

STATE OF THE ART

RACING THROUGH THE HALLS OF CONGRESS

The “Black Nod” as an Adaptive Strategy for Surviving in a Raced Institution

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Abstract

Although there is an impressive body of research on the U.S. Congress, there has been limited discussion about the central role race plays in the organization of this political institution. While some scholars have documented Congress’ racist past, less is known about the present significance of race in the federal legislature. Throughout the day, African Americans routinely *nod* to one another in the halls of the Capitol, and consider the Black nod as a common cultural gesture. However, data from over sixty in-depth interviews suggest there is an additional layer of meaning to the Black nod in Congress. From the microlevel encounters, I observed and examined, I interpret the nod as more than a gesture that occurs in a matter of seconds between colleagues or even among perfect strangers in the halls of Congress. The Black nod encompasses and is shaped by labor organized along racial lines, a history of racial subordination, and powerful perceptions of race in the post-Civil-Rights era on the meso-, and macrolevels. Using this interpretive foundation, this article will show how the nod is an adaptive strategy of Black staffers that renders them visible in an environment where they feel socially invisible. The nod becomes an external expression of their racialized professional identity. I argue that the congressional workplace is a raced political institution and that the microlevel encounters I observed delineate and reproduce its racial boundaries. This article represents perhaps the first sociological study of Congress and provides an unprecedented view into its inner workings and the social dimensions that organize workplace relationships.

Keywords: Adaptive Strategy, Black Nod, Boundary Work, Congress, Cultural Repertoires, Raced Political Institution, Recognition, Social Invisibility

I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (2010, p. 3)

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INTRODUCTION

On December 11, 2014, hundreds of Black congressional employees descended the steps of the Capitol and stood with their hands up in a powerful show of solidarity with nationwide protests for reform in the criminal justice system (Mak 2014). As elite professionals who serve members of Congress, their calls for attention to the deaths of unarmed Black men and women by police officers were particularly significant. Although the news media widely covered the protest, reporters ignored the presence of dramatic inequality in the Capitol itself. In this article, I investigate how race unfolds in the day-to-day work experiences of Black congressional employees.¹ Specifically, I analyze the cultural rituals and routine practices of African American employees to provide an alternative view of how power is distributed and linked to race in Congress. This intimate view of the congressional workplace not only highlights how race is an organizing force within it, but also reveals how race structures the community of African American employees. Drawing on several months of fieldwork, I open with an excerpt from my field notes during my time as a legislative intern working in the U.S. House of Representatives.

June 14, 2011

Just after 9:30 AM, I leave my office and head downstairs to grab a quick bite from the Rayburn cafeteria, one of three dining facilities in the House of Representatives office buildings. Members and staff frequent the popular café for its expansive menu that changes daily, while lobbyists often use the dining area throughout the day as a site to prepare for their upcoming meetings. This morning, I notice as I pass through one of three checkout lanes that the room is almost empty. Only a few individuals are sitting in the dining area. As I walk along the external perimeter of the lunchroom, I see a tall brown-skinned man walking toward me. The gentleman, who appears to be in his 30s and is casually dressed in slacks and a long-sleeved button-down shirt, lowers his head, and nods to me. I reciprocate the nod. I continue walking and turn left into the North Hallway to take an elevator from the basement level to the third floor.

An older African American service employee wearing navy sweatpants and a powder blue polo shirt is also waiting at the elevator. The man, who appears to be in his 50s with salt-and-pepper hair and scruff on his face, nods to me and says, “How you doin?” I warmly nod and respond, “I’m good. How are you?”

Seconds later, a dark-skinned African American man passes us from behind and quickly nods to me as our eyes meet in the vast marble hallway. A senior African American congressman from the Midwest approaches the elevator lobby where we are waiting. Languidly walking with a hunch in his back, the congressman crosses our path, nodding and saying hello to the service employee and me as he goes to push the elevator button. The elevator arrives and the door opens. Three staffers are on the elevator, two Black women and one White man. The service employee enters first, and then I follow. The Black women nod to me as I enter the elevator, and I nod back. The elevator door closes. I extend my hand to hold open the silver metal doors for the congressman, who ends a short conversation with the young Black man who had greeted him in the hallway.

The women say hello to the congressman. “Everybody all right?” says the senior representative. A mixture of yeses and okays fill the elevator. The White staffer exits on the first floor. There seems to be an awkward moment, as it appears he does not know what to say to the congressman as he exits. The congressman exits at the second floor. The staffers say “bye” to the congressman. The elevator

arrives at the third floor. The service employee says, “Y’all have a good day now,” as he and I exit the elevator.

Within those three minutes going from the cafeteria to my office, I exchanged nods with five congressional Black employees and one Black member of Congress. Although it is rare to see so many Black employees and so few White employees within such a short time span, the exchange amongst Black employees reflects the many informal interactions I had with them while working and conducting research in Congress.

Scholars have studied the “Black nod” and similar informal greetings exchanged among African Americans (Anderson 1999, 2011; Dyson 2001; Robinson 2010). Michael Eric Dyson (2001) argues that the nod is a gesture of recognition among Black men and writes, “The point, after all, is to unify Black men across barriers of cash, color, or culture into a signifying solidarity” (p. 93). Exchanged among Black men of different social status, the nod, he contends, is visual ebonics, expressing Black cool in its different iterations and yet ultimately extending a subtle recognition of each other. Most recently, Elijah Anderson (2011) highlights a similar type of gesture that he observed and participated in with another professional Black man. The “knowing look” that Anderson writes about conveys a shared experience among Black professionals employed in predominately White occupations. While Dyson and Anderson each investigated the meanings of such racial gestures, I aim to connect these micro-level encounters to action on meso- and macrolevels. Specifically, I will use the nod as a lens to analyze African Americans’ relationships with Congress and to particularly investigate the connection between race and power in the legislature.²

In this article, I bridge two disparate literatures: feminist scholar’s theory of gendered organizations (Acker 1992; Duerst-Lahti 2002; Hawkesworth 2003; Kenney 1996; Rosenthal 2002) and a critical race perspective of American politics (Bell 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2006; Mills 1997; Omi and Winant, 1994) to develop a theory of Congress as a *raced political institution*. I use the term *raced political institutions* to mean institutions, organized for the purposes of government, in which race is embedded in the organizational structure, is a determining factor of how labor and space is organized on the formal level. I also use the term informally to capture how perceptions of power influence identity construction, interactions, and culture. Using an interpretive foundation, I focus on Congress’ informal structure and argue that the Black nod is an adaptive strategy for Black staffers to cope and survive in a workplace characterized by a perceptible but unofficial racial hierarchy.

