University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Queer BIPOC Placemaking Oral History Project
Interviewee: Khalia Mullin, University of Illinois undergraduate student
Interviewer: Chanelle Davis, MSLIS student
March 28, 2025
Method: In person
Length: 47:04

Chanelle Davis: (background voices) Okay, so today is Friday, March, 28, 2025. Um, and we are at the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center in Champaign, Illinois, at the University of Illinois. This is Chanelle Davis with

Khalia Mullin: Khalia Mullin.

CD: And this oral history interview is about place-making and community building at the University of Illinois. So Khalia, I'd like to just kind of start off by asking how, specifically, you identify as a member of the queer community and as a person of color.

KM: Yes, I am just queer and pansexual. Those are my two labels that I go by, pansexual for my sexuality, obviously, but I like to just say that I'm queer.

CD: And how about as a person of color?

KM: I honestly just think of myself as a revolutionary queer person, usually. Um, I think Blackness is inherently queer, so, I usually just go under the label of queer.

CD: Gotcha, thank you. Um, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (background noise)

KM: Yes (laughs), um, I am, like I said, a revolutionary queer, Black person, and I have a very hard politic when it comes to just humanity. I have a lot of, I guess, um. I have a lot of— dang what is the word (laughs)? I have a lot of interest, I'll say, in just helping the world to be a better place and having people, like, actually have fulfilling lives in whatever way I can, you know, help out in that way. And also just making myself (laughs) have a fulfilling life and putting myself in that position to, you know, put all the steps in place that I need to do on a day-to-day basis. Like, I really just take everything day by day. Um, I'm very interested in things like dancing and music. I love music. I love Black culture, in general. Every form of dance is, like, something that I hope to, you know, have a foot in at some point in time. I love art. I'm an art admirer? Admirer. I love art. I love consuming art. And I'm also a person who hopes to, like, you know, create more art as well. Um, yeah. It's hard to define myself right now just because I feel so trapped in, like, the college mindset of trying to just get out of here. But I also have no

career lined up right now, either (laughs). I'm figuring it out along the way, really. And, yeah, and that's, that's me, I guess.

CD: Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. I'll definitely ask some follow up questions about some of the things you shared. Um, could you talk a little bit more about your role as a member of, like, the campus community, maybe where you are, um, in your experience as, like, a student?

KM: Kind of going hand in hand with the last question as well, I feel that I am very, like, friendship and community oriented, always. My friends, like, reflect me and, like, I am also a reflection of my friends. So I've been very big on community building here on campus, and a lot of that has blossomed into, like, wonderful friendships that have impacted me in really great ways. Um, I am a part of a student organization, but it's also just an open organization for people in the C-U [Champaign-Urbana] area, here on campus called Black Students for Revolution. And there are a lot of people in there who are just very focused on, again, like, ensuring that Black people can live a fulfilling life and get the things that they need when, you know, we can actually help out there.

But my role, I guess, in campus and the campus community, is probably just, like, educating because I have access to a lot of information when it comes from, like, my community, or when it comes from even the courses that I take because I'm a political science and African American studies major as well. So really, just, like, sharing what I know with people, and also just always— I'm always trying to learn and always trying to understand everything a lot better so that I can translate that for other people, usually.

CD: That's awesome. So you mentioned being a political science and Afro-American studies major. Um, can you talk a little bit more about your experiences in those majors, and, sort of, starting from when you first arrived on campus because you're an undergraduate student, correct?

KM: Um-hm.

CD: Okay, yeah. So please share more about that.

KM: Yeah. So I initially decided to go into political science, um, when I came here because I think I was under a very similar notion that a lot of people have that, like, African American studies isn't really worth, like, your time. It's not really going to give you any type of career or anything, which is completely incorrect. And I realize that now, of course, but I came in initially as a political science major, and of course, poli sci [political science] here is very, like, I guess, majorly white. And there are a lot of people of color in there as well, but people are there for different reasons, usually, and you come to, like, find out and understand a little bit better after, like, all of these discussions, and after, like, reading people's essays and, like, what people are interested in and stuff. And I was very interested in political science because I wanted to understand, like, the world systems a little better because, like, it's

