

# Blackness is Here and Everywhere: The Whiteness of Geography in the U.S. Academy

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## Introduction

Geography as an academic discipline roots itself in colonialism. Organizations like the Royal Geographical Society in London functioned as extensions of colonial reign (Livingstone 1992). This impact translates into the earliest geographical paradigms: environmental determinism; a paradigm that asserts that physical geographic features influence sociocultural and political development (Meyer 2020). The paradigm influenced leaders of the earliest geographical associations in the U.S. like the American Association of Geographers’ (AAG) first woman president Ellen Semple. Therefore this historical legacy impacts the discipline by otherizing Blackness as separate from geographical and spatial matters. This inequality helps contribute to making Black Matters feel separate from Spatial Matters.

Blackness is separated from spatial matters because of colonialism. Nikole Hannah Jones writes, “It should devastate us all that in 2020 it took a cellphone video broadcast across the globe of a black man dying from the oldest and most terrifying tool in the white-supremacist arsenal to make a vast majority of white Americans decide that, well, this might be enough” (2020). However, Black lives are also “necessarily geographic” (McKittrick) and are produced in relation to racism and economic profit” (2006). Spaces, according to the 1619 Project, like American politics, music, healthcare, or urban planning, were produced in relation to racism, enslavement and profitization. Thus despite being undesirable and despatialized Black people are “necessarily geographic”; this contrast motivates my goal to understand this separation.

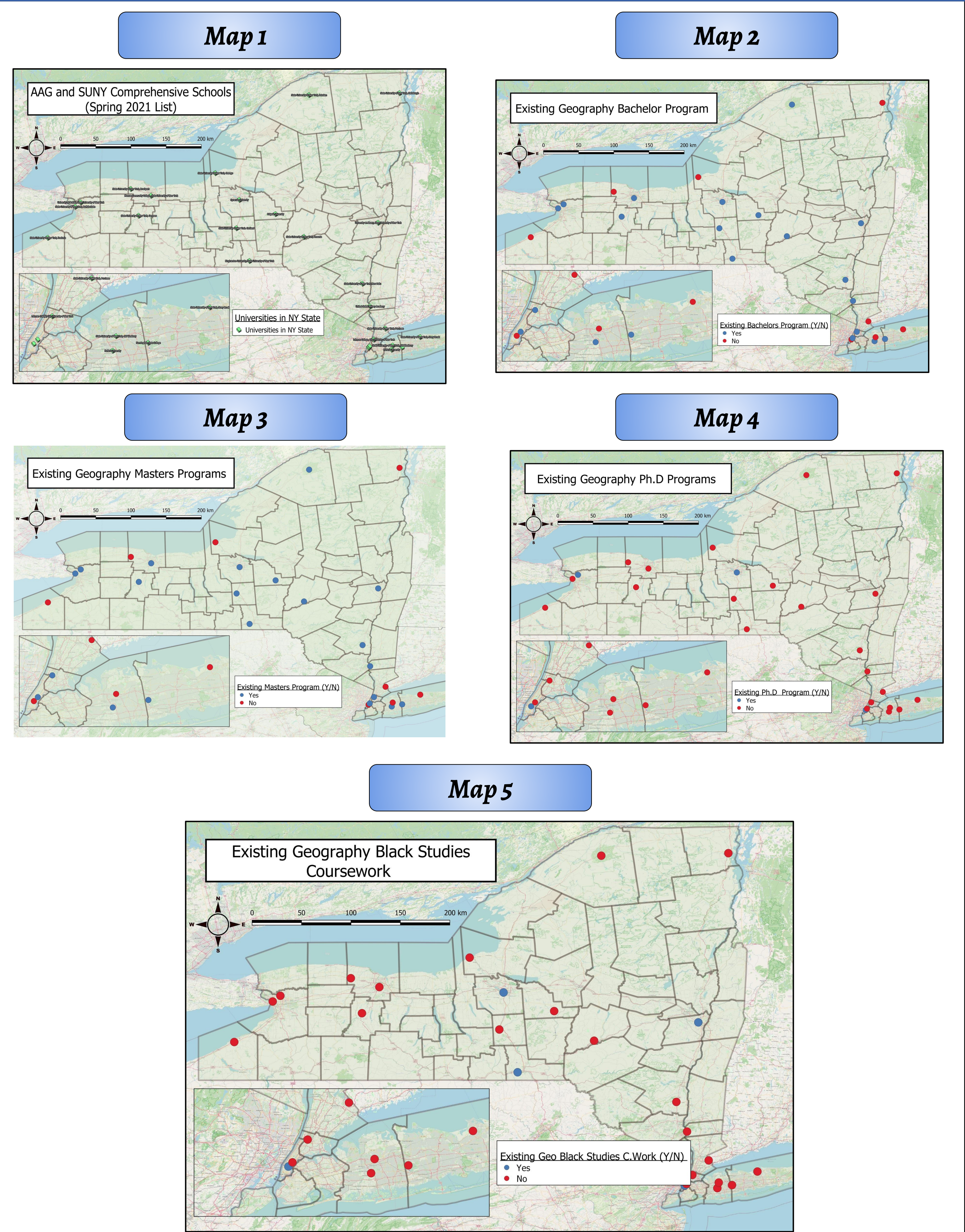
The study attempts to understand the separation of how “Black matters are [not] spatial matters” (McKittrick 2006). This research studies the *spatial relationship between geographic course content in NY State and HBCUs and whether there is existing course content related to Blackness and/or topics of anti-racism within Geography Programs.*