To frame my analysis of racial hierarchies, I first review the relevant literature on gendered organizations, raced spaces, and social gestures. Next, I chronicle the racial history of Congress, documenting persistent patterns of racism and racial inequality that extend to the current congressional workforce. Using my data in conjunction with these theories, I show how this racist history coupled with persistent inequality shapes Black employees’ understanding of their social position within the legislature as seen through daily interactions. The Black nod is a way of seeing the marginalized status of Black legislative staff and recognizing their attempts to mobilize and challenge Congress as a *raced political institution*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ORGANIZATIONS, POWER, AND RACE

Beginning in the 1980s feminist sociologists advocated for a more critical approach to studying gender disparities in the workplaces. To this end, they moved from

questioning why women are missing from top positions to ask instead how “the overall institutional structure, and the character of particular institutional areas, have been formed by and through gender” (Acker 1992, p. 568). As a result of this analytical shift, feminist sociologists argued that organizations themselves are gendered. The concept of gendered organizations demonstrates the extent to which gender is a part of the formal and informal structure of an organization and influences action on the micro- and mesolevels. While early scholars like Rosabeth Kanter (1977) highlighted the divisions of labor along lines of gender, later feminist scholars documented how gender is a constitutive element of organizations, underlies institutional logic, and is textually mediated in governing documents. Moreover, they also showed how gender is a part of organizational culture that shapes the aspirations, spirits, and perceptions of individuals (Duerst-Lahti 1987; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995). This impressive body of research demonstrates that gender is not a fixed characteristic defined by a numeric representation of employees hired into the organization, but rather, gender—including its associated norms, performance, and hierarchies—is continually reproduced in work organizations.

While numerous feminist scholars have documented how a variety of organizations are gendered, the ways in which institutions are raced (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Reskin et al., 1999; Vallas 2003) or classed (Acker 2006) remain theoretically underdeveloped. Wendy Moore’s (2008) concept of White institutional space is a notable exception, because it reveals how racism and White privilege are reproduced through interracial interactions, distributions of power, and governing logics within elite spaces like American law schools. Additionally, political scientist Mary Hawkesworth (2003) explicitly investigated gendering and racing among legislators in the U.S. Congress, and found despite equal pay and autonomy, that congresswomen of color do not have power equal to other members and therefore must deploy a myriad of adaptive strategies to gain legislative success. I build upon these seminal studies that locate social interactions as crucial sites where racism and White privilege is reproduced, however, I add insights from microsociology that are instructive for revealing the informal dimensions of racial hierarchies and the ways in which subordinate groups resist domination. In contrast to Hawkesworth and Moore, whose studies of racial encounters focus on the surface of interactions, microsociology provides the analytical tools to understand how interactions are important for identity formation and boundary maintenance. These insights show how cultural performances and norms tacitly reproduce race.

One aspect of interracial and intraracial interactions that is often overlooked is the greeting, which is an overture to a more substantive interaction. Greetings and the social gestures that often accompany them are more than the everyday signals we witness from family, friends, and strangers, they tell us about the individual and the environment in which he or she is embedded (Allert 2005). As such, social gestures can inform us about race and racism in ways that may be unrecognized. For example, Bertram Doyle’s (1968) analysis of social rituals, such as salutatory greetings, demonstrates how a rigid social etiquette is a feature of a racial caste system. Early work such as this provides a model to show how the interactional ritual of greetings is imbued with racial meaning and significance.

The beginnings of interactions are especially important for setting the stage for future action and are witnessed in the moments that decide if an interaction will occur. Eye contact is often the first step to initiating a greeting and interpersonal interaction, but as Erving Goffman (1959) noted, avoiding eye contact was an important way to signal racial subordination. For instance, he cites how Black men were not allowed to establish eye contact with Whites, especially women, in public places, and how Whites would avoid eye contact with domestic workers, who were Black, to signal

their subordinate role. However, the present racial moment differs from the era of race relations understood by Doyle and Goffman; today, the “rigid social etiquette” governing interactions between races is far less rigorously defined and enforced, although not altogether absent. The current era is characterized by an expectation of political correctness in which overtly racist attitudes are less likely to be expressed and the racial meanings of gestures are likely to be ambiguous (Jackson 2008). Consequently, it is unclear if salutatory greetings still have any racial meaning or if establishing or avoiding eye contact signals racial subordination.

Iddo Tavory’s (2010) analysis of the nodding ritual among Orthodox Jews is instructive for contemplating the racial meaning of greetings and relations more broadly. After observing nods among Orthodox Jews who donned a yarmulke, he writes “Rather than looking at the ways identifications are ‘held’ in some abstract way, potentiality is revealed in interactions with others, interactions in which members tacitly come to expect they will be ‘reconstituted’ in specific ways” (2010, p. 53). While Tavory points to the ways in which these everyday microprocesses constitute ethnic and racial identification, I argue that in this case they simultaneously delineate the boundaries of a raced political institution.

I build upon the insights of feminist sociologists and the work of microsociologists to analyze the cultural routines of African American employees. Similar to scholars who investigated Black professionals’ experiences in post-Civil Rights era workplaces (Collins 1997; Durr and Logan, 1997; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Wingfield 2013), I am interested in examining the barriers confronting this group. However, in this article, I connect microlevel encounters to speak more directly to how race organizes the workplace, which in this case is a raced political institution.

RACE IN CONGRESS

Congress is rarely considered a raced institution (see Hawkesworth 2003), despite the fact that race is a central organizing feature of the institution. As sociologist Joe Feagin writes, “the central problem is that, from the beginning, European American institutions were racially hierarchical, White-racist, and undemocratic” (2010, p. xiv). The Constitution apportioned representation in the House of Representatives by the number of free persons, those imprisoned, and three-fifths of all other persons. Those “other persons” refer to those in chattel slavery, who were seen not as citizens but as property by the founding fathers, many of whom were slaveholders (Feagin 2010; Harris 1993). The Capitol serves as a chilling embodiment of America’s racial caste system, as Black slaves contributed to building a monument to a democracy in which their presence was not accepted (Allen 2005; Holland 2007). In 1828, Congress banned Blacks, unless they were employees, from entering the grounds of the Capitol (Green 1967). Although after the Civil War many of these racially exclusive rules disappeared (Masur 2010), they were replaced by norms and rules that established an informal racial hierarchy in the legislature and lasted until the 1950s. Black political reporters were denied entry to pressrooms in the Capitol (Ritchie 2005), while Black legislative staff in the House of Representatives had to eat separately in a segregated dining facility, a floor beneath the dining room where Whites were served (House U.S. Congress 1934). Not only did White lawmakers enshrine a system of Jim Crow segregation inside the Capitol, they also used their appropriation powers to subvert federal anti-discrimination initiatives in the federal workforce (King 2007).

This history is not surprising considering that White men have held a dominant position within Congress. African Americans only represent 1.16% of the over 12,000

individuals elected to Congress between 1789 and 2014, and women of color have almost wholly been absent during its entirety, revealing how Congress is both raced *and* gendered.

Race is a constitutive element of our republic, textually mediated in governing documents, and exhibited by a long history of racial segregation and stratification in Congress. However, our understanding of Congress as a *raced and gendered political institution* has so far been limited to only recognizing “racing” among legislators (Hawkesworth 2003). In other words, there is a need to explore how racing and gendering occur through all levels of the legislature.