all messed up to me in my mind, but I wanted to make sense of it in, like, a curriculum format, and I got that, for sure. I'm very happy that I majored in political science because I understand the workings of a lot of things now. Everything's very backwards to me, but I can at least pinpoint and, like, understand right now. Um, my experience there, it, you know, the academics, it didn't really give you, like, the insight that you may want as a Black student. It didn't really touch upon, like, Black people a lot. It didn't touch upon, like, the impacts of the systems a lot. It just teaches you what the system is, like, the World Trade Organization, or, like, all of these things that are very big, but they just don't hit the points that they need to, basically. And I realized that my, like, freshman year as soon as I got here because I was like, Oh my God. Like, we're talking about Third World countries, and, like, Africa had, like, one week of study in the entire semester. And it's like, this makes no sense, like— like, the entire African continent had one week (laughs) of study, and that's insane to me.

So, I started minoring in African American studies, um, my second semester freshman year, and I loved it so much. I started out, like, in 200-levels, so I, like, completely surpassed the 100-level, and I had to do that later, but it was just, like, so insightful. I started studying, like, Black feminisms and (sigh), and I took, um, a GWS [Gender and Women's Studies] course, and it taught me even more about Black people as well, which I wasn't expecting. So I initially— or I eventually decided to start majoring in African American studies at the end of my sophomore year here. And I just changed it to a major, and it was actually very easy to complete my two majors because some of the classes would overlap, like Pan-Africanism, and that was a wonderful class as well. Um, all of the courses I took were just, like, very eye-opening and relatable as well to where, like, I could see the curriculum in my life, like, daily. And, like, the things that I go through daily. And I could also, like, talk about that in those— some of those classes with, like, you know, smaller students— or smaller student bodies. But in one of my, like, feminisms class, it was literally, like, I don't even know, like 10 Black girls, like, the entire semester, so we just had a wonderful time together. And I was like, I need to just major in this because, like, this is what matters to me. So, yeah.

CD: That's awesome. It sounds like maybe some of your expectations weren't met in the political science department when you first arrived. Can you talk a little bit more about your overall expectations of what your experience might be coming to the University of Illinois itself, before you decided to come here?

KM: Yes, um, I expected the U of I to be, like, a very inclusive space. And not just, like, inclusive, but like— like, I did expect it to be more Black people here. I expected it to be more of me, like, walking around, basically. I also grew up in a predominantly white area, like, for 11 years of my life before coming here. So, I was already used to the, like, PWI [predominantly white institution] setting and, like, I mean, I just got an even bigger taste of that, (laughs) I guess. But, um, I'm glad I found people that I could, you know, deviate from all of this from. But I expected the political science department to be more diverse, um, the curriculum to be more inclusive, and actually, like, legit (laughs). It is legit as, like, a foundational understanding of political science, but, um, I expected it to be maybe a little bit less,

like, bipartisan, is what I would say. Um, I expected there to be, like, more faculty that, like, actually was Black in political science because, I mean, it's political science, you know.

Yeah, I also expected a lot of, like, a lot more spaces for people like me to, like, you know, just go to and, like, more events, and I expected a lot, actually (laughs). Um, and I think, like, I also was kind of fed that understanding or delusion my freshman year coming here, because, like, I, um— I came here, and as soon as I got on campus, I went to the, like, BNAACC [Bruce Nesbitt African American Cultural Center] Circuit Program, which is a program that, like, just initiates Black students into the campus, like, culture, really. But it's for, like, Black students, and, um, it's very— it's just, like, informational, basically, and fun because you meet people. And I was like, Oh yeah, like, I'm under the gaze of, like, this is going to be great. I have all my people here, and it wasn't like that. And I also came to understand that there are a lot of, like, divisions within the Black community itself. I already knew that, but it was, like, in my face at school, and I'd never had that because I wasn't around too many Black people in school. So, yeah. I guess I had (laughs)— I had a lot of expectations, and now I'm about to leave, so.

CD: I'd love to hear more about your experience prior to coming to the University. You mentioned being somewhat familiar with being in environments that were predominantly white during, I'm assuming, maybe school age when you were in school. Can you talk a little bit more about growing up in that environment?

