arts advocacy, media & communications, and social justice more than 20 years. Griot-descended from Laurel, Mississippi—a keeper of things—a Native Son—and a dreamer from Compton, California.

Christian Rodriguez

Christian Rodriguez was born and raised in New York City by immigrants of the Dominican Republic. He spent his childhood traveling between the two islands and cultures. In high school, he attended a four-year after school photographic residency program, NYCSalt. His passion for photography led him to study at the Savannah College of Art and Design. While away from home, he developed an infatuation for his Dominican background. His photographic work focuses on issues of immigration, cultural identity, and the Dominican diaspora. Currently he is working on long-term projects between DR and NYC. He prefers the use of traditional methods such as photographing on light sensitive materials and a more hands-on approach to image making. In 2017, he exhibited with En Foco for their series “The Apartment Gallery Series” as well as selected for The New York Times Portfolio Review.

THE CULTURAL ATTACHÉ

The Cultural Attaché is a platform and social justice effort by Marcus Anthony Brock which seeks to bring forth unity, awareness, and liberation around race, class, and a gender and how we seek to bring change in our knowledge and affirmation of the human condition. A battle not won but earned.