Congressional Staff

While the political scientists and American historians that do examine the role of race in Congress focus on members of Congress (Fenno 2003; Gamble 2007; Grose 2011; King 2007; Minta 2011; Minta and Brown, 2014; Singh 1998; Tate 2003), it is perhaps even more appropriate to study legislative staff, among whom racial inequality is more widespread. For example, women of all backgrounds and men of color are overrepresented in junior staff positions but are rarely found in senior staff positions (Chief Administrative Office U.S. House of Representatives 2010; Congressional Hispanic Staff Association 2010). Additionally, minority employees are concentrated in the offices of members of Congress who are racial minorities themselves (Lorber 2009).³

Legislative staffers are influential actors in the policymaking process; they provide critical advice, guidance, and analysis to members of Congress and ultimately influence the voting behavior of their member (Fox and Hammond, 1977; Malbin 1980). Although there is a basic understanding of the profiles of congressional staff and their work responsibilities, this view neglects the informal organization of work (Romzek and Utter, 1996). It is rarely contemplated how important social dynamics such as race and gender influence the careers and work experiences of staff. This conceptual gap persists, even with convincing evidence that race and gender act as organizing forces between members of Congress, and that dramatic inequality exists within the congressional workforce (Hawkesworth 2003).

In 2006, *Diversity Inc.* (Brown and Lowery, 2006) labeled the Senate the worst employer for diversity and noted that people of color were better represented in senior positions in the top fifty corporations than in the Senate. Surprisingly, political news outlets like the *National Journal* and *The Hill* give more attention to the issue of stratification in the congressional workplace than sociologists (Edwards 2012), releasing yearly studies of the most influential Hill staffers and noting the dearth of senior staff of color.

This article represents perhaps the first sociological study of Congress that documents the demographics and experiences of racial minorities and women in staff positions in both the House and the Senate. Cindy Rosenthal notes, “Our understanding of institutions is inextricably bound to the dominant individuals who populate them” (2000, p. 41), and Congress is no exception. Focusing instead on congressional Black employees, this article seeks to move against that trend, unpacking racial encounters in the daily work experiences of Black employees. An analysis of the microlevel encounters that happen every day (outside regular work activities) can provide an accessible, yet instructive, window into congressional culture and its racial ethos. Although this analysis is based on only a small population of the congressional workforce, it suggests new ways of thinking about how we understand and conceptualize Congress, requiring further interrogations of race as an organizing force of the congressional workplace.

METHODS

Data for this study were collected from 2010 to 2014 with approximately sixty-five one-hour interviews and numerous informal conversations with congressional employees. My involvement with this study was preceded by more than two years of experience working in the House as a legislative intern/fellow for a Black member of Congress and later for a White member of Congress. In addition, as an African American man, I had special entrée into the community of congressional Black employees; I was able to situate myself as someone with similar life experiences to better understand group dynamics.

During the summers of 2010–2013, I worked as a legislative intern/fellow for a Black congressman in the House of Representatives to collect a portion of these data. As part of my duties, I was often called upon to run errands for senior staffers in the office. While fulfilling the less glamorous aspects of my internship/fellowship (from getting letters signed by other members of Congress to going to the House Floor to drop off legislation in the Capitol), I used the opportunity to record any nods or other types of gestures I received from Black employees. I never initiated the nod or communicated while walking in the hallways unless I knew the employees, so that I would minimize my own influence on interactions I observed. Ethnographic observations are supplemental data I use to describe interactions and the congressional workplace, and were instrumental in finding differences in interactional styles between legislative staff, which I used to refine interview questions.

In interviews, I asked respondents to discuss their tenure on Capitol Hill, including how they obtained each job position and to detail their work responsibilities for each position. Next, I probed respondents about their relationships with peers and specifically focused on members of the same racial and gender background. During these moments, Black respondents, either independently or with prompting, would discuss intra-racial interactions including the nod.

To describe their close relations with African American employees, many Black respondents use their heads to indicate how they nodded to other African Americans, either friends or unfamiliar faces, in congressional hallways. On these occasions, I pretended to be uninformed about this cultural practice and asked for more details. I asked respondents about what the gesture meant, when they nodded, and why they participated in this informal social activity with other Black staffers. Discussions about the nod lent themselves to conversations about the social situation of congressional Black employees or what it meant to be Black and working in Congress. Black respondents discussed their perceptions of how race unfolded in their daily work life and careers and the informal organization of Congress. In this instance, specifically probing about habitual gestures allowed Black respondents, somewhat unknowingly, to articulate how the institutional and historical context in which they are embedded organized their social experience.

I used a snowball technique to recruit and interview respondents, starting first with my coworkers and prior contacts from working on “the Hill” and soliciting referrals from those initial contacts in order to secure additional interviews. In total, I interviewed sixty-five former and current congressional employees. Participants in this study represented employees of different status and rank, including senior staff (chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors (49%)), mid-level staff (legislative assistants (39%)), and junior staff (staff assistants and interns (12%)) from various offices. 47% of respondents had worked for a Black member of Congress, also known as the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) offices, while 49% had worked for a White member of Congress. 49% (32) of the respondents were men. 65% (42)

of respondents were African American. This sample of African Americans comprised thirty-five Democrats, six Republicans, and one Independent.⁴

SAFETY AND STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The practice of nodding among African Americans is not specific to Congress. Discussions of this informal exchange among African American are found in literary fiction (Adichie 2013) and the nod was even the focus of an entire episode of 2014's television hit series *Black-ish*. However, in this instance, the nod does inform us about the social terrain that Black employees navigate in Congress. The Black professional staff I interviewed often brushed off the nod as merely a common cultural practice shared among African Americans. However, data reveals that these ephemeral interactions are not just about signaling general sentiments of solidarity, but rather they are also an adaptive strategy for working in a majority White institution. Unlike other adaptive strategies that Black professionals deploy to obtain professional success in majority White workplaces, i.e., changes in appearance or voice, the nod is more akin to a survival technique (Anderson 1999; Lacy 2007). The habitual and cultural components to the nod mask how the gesture provides Black staffers with a tool to establish networks of support and gain information necessary for professional success.

The numerical underrepresentation of congressional Black employees is a recurring explanation that respondents offered for their participation in the Black nod. Out of the forty-two African Americans I interviewed, thirty-seven (88%) knew about the nod, and thirty-four (80%) participated in the practice. Additionally, twenty-nine respondents (60%) said the nod was a gesture of solidarity and made reference to their numerical underrepresentation. Not only are there few African American legislative employees, but also, according to the 2010 House Employment Survey, Blacks and Hispanics are mostly concentrated in junior positions such as staff assistants and schedulers. Similarly, in the Senate, a 2015 report from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that African Americans represent less than 1% of the most senior staffers in the Senate (Jones 2015).