KM: Yeah. So I was born in Chicago, and I lived in Chicago until I was age seven, and then at age seven I moved, which was, like, in the middle of third grade, I think. Yeah, in the middle of third grade, I moved to a town called Wheaton, Illinois, (laughs) if you know where that is, it's a neighbor to Naperville. And Wheaton is just a very predominantly white area, um, very Christian, very, like, I would say conservative but liberal. Um, I (laughs)— I from age seven to, like, the end of high school, I went through that institution, so I already knew what being around all white people would be like. It was honestly, like, a culture shock at the beginning of, like, my time there just because, like, I was a kid, I didn't really understand anything. And also, like, people behave certain type of ways, or like, you're just othered, like, at a very young age. So it's like, okay, like, I understand what's happening here, but also, like, I have to make a place here because I'm here for, like, my entire childhood, basically. So I ended up, like, having good friends around me who, you know, I'm thinking more in, like, high school now, but even then, like, I still have a friend from third grade who goes here, and I'm seeing her next week, so we're still great friends. And she's white, and she's also queer, and I think that's— her queerness has also, like, kind of drawn, like, a good bridge for me and her to maintain a good relationship like that.

But schooling in predominantly white institutions in middle school and high school was not the easiest time. I also grew up, like, lower class, like, pretty— like, we didn't have, like, money to spare, um, but we were in an area where money was, like, just frivolously, like, thrown around. And, you know, sports cost, and, like, everything cost, but I wanted to do everything, and I wanted to keep up with everyone that I was around. And I did track and volleyball with people, so I grew some friendships there, even

though my mom could barely even pay for those, like, I still, like— she still made a way to do that for me because she knew that that was so important in, like, the— like, building camaraderie, I guess. And yeah, like, it was— honestly, I think I just tied a lot of my race to, like, class as well there because that was, like— not only was it, like— well, it was just a major culture shock, like, racially, class-ly. Um, all these things that, like, really is, like, the foundation of, like, me as a person were kind of challenged there, and I kind of had to navigate that a little differently, and it was very difficult. I had my own, like, inside world that I usually would just retreat to when I could, you know. Um, because, like, any Black person who's around white people, like in— like, a very enclosed setting, like, you understand that they have to have, like, their own consciousness, like, going behind all of these things, whether, like, you're included, or whether you're, like, anti-social, like, either way.

But I made it a point to be very, like, involved in school. I was also on my school's African American advisory, and I became, like, one of the co-presidents by my junior year, and it was like— like, that was a great space for me as well because there were other Black students in my school, in high school, so I got to talk to them. And, you know, George Floyd and Black Lives Matter happened, and I had, like, a community to go back to and actually talk about things like that, you know, kind of dissect the reality that I was living in that kind of spoke to a lot of, like, Black Lives Matter and just like— just, like, human rights and, like, being Black in general. Like, um, I had my own space to do that, thankfully, in high school, especially when, like, you know, the social climate was kind of crazy. Yeah.

CD: It sounds like you were able to find some pockets at certain points, whether it was in sports or, like, student committees, um, to be amongst people, um, who felt like community but still faced some challenges, definitely regarding your identities and how you were maybe able to show up. How do you feel like your identities were perceived at home by your loved ones, in reference, I guess, to your queerness?

KM: Real. Um, specifically, to speak to my queerness, I think I kind of didn't really understand what, like, queerness was at that time, like, when I was at home with, like, my family. I know that I (laughs), for the longest time, I was, like, the biggest ally. Like, rainbows everywhere, biggest, like, what's it called? Like, most consistent, like, Pride Parade goer and, like, all these things, um, that I didn't really understand because I didn't have too much, like, queerness around me. Like, it was just so white and, like, heterosexual as well, especially doing sports. Like, I didn't even have time to really think about a lot of things outside of, like, my Blackness. Like, I was constantly thinking about that and constantly aware of that, but I think my queerness kind of took the back seat when, like, I was growing up in this area, um, because I was always, like, worried about something else. Or, you know, I would tell myself, like, Okay, well, like, I'm probably, you know, interested in women, but that's going to have to wait (laughs) until the time comes, I guess.

Um, and that was really sad, but I think also, like, my family did have a role in, um, I guess, that suppression as well because my family's not very, um— I wouldn't say they're not accepting. They're

accepting now that I have, like, come out and things like that, but of course, it's still a little murky, and I know a lot of queer people experience stuff like that. My family can just, um, maybe say more insensitive things, and at the time, I didn't understand that I was queer, but it would always be like, um— it would always make me uncomfortable. I— once my stepmom (laughs), my stepmom once said that, like, bisexual people are nasty (laughs), and they are, like, opportunists. And I was like, I don't know what to say to that because I think I might be bisexual (laughs). So this is kind of awkward, but, um, in times like that, it's just, like, Okay, well, like, I just know not to say anything or not to, like, even pursue that right now because, you know, I'm under your wing and all of these things. But they have become, like, much better (laughs). Like, much, much better.