## Data and Methods

The study area examines Black Geographic coursework in 22 NY State colleges and within the 107 HBCUs in the United States. The research is preliminary and includes only schools listed within AAG’s *Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas 2020-2021* and the thirteen SUNY Comprehensive Colleges.

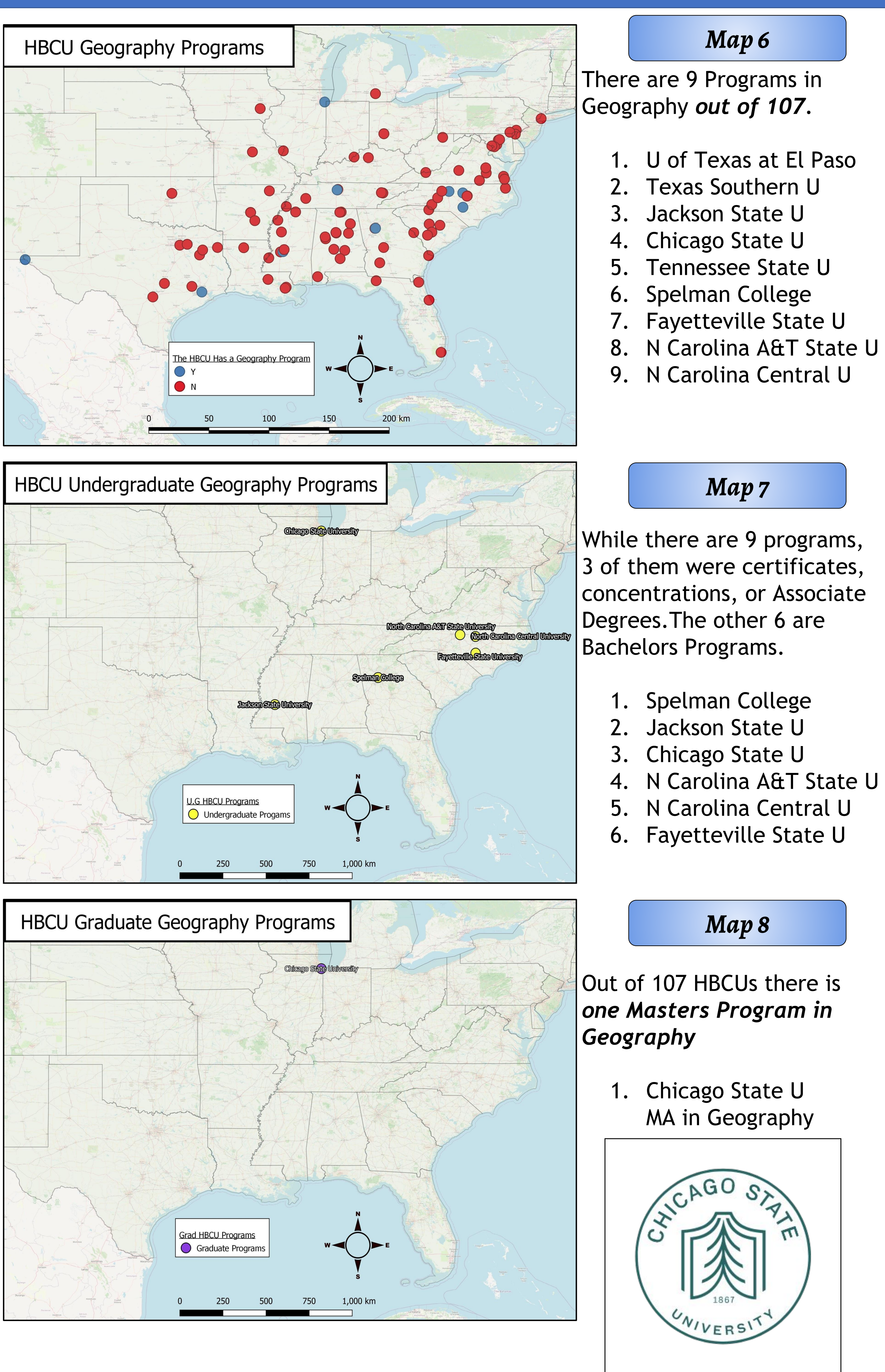
- **Categorical Collection**
    - Existing Geography Department
      - Yes/No
    - Existing Bachelors/Masters/PhD Program
      - Yes/No
    - Existing “Black Geography” Courses or Track.
      - Yes/No
        - Specific keywords used: “Racial Geography”, “Racism and Geography”, “Racialized Geographies”, “Geography and Anti-Racism”.
        - Generalized keywords used: “race”, “racism”, and/or “Blackness” in their Geography Course Catalogs and department pages. If used, I would read the course description.
          - Example: A course called “Race and Space” would be satisfactory; a called urban geography that mentions race in the description is *not* satisfactory
- All data is collected from college websites, AAG, and course catalogs, then synthesized using QGIS.

## NY State Course Distribution



- The selection process of what did *not* constitute “Black Geography Coursework or Tracks”
- Regional Geography Courses
    - Ex: Geographies of Sub-Saharan Africa
  - Cultural Geography Courses
  - Urban Geography Courses
  - Related Disciplines like Environmental Justice or Sustainability.

## HBCU Course Distribution



## Results and Discussions

- Mapping indicated:
- Only 4 New York colleges have Black Geographic coursework:
    - Binghamton University
    - Albany University
    - Syracuse University
    - CUNY Graduate Center
  - Most of the HBCUs do not have Geography Programs; only one offers a graduate degree.
- Future research can include:
- Analyzing additional NY colleges and universities
  - Analyzing HBCU’s relationship with Geography departments (i.e., many have Geography *courses*, but not Geography *departments*)

New York State has many Bachelors programs and subsequently fewer Masters and PhD programs. However, many programs do not have classes explicitly discussing race and geography.

From forced labor and prison industrial complex to the academy, Blackness has always been spatial. If Blackness were not, then the question of who and what created the West would not exist. It is a contradiction that has taken up too much space. This change should and must mean more than “adding Black subjects to geography syllabi” (Hawthorne 2019). To care about Black lives means improving the material and virtuous conditions of our space.

That means every geographer has their place in contributing to Black lives. If we recognize that Black Lives Matter then Black Matters are Spatial Matters that must be part of our study if we want to continue correcting the wrongs and building new spaces.

## Works Cited

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