There are two specific ways the nod acts as an adaptive strategy for Black employees working in the majority White congressional workplace. First, the nod is a way of acknowledging the shared work experience of African Americans, who are underrepresented in Congress. The research reveals that the nod transcends political and occupational boundaries among African Americans on Capitol Hill. Despite increasing partisanship in American politics, party affiliation is not a deeply dividing factor in relationships among Black employees, and nodding occurred among and between Black Democrats and Black Republicans. Second, the nod acts a way to cultivate and maintain social relationships among Black employees in a manner that supports their professional development and career mobility. In this section, I reveal how microlevel interactions are an outcome from action situated on the mesolevel, primarily the marginalized status of African Americans in the congressional workplace.

A Gesture of Acknowledgment

Kelly, who works for a Republican, brought up the nod as a way that she interacts with African Americans in Congress.⁵ She said, "If it's an African American staffer I mean I still think that same old fashioned kind of nod, you know, acknowledgment, is still done up here. You don't really think about, you just kind of do it. And it's a very subtle, 'I see you.'" She then went on to explain the meaning of the nod. "I do think that it's just a recognition on the part of all us that there are so few, and it's still, even though

it shouldn't be new or fresh, it kinda sorta is, because [there] is still such a long way to go. So it's just sort of acknowledgement. Good job, you made it."

During conversations about the nod, many African American employees emphatically stated that they always greeted other Black workers in the Capitol. This was the case for Sean, a junior staffer who worked for a senior White Democratic member. He said, "The nod is just a way of communicating, not orally, of acknowledging their presence. For me personally, I'm just acknowledging, 'Oh, you're me, but you're you. You're Black.' I make a point to acknowledge every single Black person I see." Despite working in a majority White office and being gay, for Sean there was a unifying Black experience on the Hill.

This charge of recognizing African Americans did not exclude Black Republicans and indeed, Black Republicans nodded as well. I interviewed six Black Republican staffers ranging in influence from junior staffers to a chief of staff, and all six staffers participated in the Black Nod. Randall, a senior Democratic staffer said, "It is acknowledging a shared experience we have. I even try to talk to Black Republicans, because I know they have it tough." Randall alludes to how there are fewer African Americans working in Republican offices and in the Republican Party in general. He perceives that this situation must be exhausting and communicates his support through friendly gestures. Anthony, a Republican committee staffer, said "I could not live with myself if I didn't nod." He further explained that the nod meant, "I'm in the struggle, 'I see you brother, I see you sister.' I see the struggle." Anthony intimated during the interview that although his office was not a racially hostile environment, the same could not be said for the rest of the legislative body. He said, "Black staffers go through a lot, those not in CBC offices, hearing racist comments or comments that make you pause to say 'Why do you say something like that or talk about a group in a certain way?'" Moreover, he added that African Americans in Congress could not always express how they felt about race. African American staffers cited numerous reasons why they were reluctant to express racial views including: a desire not to escalate social encounters with Whites; they were too busy with their own work responsibilities and did not want to become distracted; and dealing with racism was generally exhaustive and avoiding these issues was a strategy to remain focused and sane.

"Well I nod to a lot of Blacks in the hallway because I know them," said Brandon, a military staffer for a White member of Congress. He added, "But I try to go out of my way to nod to them because you never know what they are going through. Someone might be having a tough day, especially if they are working in a non-CBC office, you just never know."

Cassie, a fellow for a Black member who works in a majority Black office, described how she feels when she nods in the hallways with other Black employees:

Again, I think it is the sense of relief in the day-to-day stress, the craziness of the Hill. Because you always feel like you are fighting, you know, you always feel like you are trying to prove something and do something. And you can sometimes feel overwhelmed, and you know [you are] not always necessarily supported but to know in that brief moment that someone else is acknowledging you and going through the same thing you are going through. It is just a respite, you know.

Cassie alludes to the struggle of being a minority working in a majority-dominated institution and the general stress from work. During our interview, Cassie repeatedly brought up the stress of trying to produce good work. Although Cassie worked in a majority Black office, where any failure would not necessarily be attributed to her racial identity, she still found the congressional workplace stressful.

Congress is an extremely stressful workplace, where staffers work long hours for low salaries (Romzek and Utter, 1996). However, this stress may be greater for African American employees, who also have to deal with racial hostility or just the pressure of being a minority in a majority White institution. Thus, when African Americans pass one another in the hallways the nod becomes an important symbol of their shared experience on the Hill. Contrary to popular belief regarding how political affiliation organizes relationships in Congress, political boundaries are not polarizing and definite for African American employees. Interviews confirmed a general sentiment among congressional Black employees that they should look out for one another and provide social support in a workplace where they are underrepresented and notably absent from positions of power. This finding echoes the recent study by Adia Wingfield (2013), who found that African Americans in predominately White occupations were likely to support each other rather than be a source of competition. In addition, with few African Americans in senior staff positions, Black staffers who work in Democratic and Republican offices often have at least cordial relations, if not more substantive relationships. Interviews with current and former Black staffers confirmed a general trend of cooperation and solidarity across party lines to promote racial equality, despite ideological and political differences.

Nods and Networks

As we have seen, Black staff use the nod as a means for showing support within the Black community on the Hill, but they also use this cultural gesture as a tool for professional mobility. In one particular meeting for Black men on the Hill, I was part of a group that was explicitly told to nod. The informal meet-up was for all Black men on the Hill—members, House and Senate staffers, and service employees. Although the focus of this meeting was on Black men's health and policy initiatives to address the health crisis, one of the organizers prefaced the formal proceedings by explaining the purpose of the group. A primary concern of the leaders of the group was to build stronger social ties among Black men on the Hill to facilitate mobility. The organizer stressed the importance of networks and building stronger social ties with other Black men so they could be privy to information outside their personal network. Consequently, the staffer instructed those in attendance to nod and acknowledge "brothas" when they met in the hallways. This reflects that the nod is not only a recognition of camaraderie but that it also connects individuals in the workplace. The nod, although just a brief greeting, could also be a moment that leads to the formation of more substantive relationships. Subtly introducing and recognizing other staffers you do not know is a strategy for gaining access to knowledge outside your established network.

While most of the nods I recorded from Black staffers were fleeting moments accompanied with brief salutations, the nod did on occasion set the stage for interacting more substantively with Black staffers.

July 13, 2011. 3:30 PM

A young Black staffer nods to me while I wait for the elevator on the third floor of the Rayburn House Office Building. "This elevator is so slow," he says. He continued, "What office do you work for?" After I told him the name of the Black representative I worked for, he replied he had worked on and off for a senior African American for the last seven years. As we descend down several floors on the elevator, I formally introduce myself to my new acquaintance. As we depart, he says, "I will see you around."

As this brief moment demonstrates, the interaction began with the Black nod; however, it would be a mistake to suggest that the Black nod alone builds networks as the organizer from the Black men's groups suggests. It would be more accurate to say that the Black nod is part of Black professionals' cultural toolkit and that they use the gesture to facilitate introductions and maintain social networks with other African Americans (Lacy 2007). In order for the interaction I described above to turn into a network tie, I would have needed to come into contact more often with that staffer during my fieldwork, which I did not. While none of the respondents gave examples of a relationship that developed from the Black nod, this could be from the inherent difficulty of recollecting how relationships begin, especially with regard to a habitual gesture that respondents rarely contemplated. However, when Black staffers did discuss the importance of nodding and social networks, they would discuss in a generalized way how the nod acted as a preamble to conversations, in which they could obtain important information or introduce themselves to new acquaintances. As such, it makes sense to think of the nod as a part of an available repertoire from which Black professionals draw in order to interact with known and unknown members of their racial group.