Of course, I think there's a lot of just homophobia in the Black community in general, and that's for a number of reasons. And of course, I study African American studies, so I have my own theories about that, but— and other people's theories about that, but it was just, like, I don't know. It wasn't always on my mind until something was said or, um— or I really had to, like, sit with myself for a second. And I was just like, You know, I'll worry about that when I'm, like, you know, on my own and doing my own thing. So, yeah.

CD: Thank you so much for sharing that. I know it's not always easy to talk about moments when you're around people, or especially loved ones, and you maybe don't feel like you can be fully seen. Um, I am happy to hear that it sounds like they have— you all have come a long way with your relationship with regard to your identities. Although you mentioned that during maybe, like, middle school and high school, you kind of felt like that aspect of your queerness kind of had to take a back seat until maybe you got into a different space, was there a specific moment when you were growing up where the initial thought of, oh, I might actually like girls kind of popped into your mind? Or had it kind of always been there, or was there, like, a specific moment that it became clear to you?

KM: Um, I think I'm more of a, like, retroactive, like, thinker more so than then because I really just didn't even understand queerness. I didn't understand that, like, people actually liked the same gender, like, I (laughs)— which is crazy because, like, you know people are gay. Like, I knew people are gay, but it was so, like, foreign and far from me that I was just, like, is that really a thing? Like, I don't know what that really is, but retroactively, when I think about, like, my life in general, I'm like, Okay, yeah (laughs). Um, I understand now a lot of these things, and I have to look back on a lot of stuff, and I'm like, yeah. Like, that makes a lot of sense. Also— well, never mind (laughs).

CD: Got you. All that is very helpful context, I think, for the rest of the conversation. So I appreciate you sharing that. I kind of want to jump back to, um, your time at the University of Illinois now, if that's okay, and learn more about the factors that kind of led you here. Like, how did you decide to come here?

KM: Um (laughs), I actually really wanted to go to Colorado State University. I was interested in Colorado State University and Syracuse University in New York. Um, I applied to those schools, and I applied to a couple of other schools, and I got into, like, a couple, but I was rejected to most of the schools that I applied to. Um, the ones that I got into, like, Michigan State [University], I believe. Um, I don't even know, like, Indiana University, I believe. Just random schools, but I wasn't really interested in going to those schools. I really just wanted to go to either Colorado State or Syracuse. I realized that Colorado State was kind of too far for, like, my own, like want, because I want to be around my family and as close as I can be. I'm also not, like, an independent person yet in my life, so I rely on my family a lot. And I couldn't move, I couldn't make that move. Syracuse, I also couldn't make that move because I realized that was very far, too. And, um, I applied to, you know, the other Midwest schools, and I got into Michigan State. I think I got into Indiana. But my mom, like, really urged me to apply to U of I. I was like, Ugh, like, why (laughs)? I don't want to go there. Like, everybody from my school's going to go there. I had, like, 30 something kids from my—just from my class, like, come here. So that's, like, 30 other from every other class I knew. Um, and I was like, I don't want to go there. Like, everybody's going there. I don't even want to see these people anymore. Like, I need a new life. I need to go somewhere, like, nice and just different. Because I think I knew that I needed, like, to really come into myself fully, especially, like, literally as a queer person. Like, I knew that I needed that, and I wasn't expecting to get that here I don't think, like. So I applied here, and then once every, like, financial aid package and, like, came back and stuff, it was, like, clear that U of I was going to give me the best, um— the most money. And I was like, I might have to go here (laughs), and I had to go here. So I ended up coming to U of I, and I'm very happy I did, like, I love all the people I met and stuff, but that was really my route of coming here. It wasn't like a full-on choice (laughs). I didn't have a choice, yeah.

CD: That makes a lot of sense. I think a lot of people, obviously, the financial aspect plays a big factor in, you know, where people feel like they can go and live comfortably. Um, so very real decision it sounds like you had to make. I— so what year was that when you first got to campus?

KM: 2021.

CD: Wow. So (Khalia laughs) like, still in the midst of the early stages of the pandemic.

