POC in a PWI:
Examining the Experiences & Social Navigation Patterns of Students of Color at a Predominantly White Institution

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## Abstract

This qualitative, interview-based study examines the experiences and social navigation patterns of students of color attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). It also considers the impact that ethnoracial incidents and conflicts— conceptualized as 'trigger events'— have on students' modes of belonging and perceptions of the institution. I draw on semi-structured interviews with 21 undergraduate students of color at Syracuse University to understand and analyze their experiences, social identity formation, and modes of belonging throughout their college careers. The study is driven by three primary research questions: *What impact do the institutional setting and administrative actions have on the social navigation patterns and feelings of belonging of students of color at PWIs? What effect does a student of color's endurance of macro- and micro-aggressions while attending a PWI have on their modes of interaction and social engagement?* And finally, *to what extent does one's status as a person of color (POC) in a PWI influence their feelings of comfort, safety, and belonging on campus?*

In analyzing interview data, I present findings that relate to students' patterns of social disillusionment, physical and emotional disengagement from the broader campus community, identification of a need for race/ethnicity-based affinity spaces, experiences of intragroup exclusion, and perceptions of institutional inadequacies. I ultimately conclude that students of color have come to normalize a reality of bias, marginalization, and exclusion in the context of the PWI, which in turn has informed a need to locate and forge protective spaces and affinity groups to combat this reality. I conclude with student-proposed policies and strategies to create a safer, more hospitable campus climate and contribute to the development of a higher education system invested in ethnoracial justice and equity.

## Executive Summary

This study examines the experiences and social navigation patterns of undergraduate students of color attending a predominantly white institution (PWI), or an institution of higher learning wherein White students account for over 50% of the student body. I propose that there are pertinent, institutional and systemic factors that can influence students' jaded perceptions of the PWI and their tendencies to pursue ethnoracial affinity groups— or groups formed around shared racial and/or ethnic identities— in the college context. Rather than focusing solely on students' complicity in forging racially/ethnically homogenous spaces, it is necessary to approach this phenomenon from a macro perspective, one that transcends the individual student of color's identity, desires, and preferences. This means examining the external factors that have influenced students' navigation patterns, their physical and emotional welfare, and their strategies for belonging in the context of a PWI. As such, I define a set of research questions to shape the study: *What impact do the institutional setting and administrative actions have on the social navigation patterns and feelings of belonging of students of color at PWIs? What effect does a student of color's endurance of macro- and micro-aggressions while attending a PWI have on their modes of interaction and social engagement?* And finally, *to what extent does one's status as a person of color (POC) in a PWI influence their feelings of comfort, safety, and belonging on campus?*

This study is qualitative in nature, meaning that I was interested in directly engaging with students on a subjective and non-numerical level in order to make meaning of their experiences. Over the span of a month and a half, I recruited and individually interviewed 21 'respondents' (interviewees/research participants) who were self-identified students of color at Syracuse

University.[1] All of the interviews that I conducted were semi-structured in nature, meaning that, while I came prepared with a list of topics and open-ended questions to guide each interview, it was not always limited to these topics and questions. Interviews were conducted with the intention of establishing a sense of rapport with respondents so that they felt comfortable sharing their stories. As such, I treated each interview like a conversation, which often meant pursuing different topical trajectories and indulging tangents to develop a richer perspective. With my respondents' permission, I audio-recorded each interview and later had the recordings transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

Data analysis involved the use of a multi-step 'coding' strategy; essentially, I began by reading through each transcript and marking concepts as they appeared line-by-line, and then later narrowed down and condensed these concepts into over-arching themes that informed my key findings.

In this paper, my findings begin with 'the path to disillusionment.' I draw upon interview data to show how many students described approaching their undergraduate careers with an optimistic ideal of what their college experience would be like. As they adjusted to campus, however, I show how students' initial feelings of school pride and expectations of interracial belonging became clouded by encounters with racism, prejudice, and microaggressions (subtle, denigrating comments, questions, or actions), and other forms of discrimination. Over time, they became disillusioned to see the patterns of marginalization and inequality that pervaded the

[1] In using the terms *students of color, person of color,* and *people of color*, I draw upon Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's (2017) criteria to refer to members of "those groups in America that are and have been historically targeted by racism. This includes people of African descent, people of Asian descent, people of Latin American descent, and indigenous peoples (sometimes referred to as Native Americans or American Indians)" (p. 94).

campus climate and associated their negative experiences with the "reality" of being racial and ethnic minorities in a PWI. With disillusionment came disengagement, or students' physical or emotional self-removal from spaces that they perceived as unsafe or unwelcoming. As students disengaged, I show how many pursued literal and figurative, racially and/or ethnically homogenous affinity spaces where they felt safe, empowered, and/or that they belonged there. However, I also point out that not *all* students of color necessarily feel belonging in these groups. In some cases, I found that the intersection of an individuals' social positions and identities (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) may lead a student to feel excluded in the same spaces that are allegedly intended to make them feel included.