Until this point, I have discussed the nod in ways that are not truly specific to Congress. While the interview data do highlight how the numerical underrepresentation of African Americans in the congressional workplace strongly shapes the behaviors and interactions of Black employees, these findings could be found in many majority White workplaces (Anderson 1999; Wingfield 2013). In the next section, I will focus on ways the practice of nodding among Black employees is related to Congress as a raced political institution. The deployment of the nod reveals how racial boundaries are reproduced and folklore concerning the gesture demonstrates how Black staffers discipline other African Americans to maintain a cohesive community that confronts their persistent underrepresentation.

INVISIBILITY VERSUS VISIBILITY: PERCEPTIONS OF RACE

White Civil Inattention and Black Invisibility

In all of the exchanges of the Black nod recorded in my field notes, eye contact is the crucial first step that determines if the nod will occur. As Goffman notes, eye contact is often the opening move to more substantive interaction. He explains "eye to eye looks, then, play a special role in the communication life of the community, ritually establishing an avowed openness to verbal statements and a rightfully heightened mutual relevance of acts" (Goffman 1963, p. 92). The signals that we convey with our eyes inform us if the other individual is open to further communication. Consequently, if the overture is accepted, typically by sustained eye contact, what follows is some type of facial expression elaborated by a verbal or nonverbal message.

However, seeing the person and making eye contact also takes on a deeper, symbolic meaning for congressional Black employees. Almost one third of the Black employees said that the nod was a way of seeing the presence of the other person ($n = 13$). Goffman notes that abnormal gazes often signal alienation from group life and writes, "An individual who feels he has cause to be alienated from those around him will express this through some 'abnormality of the gaze,' especially averting of the eyes" (1963, p. 93). Contrary to Goffman, my interview data indicated that when White employees do not establish eye contact with Black employees, either intentionally or unintentionally, Black employees perceive this as a perpetuation of their social invisibility in Congress. The miscommunication or misrecognition between White

and Black congressional employees leads African American employees to negatively interpret the interaction.

As Monica explained to me, “White men act like they don’t *see* you in the hallway, they look straight ahead or near the floor.” “Especially White members,” she continued, “some of them won’t even look at you. They look every other way, but at you.” A chief of staff for a Black member of Congress, Monica also perceived that White staff made assumptions that she was a service employee saying, “Sometimes I am in the elevator, and they just ignore me. I will say ‘hi’ if I am in close quarters with someone, but they do not *see* you. They just say ‘Floor number three please’ like I work here [on the elevator].” Interestingly, Monica’s account about how White men are reluctant to recognize her reflects on how Congress is both raced and gendered. As an African American woman, she identifies how White men occupy the dominant positions of power in Congress, and even as a chief of staff she does not feel embraced by those with whom she works in close proximity. Monica does not participate in the Black nod, because she believes it is more of a male gesture; however, she is more likely to acknowledge other African Americans staffers by saying hello.

A pattern of criticizing the action or inaction of White lawmakers and White staffers was only found among a subset of interviews ($n = 7$), and all of these instances were from senior staffers, except one, suggesting that this is a generational difference. In one moment, Lisa, an African American committee staffer for a Black member of Congress, described the “rude” and “disrespectful” behavior of young White staffers, who obstructed her path before she exited an elevator.

One year I was taking the elevator. I was trying to exit the elevator, before I could get out, a young bunch of staffers rushed on in. It was mildly irritating. I said, “Excuse me.” And the young woman comes, and says, “Excuse me,” to me. And I thought, “Oh how rude.” Again, maybe it’s my age, or my upbringing.

The staffers Lisa described above were White and she went on to generalize the group as, “entitled,” “privileged,” and “oblivious to all the world.” She observed that “lot of the folks of color who seek to make eye contact, a lot of them happen to be Black.” While young African Americans staffers are not “perfect” in her opinion, she said they seem to have a different upbringing, which recognizes the value of acknowledging individuals. Lisa’s participation in the “Black nod” is directly related to this instance of “disrespect.” She says about the nod, “It’s a way for us to acknowledge each other in this environment where we’re not really respected and not really affirmed.” Lisa clearly saw a connection between the microlevel encounters she described and the larger power structure of Congress.

We’re not in a majority, chiefly—numerically. We’re not making the main decisions. Black folks aren’t in positions of power, controlling the budgets or making the major policy decisions. In order to accept this. It’s a way to sort of acknowledge people in this kind of personal situation.

As Lisa indicated, although the nod was just not about the numerical underrepresentation of African Americans on Capitol Hill, the gesture illuminates how African Americans lack institutional power. During our conversation, Lisa equated power with Democrats being in the numerical majority in the House again. When Democrats were in charge her boss headed a major committee and had a diverse staff that centered the committee’s agenda around racial justice. Yet, other African Americans staffers I interviewed voiced their inability to influence Democratic decision making more

broadly, highlighting how African Americans lack real political power regardless of who controlled the chambers.

Both Monica and Lisa, older African Americans in senior positions, see the actions of White staffers as “disrespectful.” Although these instances are tangentially related to the nod, they reveal a clash of two modes of civility on Capitol Hill. Lisa said that it was a cultural difference between African Americans and Whites, and she is most likely right. However, this cultural difference between how Whites and Blacks interact has material consequences for how Black employees think about their social position in Congress and the institution itself. Here notions of respect and power are tied together, and Black employees’ perception of Whites’ civil inattention is related to the marginalized status of African Americans in Congress.

If African Americans are socially invisible in Congress, then the nod acts as a way to affirm their social presence. In one third of interviews with Black respondents who knew about the nod, they described the nod as meaning “I see you.” As mentioned previously, Anthony, a Republican committee staffer, said the nod meant, “I’m in the struggle, I *see* you brother, I *see* you sister. I *see* the struggle.” Anthony recognizes his fictive kin in Congress, in an atmosphere where they might not be seen, and sees the struggle that African Americans face in this predominately White space.

Jordan, a chief of staff to a Black member of Congress said about the nod:

I think it’s a validation. It’s like, “I know who you are and I see you. I see you and I validate you.” You know, and that’s kinda what the nod is. It’s like, yeah, we have a common shared [experience]—we may know nothing about each other, but we’re here on the Hill, which is where—we know we’re a small number there, and we’re walking these halls knowing that we’re doing something good, something connected to the same kind of work, and so, there’s a recognition there. You know, whether it’s a Black male or female. You know, you got my nod; I hear you, I see you, you know, and that’s the start of it. If there’s nothing else, you got that.

From Jordan’s perspective, he nods to validate the experiences of other African Americans who are numerically rare in Congress. Interestingly, he explained that his own social invisibility and that of other congressional Black employees in Congress stems from the lack of awareness among those not familiar with the halls of Congress and the fact that African Americans work there.