KM: Yeah.

CD: Can you speak to that a little bit?

KM: I can. Um (laughs), getting here, I— so I was actually initially supposed to dorm in Weston Hall. That was my roommate and I's decision, and then I actually submitted the form too late, so they threw us in Allen Hall, um, because I guess, like, the remaining people will just go into Allen Hall or like these random dorms. And I went to Allen Hall, and it was just a bunch of queer people, and that was the best thing that could have happened to me, actually (laughs). So I'm glad I submitted it late. But going there,

you have queer people. So you have people who are conscious of a lot of things. And when it comes to the pandemic, like, you have people that are masked everywhere, like, that are coming. And I know that that's just not the case in, like, say, the 6Pac, or these other places where people are, you know, just living their lives, I guess, in their own bubbles. And Allen Hall was, like, you have people who are disabled, you have gay people, you have, like, Black people, you have all types of people— musicians, artists, all the above. So, yeah. So there was a lot of consciousness when it came to, like, just protecting your community in general and also building community. They had a lot of, like, you know, programming for stuff like that.

And it was kind of interesting because even, like, outside of that little dorm hall, although that was— people were very, like, attentive to that. I think I was very attentive to, like, you know, protecting myself and protecting the people around me because I, like, I don't know. I knew that COVID, like, it was going to be what it is today, you know, like it's, um. And we saw, like, we were all, like, updated on the numbers, like we knew everything. We had, like, even, like, testing centers, like, right next to us, and I would test all of the time because I also went out a lot, and (laughs) even at some of those, like, frat parties or something, like, I put on a face mask. Like, it was like— and people would make fun of me because it's like, what are you doing? Like, we're literally in a frat basement, but I'm like, I don't know, like, I'm not trying to get COVID, I'm not trying to spread it or anything, so.

But stuff like that, like, in classes, we— I don't even think they had, like, too many protocols for, like, space either because I remember being in a very big, like, auditorium hall for one of my classes, and there were like 200 people in the class, and we're all, like, back to back, like, basically. Like, I don't think the school necessarily cared too much. And I also think a lot of people intentionally would not, like, test for COVID so that they wouldn't know that they were positive even if they were positive, you know what I mean? Or even if they were infected or anything. So it was kind of just like— it was very unbalanced. It was very all over the place. Like, couldn't really maintain a lot of stuff, but I definitely got COVID, like twice my freshman year, and I don't think I've had it since (laughs). So it was really like a freshman year, like, you're in proximity to so many people, and the University doesn't really have too many protocols. Of course, they have, like, decent resources to, like, go get tested and stuff. But it was kind of like, I would say, like a phase, I guess, like a phase because it's like, maybe we shouldn't have so many events, or maybe, like, a lot of stuff shouldn't be happening, or, you know, classes should have protocols and all of these things. But building, like, relationships was good too because I could just stay in the dorm, and I liked the people in my dorm, so it was all— it was, I don't know. It was good for me. I know it's not (laughs)— it wasn't great for everyone, and I also know a lot of people who had very difficult times at, like, building community or making friends because of COVID, especially the year before me. So I'm glad that I kind of came at the, like, tail end of when everyone was, you know, riled up by this.

CD: That's amazing that it seems like there was really a culture of care and just a really diverse group of students at Allen Hall. Is it designed to be that way, or did it—was it just kind of serendipitous?

KM: (laughs) No, Allen Hall is definitely designed for, like, queer creatives, basically.

CD: Wow.
KM: Yeah, and I did not know that (laughs) until I got there, actually. Um, they have all of these, like, amazing programming, like, spot on programming. They have, like, open mics. They have all these, like, zine making, joy making, like, whatever you— community building, art printing. Like, they had everything. Ceramic studio, I'm just listing (laughs) everything. But, um, like, it was a space that people intentionally signed up to be in as, like, queer students because they knew, like, where they wanted to be, but I kind of just got thrown there. So I wasn't expecting all of that. And like, my entire world was, like, completely shifted

CD: Like a pleasant surprise.

KM: Yeah, it was wonderful. So yeah, it's made to be that way.

CD: That's great. Were there other spaces on campus where you felt, like, a similar vibe of community or just kind of felt really affirmed in the space?