I mean, as an African American male, you know, I don’t know that anybody knows that we walk this place and that we have such an impact on what we do. And so, sometimes it’s like the Ralph Ellison book, *Invisible Man*, you know? You kinda are here when nobody knows you’re here.

African Americans were critical of not receiving formal acknowledgement of their social presence when near Whites, and interpreted it as a racial slight. However, Jordan also highlights his perceived invisibility from outsiders. He suggests that outsiders are not aware of the presence of African Americans working in Congress, especially those in senior positions, like him.

Monica, Lisa, and Jordan all discussed in different ways the invisibility of congressional Black employees and, as senior staffers, all three talked about a level of recognition they should be afforded, but did not receive. Monica and Lisa both felt ignored by White lawmakers and White staffers in the hallways and elevators. Monica thought the lack of interaction indicated how Whites were consciously ignoring her presence

or attempting to reduce her social status, while Lisa saw the behavior of young Whites as disrespectful and ignorant of a Black minority. While Jordan also articulated claims of social invisibility, his concerns were more about those outside of Capitol Hill who do not realize that African Americans occupy senior and influential roles in the legislature. While each grievance differs slightly, each one articulates a need to affirm the presence of African Americans in Congress in social interaction, and the Black nod is one tool they choose to recognize their African American colleagues.

Nodding and Performing One's Racial Identity

The practice of nodding is important for acknowledging a shared experience, recognizing the social presence of minorities in a majority White institution, for building strong networks, and signaling visibility for those who feel invisible. However, not nodding invalidates all of the above. Not only did African Americans negatively interpret situations where White staff did not acknowledge them, they were equally upset, if not more so, when Blacks failed to do the same. Not nodding effectively allowed African Americans to question Black non-participant's racial authenticity and understanding of racial issues. A third of Black respondents ($n = 15$) discussed how some African American staffers did not participate in the Black nod. Their criticism of Black non-participants, and comments about why they should nod in a "minority situation," reaffirm the significance of race in their daily work experiences and careers. Here the practice of nodding is an example of performing race.

I should note that there are obvious gender differences in the practice of nodding among African Americans. One female respondent said that Black women were more inclined to speak and that the Black nod was actually more of a male gesture (Dyson 2001). However, another explanation is simply that nodding to Black men could be seen as a possible sexual signal, a layer of implication that my male respondents never worried about. Black women are careful that the gestures they exchange convey camaraderie, not sexual attraction. Therefore, female respondents said they were more likely to reciprocate the nod than initiate the gesture themselves. Nods, therefore, were typically between Black men or from Black men to Black women. However, Black women were aware of what the Black nod is and its significance, and spoke at great length about the gesture.

"For me, it would be like, what kind of Black person are you?" Cassie, the legislative fellow said, laughingly. She continued, "Honestly, like how do I put that in a better way? Um, like, are you trying to ignore the fact that you are a Black person and I'm a Black person and race? Do you think race really doesn't matter?" By not nodding, she stated, non-participants must be blind to the racial dynamics of Capitol Hill, underscoring the significance of race in the day-to-day business of Congress.

Not Nodding and the Splintering of the Black Community

Understanding the racial dynamics of Congress and the particular disadvantaged position staffers of color occupy meant that they needed to "stick together." As Cassie said, it is more than just being blind to the continuing significance of race; there was a clear difference between the people who nod and those who do not. It is unclear from my interviews why some Black employees do not nod, as almost everyone I interviewed said they participated. In interviews, Black employees presented themselves as friendly and social beings that acknowledge other African Americans or all employees more broadly. I was unable to find anyone who was aware of the Black nod or another variation of racial acknowledgment but chose not to participate.

Black employees who do not know the motivations of non-participants infer their own explanations. Respondents routinely brought up class differences to explain the behavior of non-participants, saying those who did not nod thought that they were somehow better than the rest and were not enmeshed in the struggle for racial equality. If the nod meant that “I see you,” then not nodding meant, “I do not see you,” which respondents described as uniquely hurtful coming from another African American.

In *Disintegration*, journalist Eugene Robinson ruminates about the splintering of the Black community and writes,

I have to ask whether Black Americans, divided as they are by the process of disintegration, still have enough shared experiences, values, hopes, fears, and dreams that they define and claim a single racial identity—and feel a racial solidarity powerful enough to connect, if only for an instant, strangers who may never see each other again. I give the little nod without even thinking about it. Is it my imagination, or are fewer people nodding back (2010, p. 224)?

Similarly, former congressional Black employees of the 1980s and 1990s and current Black staff with decades of experiences lament about the lack of nodding among this younger generation of African Americans. These respondents (n = 3) tell nostalgic stories about how every Black person would nod in earlier periods and some even spoke about critical interventions they made with other Black staff to teach them the rules about nodding and acknowledgment in Congress.

Cynthia, who has worked in Congress for over a decade for two Black members, told a story about how she taught a Black male to nod after he failed to acknowledge her in the hallways. She would later go on to chide me during the interview for not knowing enough Black employees in Congress and relying on my office contacts to secure respondents rather than my own solid network of African American staff. A Black staffer from the 1970s and 1980s did not know what the Black nod was when I asked him about the social practice. However, after I explained my observations, he sharply quipped, “Oh you mean speaking!” Even if an African American did not know about the head nod, there was an assumption of acknowledgment and communication, either verbal or non-verbal, among African Americans. All of these senior Blacks in Congress maintain that nodding is something you do as a Black person to other Black people, especially when you are underrepresented in a particular space.

Jonathan, a chief of staff, mentioned how he built his network of African American colleagues through informal meetings. “When I started here in ‘91, that head nod was in full effect,” he said. He met important Black members of Congress like Kwesi M’Fume, Ron Dellums, and Barbara Collins through informal greetings and gestures in the hallways. However, after decades being in Congress he does not see the same level of participation of nodding among young Black staff and does not know if this generation understands why it is important.

I have a friend of mine who works at the White House and assists in bringing in more minority candidates, people of color, into the administration. She wanted to have a conversation with me. I said, “Okay, come on up to the Hill. We’ll have it.” I said, “Let’s go to the House floor. We’re in recess, we’ll just sit on the floor and talk.” Which is something also that most people don’t think that we would do. So we’re walking, and there were three young Black people walking towards us, two males and one female, just chatting, kinda, you know, coming. Both my friend and

I both stopped talking so we could sort of eye them and acknowledge them for who they are, to say, "Hello, how are you, good morning." They walked past us like we were not even there.

Jonathan clearly expresses his amazement and disdain that he did not receive an acknowledgment from the young Black staffers. However, more important is the action that Jonathan intended to take and how that reflects the underrepresented status of African Americans in Congress. Jonathan stops his conversation with his colleagues to recognize the other African Americans, first by eye contact, and second with verbal communication. However, in this case the interaction did not take place. Again, Jonathan notes he intended to acknowledge them just for who they are, young African Americans in a space where they are numerically rare. Here there is a hint of racial pride of their accomplishments and he later admits that he is more cognizant of these interactions with people of color than with Whites. This instance is also connected to his personal efforts to improve diversity in Congress—an issue that he has publically written about and that he says keeps him up at night. The purpose of this meeting with his colleague from the White House was to discuss ways to improve racial representation in the presidential administration; however, from his vantage point the lack of nodding is a critical setback for those diversity initiatives.

The Black nod in many ways acts a metaphor to demonstrate the changes in the Black community on the Hill. Whereas between 1960 and 1990 a Black legislative staffer could expect to know the entire African American professional community in the Capitol, in part because of its small size, now the chances of identifying every Black staffer are unlikely as the group continues to grow. As Eugene Robinson (2010) and John Jackson (2008) both highlight, in the twenty-first century our understanding of what race means has changed. Racial paranoia represents the flipside of racial solidarity. Nodding among African American employees is a way to signal racial solidarity and convey a set similar of shared experiences and beliefs about the significance of race and racism. However, when an African American does not participate in the practice of nodding, perhaps by not reciprocating the gesture or by avoiding eye contact, other African Americans read this behavior as an indication that an African American does not share the same views and values. The uncertainty of the motives of Black non-participants produces racial paranoia for those African Americans who do nod. In this instance, nodding facilitates the practice of boundary making among African American employees. In informal conversations about the nod, African Americans would try to decipher why another African American would not acknowledge them, either by verbal or non-verbal communication; they would ultimately conclude that Black non-participants did not see the importance of racial cooperation and to some extent the circumstances that required it. Here the nod represents a certain disciplining of race, where Black staffers, particularly those who are older and more senior, recognize the only way to effectively improve the status of African American staff on the Hill is to maintain a strong Black community. Thus, not nodding becomes an affront to those attempts at building power and community.

The Nod as Gestural Equalizer Across Rank, Class, and Age

In his anecdote about three young African Americans not nodding to him and his colleague, Jonathan provides insight into the social organization of Congress. He acknowledges his senior status as a chief of staff and that of his colleague at the White House. He notes that his position gives him unprecedented access to the Capitol and

the ability to use the House Floor as a meeting space when Congress is adjourned. Jonathan went on to explain how he would do the nod when he first came to Capitol Hill with Black members of Congress, reaffirming his observations about the lack of nodding among young Black staff. Recalling how he would introduce himself to these Black political leaders, he says,

Yeah, either a nod or—you could also say, “Good morning Congressman,” they’re like, “Oh, hey, good morning, how are you?”... You could see—John Lewis, you could say hello. They would say hi. You see Lewis does that all the time, ‘cause everybody now *sees* him. He—Lewis could walk by everybody and just be like, “I don’t wanna talk to you. You know who I am?” And the thing about it is there are a lot of young people who do the very same thing. And I’m like,—that’s fine by me. I shake my head, because I wish it wasn’t. I could come into my office every day, sit at my desk and pat myself on the back for eight hours at what I’ve achieved and where I am. I don’t have to say a doggone thing to anybody. Because most of ‘em can’t do anything for me. But the ironic thing is I go out of my way to make contact with people. And they *see* me, they go out of their way to not make contact with me.

Here Jonathan references a critical dimension of the Black nod: its ability to transcend occupational rank as nodding occurs between Black staff and Black members of Congress. He also details how he and other African Americans who have accrued a certain level of success could easily abandon these social practices, but instead they remain committed to them. Michèle Lamont (2000) found that Black working class men put strong value on solidarity and generosity, and here, these principles are found among Black professional men. Jonathan went on to explain the value of nodding and having core networks of African Americans for the purposes of venting about certain issues to which they would be able to relate and seeking their professional mentorship. Jonathan was not alone. Many African Americans, most notably those of senior status, empathically stated the importance of nodding and ascribed negative perceptions to those who did not. As Monica recounted earlier, she believes that White men, especially members of Congress, do not see her in the hallways. In many ways this lack of recognition Monica described reinforces a racial hierarchy in Congress, because Whites are not entering into the type of equalizing interaction with Black staff that African Americans in the Capitol exchange with each other.

Visible Responses to Invisibility

The Black nod is a subtle and discreet gesture, however, it is not invisible. The nod is a visible response on the part of African Americans in Congress to their self-perception of invisibility in Congress. Moreover, there is little awareness by some Whites about this social practice—only one non-Black respondent knew about the nod. It is unknown how much Whites and other racial and ethnic minorities are aware of the Black nod. The gesture is subtle and discreet, and if the perceptions of Black respondents are true then Whites who intentionally avoid establishing eye contact may not see the gesture at all, thus confirming their invisibility in Congress. However, the ephemeral Black nod is successful in ways that more formal methods of recognition are not. Monica, who before said that White men did not notice her in the hallways, later expressed a racial anxiety suggesting that Blacks in large numbers heighten the awareness of Whites to the presence of Blacks:

I have to tell you what happened last week. I was downstairs with my one my girlfriends in the cafeteria and we ran into some other Black people we know. [She recounted about four names of senior Black women that have been omitted.] And I said you know we have to break it up before they start think we are plotting. But that never happens. You never see that many Black people together.

What Monica told me was expressed with a certain degree of levity to convey how rare it is for her to see many African Americans outside of her office due the vastness (and Whiteness) of the Capitol complex. However, there is also a hint of racial anxiety in her reflection, which is connected to how African Americans formally and informally interact. The nod works in part because the subtle gesture is discreet and often unnoticeable by those who are not Black. In addition, without a cultural awareness of the meaning of the gesture, the coded message of racial solidarity and recognition becomes indecipherable to outsiders. Many Black employees may try to avoid very public interactions with others Black employees in part because of what it might signal to White employees. As Anderson (1999) observed among Black corporate executives, highly visible moments of congregating or fraternizing closely with other Blacks are boundary-heightening events. Gatherings of African Americans can remind Whites about the racial identity of their Black coworkers and possibly exaggerate differences between Whites and Blacks. This could work to the disadvantage of African Americans who at other times engage in inclusionary boundary work to blur distinctions between themselves and their White colleagues (Lacy 2007).

What I have shown in this section is that although the Black nod is a common cultural practice amongst African Americans in spaces where they are numerically in the minority, its application in congressional workforce interactions is not just a mere extension of that cultural practice; it is a cultural tool that advances Blacks on Capitol Hill both as a community and as individuals. The nod on the Hill is imbued with layers of meaning and interpretation. For Monica, Cassie, Anthony, and Jordan, the pre-eminent meaning of the congressional Black nod is affirming the presence of other Blacks, in spite of being diluted in a White majority environment, in response to being ignored by White staff, and regardless of one's ideological or party affiliation. For Cassie and Jonathan, the nod is a performance of race that serves as a gestural equalizer and signal of racial authenticity. Given this importance, not nodding is interpreted on a microlevel as a personal slight and on a macrolevel as an indicator of emerging fractures in shared Black identity across class and generational lines. Finally, Monica cites the strength of the nod as an adaptive strategy for affirming and reproducing Black solidarity without being so conspicuous that it is perceived as threatening to the White majority. Feminist sociologists use the term "gender ethos" to describe the organizational culture of gendered organizations, which influences beliefs, mores, attitudes and practices. However, in Congress it is its *racial and gender ethos* that shapes Black employees' perceptions of themselves and others and their interactions in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Slightly after 1 PM, I leave my office, ending my second consecutive summer studying Congress. After saying goodbye to my co-workers, I prepare to take my usual route to exit the congressional complex, walking through the basements of Rayburn and Longworth and exiting through the garage in the Cannon House Office Building. This afternoon, the buildings are quiet, not atypical for a Friday during August recess. However, before I depart from the halls of Congress, I become

engaged once again in the interaction I have come to study. A Black male Capitol Police officer, who appears to be in his 30s, nods to me. He quickly lowers his head and nods down as we briskly walk past each other in the tan brick hallways of the Longworth basement.