KM: Um (laughs), I would say the closest second to that is definitely BNAACC, the Black Cultural Center here. It's like— I think it's just great to see that there are, like, so many other Black students. And when I was here, when the house had, like, you know, free money to kind of, like, spend on different programming, like the barbecues. That was, like, top-tier because, like, I'm doing line dances with Black people. Like, I didn't think I was going to be doing all of that, like, after seeing how little of us there were, but this was a space for people to, like, just come at these different times. Um, and they have, like, the faculty or, like, the admin, like, barbecuing on the grill. And then you have, like, all the Greeks, like, coming out, and they're, like, stepping with each other (laughs). Like, it's just, like, a good atmosphere when it's a good atmosphere. Um, a lot of the time, I think the Cultural Center [BNAACC] can be also just, like— just a reflection of the, like, broader Black community that can have, like, some type of exclusionary, like, practices as well. So I wouldn't say it was like the most, like, welcoming and affirming space, but it was affirming in a way that I, like, have not received in another space, like, pertaining to my Blackness specifically. So that was wonderful, and I met a lot of people through that, and also circuit, like, my freshman year, that also kind of goes hand in hand. Yeah, those— so, yes. It's a close second, yeah.

CD: When you were talking about Allen Hall, you talked about how not only were there people who kind of shared similarities with you, there was, like, affirming programming, and it sounds

like some similar programming at BNAACC. I'm curious to know: one, what does community- or place-making feel like to you, and, I guess, the same question is, like, what does it mean to you? I'm really curious to know, how does it feel, and then also, actively, what does it mean? Like, how are you practicing it?

KM: Yeah, so I, hm. I would say place-making, for me, is just making a space or being in a space with people, um— not necessarily a physical space, but, like, an energy space, you know, where I can be my most authentic self, like, without having to put on a mask, without having (laughs)— without just having to, you know, change myself for other people's perceptions of me. And I think place-making is so difficult, and, like, finding a sense of belonging is, like, has always been really difficult for me, but because I have other, like, queer Black people that I know and that I've, like, built wonderful friendships with on the basis of, like, politics to be honest. And they're all (laughs)— not all of my org, but the people who I'm, like, closest to are all queer as well. So we have those, like, intense conversations. We have those, like, same experiences or the same outlooks on, like, certain things when it comes to even, you know, homophobia within our own community.

And, um, place-making, to me, it like— it means a lot to me, and I feel like it's a constant thing that you constantly have to work at because, like, if you're not doing your own internal reflection, and if you're not doing your own, like, unlearning a lot of things to actually fully accept yourself, then it can be really hard to, like, have those spaces. But it's also very affirming when you have people who are going through the same thing, and, you know, they also have to unlearn things, and they also have to, you know, reflect on things. And we can do that together and being honest about those things, and, you know, speaking up when things may, you know, be a little, you know— just entering conflict in, like, considerate and compassionate way, always. Like, that has been the basis of all of my friendships, really, and it has helped a lot. And that means, like— that means literally the world to me because, like, I guess, like, I was saying, like, from my childhood, like, I didn't have that space, or I didn't have those people to, like, lean on, or to talk to, or to really get me, or to really even open up to. So now that I have that, it literally means the world, and I was just talking to one of my friends, like—I'm like, I don't say this ever, and I always think of my friendships as, like, a fleeting, like, experience or like a fleeting connection, like. But like, I need to be friends with you, like, forever, like (laughs). Like, that's literally it. That's how it works. And that only happens when you're, like, consistent, and you know, you actually have to work on yourself to be better in those relationships.

So, like, the same way that people talk about, like, romantic relationships and stuff, like, I carry that into community making and, like, making space and time for people that I care about because, like, I want to make sure that you're doing okay. I want you to be great, and I want you to, like, enjoy and experience everything you want to experience. And I also want to, like, see you do all of that. Like, I want—like, I'm invested in the people around me. And I also just know that I am, like, very friendship-oriented, like, to a crazy degree, actually. Like, when I say that I'm a reflection of my friends or my friends are a

reflection of me, like, genuinely. Like, we are the people that we are around. And, like, tiny bits of people, like, that always, like, imprints you, basically.

So, I don't know. I think place-making is very difficult, and it's a constant thing that you have to work at, and it changes wherever you go, really, because I'm thinking about, I'm graduating soon, and I'm going to be back in Chicago. And I know I really want to find, like, the Black queer scene there as well, but, you know, that's (laughs)—there's a lot going on there. Um, but I'm excited to do it because, like, I've done it here, and I've been able to actually, like, maintain these relationships that I have and, yeah. Yeah, that's what it means to me—place-making (laughs).

CD: That's beautiful. It's beautiful to hear you talk about how committed you are to your friends and your friendships. I just have two more questions. One is, have there been any barriers or challenges to making or sustaining those connections since you've been here at the University of Illinois?

KM: Yes, specifically, with non-Black queer people that I have grown friendships with. I think, hm—and that's the thing, like, that's not to say that every Black queer person is for me (laughs) or, like, we can, you know, have friendships there or anything. But I find it just a lot easier because there are less barriers within those relationships. Whiteness just—like, it can kind of preclude, like, any type of queerness that anyone, like, has or, like, expresses or whatever because, like, at the end of the day, they are still white. So politics has been kind of a thing that I've had to balance and interrogate a little (laughs).

And also just understanding that, like—understanding, like, friendship in general, but like, you know, some people, like, take priority over others, and there is a hierarchy when it comes to, like, the people that are in your life. And it doesn't need to be, like, emphasized, or it doesn't need to be a big thing. It's just, like, inside of me. Like, I know who I want to spend my time with, and I know who affirms me and makes me feel good and I can be authentic around. So those barriers are usually just politics. The way that people, like, navigate even being, you know, even being affiliated with other people, or even the way that, like, people talk about certain things that are going on in the world today, like, that matters to me. And I realized, like, a lot of people use, like, the queer label, but like, their politic isn't really, like, centered on actually, like, being queer. And that has maybe been one of the biggest barriers. I think you just have to—you really just have to go with it and see and critique whatever you feel like needs to be critiqued because, like, some things are just different, and some people think differently, and people have different lives and understandings, so.

Yeah, I think having conversations about that has also been very helpful for me because I still have these relationships in my life, but it's just to a certain degree that doesn't, like, harm me or doesn't, like, hurt me in the process, but I always feel comfortable bringing things up. So, I mean I do not always feel

(laughs) comfortable bringing things up, but I know that I have to to, like, sustain any friendship, or also like just to, like, talk to people and understand a little bit better, but yeah.

CD: I hear you. Uncomfortable conversations can be uncomfortable (Khalia laughs), or like, when we think about conflict, for sure, but I think it is necessary, as you were talking about, to have, like, healthy relationships. Um, and it sounds like you've leaned into that, yeah, which I'm sure has helped. My last question is, what would you like to see at the University of Illinois that you feel would make community building more possible or feasible for queer people of color?

KM: Hm. I—I do think that, um—we know the foundation of the University of Illinois. Um, we know that we are on Indigenous land, and, you know, we have our land statement. I don't know what it is, but we are on Indigenous land. We (laughs), like—we know what this institution is, like, a part of in the nation, in general. So, I think knowing all of this, like, really bad, terrible history that has created the University of Illinois and is still very, like, very much within the institution as well. It's definitely—It's definitely crucial that, like, people are given the space to, like, vocalize these things. And also, like, just for marginalized people to know that their concerns are being heard from the University admin, I guess. Or, like, I don't know the other people that are involved in those things, but like, administration and faculty and departments and stuff like that.

Like, it's like, the students have things to say, always, to like—literally everywhere you go, like, a student has something to say about the university, whether it's good or whether it's critical, whatever it may be. And I think just having the—having the, like, safety and knowing that you can, you know, express those things and just be open about how you feel about the University or the world, whatever it may be. Like, this just should be a space for students to, like, exist and to be true to themselves because, like, that's literally what the whole college experience is about.

And I realized that I am, like, more political, and I know a lot of people are very political on this campus. Um, and I think just paying attention to, like—paying attention to, like, the people that this University is supposed to be, like, working for, basically, instead of just being like, a part of, you know, the machine. Or being like, you know, just—it's an institution, so we know. But even curriculum, like, it—there's a lot. Like (laughs), there's curriculum, there's faculty, there's departments, structures. There's like, pay, there's graduate students who have things to say. There's like—it's everywhere, you know. So why wouldn't the University that, you know, harbors all of these people and is supposed to, you know, be enriching the lives of these people. Like, why not listen? That's how I feel.

CD: Well, thank you so much for sharing about your experiences. I'm going to end the recording now.

END OF INTERVIEW.