In this article, I have focused on why African Americans nod to one another in the halls of Congress. As the extant literature suggests, and Black respondents first explained, the Black nod is cultural gesture that communicates racial solidarity and is not specific to Congress. However, my interview data show that there is an additional layer of meaning attached to the nods that African Americans give one another when they walk through the Capitol. Motivations to nod are also manifestations of African American employees' attempts to survive and thrive in a workplace organized by race. The nod is encompassed and shaped by labor organized along racial lines, a history of racial subordination, and racial anxiety.

While there has been much attention to the gendered nature of Congress (Rosenthal 2002), race is rarely interrogated as an organizing principle within Congress. This conceptual gap persists despite evidence that the congressional workforce is organized along racial lines, where African Americans are almost entirely absent from senior staff positions and concentrated in the offices of congresspeople of color. The ways in which the congressional workforce is stratified and segregated have material consequences in how African Americans interact and evaluate their relationships with Black employees. The nod becomes a medium through which African Americans express their shared experience in this unique environment and build relationships and a network of support among individuals who have similar work experiences.

In response to working in an environment organized by race, Black staff have developed a racialized professional identity (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Through this racialized identity—and through the gestures that signify one's "membership in the club," Black staff recognize social divisions and prioritize the validation, respect, and acknowledgement of the work of fellow African Americans in Congress over political and occupational differences. To this end, the Black nod is an external expression of Black staffers' racialized professional identity that is expected and negatively sanctioned when not initiated or reciprocated. When African American staffers do not participate in these social exchanges, Black employees perceive it as a signal that they do not share the same views and possibly do not want to be associated with other African Americans. This process of boundary making among African American staff identifies the nod as an important tool in Black professionals' cultural toolkits, which they use to create and maintain peer relationships. These findings reaffirm the importance of studying workers' cultural repertoires (Anderson 1999; Lacy 2007). This deeper understanding of the Black nod also reconceptualizes our perception of Black congressional staffers as a group, moving us from viewing them as a powerless group to seeing them with the potential to mobilize in unseen ways to enhance their positions.

In this article, I investigated microlevel encounters and connected them to action on the meso- and macrolevels. To understand the Black nod in Congress one must account for the mesolevel realities that Congress is majority White at all levels and particularly in senior staff positions, that race is a constitutive element of the national legislature, and that two centuries of racial segregation and stratification are reflected in its workforce. On the macrolevel, one must account for a history of racial subordination, particularly around social gestures and racial etiquette, and the racial anxieties that characterize the post-Civil Rights era in America. What results from the mesolevel or institutional context is the *racial ethos* of Congress; it is a spirit of past discrimination and present inequality that structures African American employees'

perceptions of the workplace and events that transpire. What results from the macro-level, or societal context, is that when Black employees enter the Capitol, they bring with them their lived experiences as Black Americans, inclusive of previous encounters with racism and an informed understanding of the country's dubious racist history, which acts as a frame to analyze their social interactions (Feagin and Sikes, 1994). Consequently, we can see that African Americans' decisions to nod to one another are not just acquiescence to banal and quotidian gestures, but as profound expressions of shared meso- and macrolevel experiences.

Congress is not a typical workplace; it is the center of federal legislative power. What is unique about the exchange of the nod in this particular social setting is how it is deployed as an adaptive strategy. In a space where political identities can be polarizing, the nod functions to transcend occupational, hierarchal, and gender boundaries. Whereas in many other settings, Black Republicans could be expected to be ostracized because of their political beliefs (Fields 2016, Rigueur 2014), data reveal that Black staff maintain close relations in spite of their party affiliation. Again, race was also used a disciplinary measure to reify racial boundaries in hope of enhancing the group's position in a manner that is unlikely to occur in less political workplaces. The reification of these racial boundaries could of course have detrimental effects and limit interracial contact that could also benefit the group.

Understanding Black legislative staffers' moral worldview can more broadly provide insight into how Black Americans think about racial encounters in the Obama era. What comes across most clearly in interviews is how the Black nod is an adaptive strategy that renders African American staffers visible in an environment where they feel socially invisible. Given its value as an adaptive strategy that implies validation, recognition, and solidarity, when the nod is not initiated or reciprocated Black staffers are not certain if this gestural absence is predicated on racism (from White staff) or on a fracturing of the shared Black identity (from other Black staff). What *is* certain is these moments between stares and glances are fraught with racial anxieties and Black employees *deploy* race as an explanation for both participation and non-participation.

In this article, I have culled research from disparate disciplines and subfields that document the raced nature of Congress and detailed more fully the relationship between race and power in the Capitol. As Congress is an institution that affects the lives of all Americans, we must pay close attention to its racial and gender composition both at the staff and member levels and to the division of labor in the congressional workforce to ensure an equitable distribution of resources and policies that do not disproportionately advantage or disadvantage particular groups. For African Americans in Congress, the nod is a way of seeing one another. For scholars, the Black nod is a way to see inequality in the congressional workforce, to acknowledge the contributions of staffers of color, and to build on the existing literature about Congress in a way that paints a more nuanced and inclusive portrait of the federal congressional workforce.

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NOTES

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2. I should emphasize that article is not an examination of the practice of the nodding in itself. Thus, this paper does not evaluate the factors that may impact the frequency of the nod, including, time, place, and the numbers of actors involved. That is an interesting research endeavor in itself, but the aim of the article is instead to use this routine cultural gesture to understand race in an important American political institution.
3. In Congress, majority and minority have specific meanings that refer to which political party controls each chamber. However, in this article, I use minority as a way of referring to women, African Americans, and other racial/ethnic groups who are numerically under-represented in the congressional workforce.
4. Over two-thirds of African Americans identify as Democrats, while only 5% of them identify as Republicans (Newport 2013).
5. Respondents' names have been altered to protect their identity. In addition, in some cases the respondent's position has been changed as it could identify some staffers. Any alterations have been thoughtfully considered so not to drastically distort the characteristics of the respondent. To this end, I am unable to present a list of respondents with background information as it could identify some respondents who occupy positions in which there are few people of color. Lastly, quotations are from either tape-recorded interviews or interviews in which a tape recorder was not present, but field notes were written immediately after the conversation.

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