The final component of my findings relates to students' perceptions of the University as an institutional body complicit in maintaining the realities of discrimination, marginalization, and unbelonging that they reported experiencing. In this section, I trace students' critiques of administrative efforts and strategies that they believe to be ineffective in making real, positive, and long-term change on campus.

I ultimately conclude that students of color have come to experience a reality of bias, marginalization, and exclusion as "normal" in the context of a PWI, which in turn has informed a need to locate and forge protective spaces—many of which are race/ethnicity-based by design—to combat this reality. This conclusion is significant, for it diverges from the limited notion of 'self-segregation' that is commonly projected onto students of color as a means of describing their patterns of social navigation. In identifying the pursuit of racial/ethnic affinity groups as a strategy for social survival and belonging, I problematize perceptions of student self-segregation and go on to spotlight a pervasive issue in the context of PWIs, one that is in intense need of

remediation. To end on a productive note, I outline a set of student-proposed policies and strategies that could create a safer, more hospitable campus climate and contribute to the development of a higher education system that is truly invested in ethnoracial justice and equity.

## Table of Contents

## Preface

This project was originally conceptualized in April of 2017 during my second semester of college. What has ultimately unfolded in these pages is the product of a confused freshman simply trying to make sense of the social world around her, driven by the frustration of having submerged herself in a new reality sans true awareness of the hidden conflicts, divisions, and violences that it housed. When I applied to Young Research Fellows, the undergraduate research program that gave me the chance to develop my creative inquiries and this specific research topic, I was rather aimless as to what exactly I wanted to do with my social observations, or how I wanted to build and transform them into a "legitimate" study. Over time, however, as I became more attuned to the concepts I was investigating and more submerged within the realm of sociological theory, I became confident in the empirical pathway that I wanted to take. I had—and continue to have—a profound investment in my research. I was energized at the thought of it and the possibilities it held.

In November of 2019, however, things began to fall apart. As Syracuse University became embroiled in a series of racist incidents and hate crimes, I found myself living my project every single day. No longer a researcher focused primarily on absorbing and interpreting other students' perspectives, I was now a student attempting to navigate the toll that the stress and fear of this reality was taking on my own being. While it was fascinating to see how my personal experiences and reactions to an ethnoracial conflict aligned with those of my respondents, I was also discerning new, critical processes and concepts that I had not previously considered. While I welcome any opportunity to enrich my project and reflect the social world as much as possible in my findings, these constant encounters with new information were

overwhelming. I felt muddled in my ideas and trajectory, as well as questioned the contribution and value of my project.

The continuously evolving developments of SU's 'Day Hall' crisis, as well as the handful of new perspectives I was casually and candidly encountering on a near hourly basis, were destabilizing. As I stared at empty Word documents, all I could focus on were the chimes of the endless emails assailing my inbox, or the texts lighting up my phone. How could I draft a literature review knowing that a White supremacist manifesto had just been electronically disseminated across campus? How could I bring myself to do anything remotely productive as I received communication after communication about a new hate crime, a new bias incident, a new update on the University's complete lack of control over the situation? Although I had persevered through a collection of race-related incidents at SU's Madrid Center the semester prior, as well as made it through the Theta Tau incident in 2018, there was something different about this particular situation that was wreaking havoc on my mental health and academic productivity in unprecedented ways. Despite expending all of my daily energy on topics of race, social justice, and identity politics, it appeared that I had nothing to show for it academically.

I vividly remember one night when I was camped out in The Barnes Center during #NotAgainSU's fourth day of occupation. I knew I had promised my advisor that I would have all of my interview transcripts coded by the end of the week, and for this reason had positioned myself next to an outlet in the corner of the lobby. For hours, I stared at the coding program on my screen, but I could not bring myself to effectively process any of the information I was reading through. Instead, I kept gravitating to my email, clicking on a news article about the events on our campus, or accepting "emergency" meeting requests from administrators who wanted to hear a student's take on the situation. As the days passed, this pattern of

unproductivity continued, and I felt myself becoming increasingly disassociated, yet also somehow increasingly involved. Although I was speaking or thinking about my thesis in some manner every single day (whether it be in these meetings with administrators, at work, in my apartment, or in a protest setting with other frustrated students, faculty, and staff), I could not bring myself to work on it. This project was never off of my mind, and yet it was still trapped within.

More than anything, I believe that the difficulties I have had in producing this final draft attest to the trauma that students of color may experience as a result of race-related stress and conflict. The inescapability of this reality has a myriad of consequences for students and their social and academic success, consequences that transfuse indiscriminately into personal, social, academic, and professional realms. This reality can be isolating—both physically and emotionally— and without a true support system or sense of belonging, perseverance can feel next to impossible.

Now, in April of 2020, I write in a position of literal isolation, fighting to retain a semblance of motivation as I witness our reality become consumed by a global pandemic and the entrenched inequalities that have been further exposed in its presence. (Looking to Newton and Shakespeare, one may think that quarantine is perhaps the best setting to create and produce, but I think it's safe to say that my experience has been on the opposite end of the productive spectrum). As what should be the pivotal semester of my undergraduate career quickly spirals into a reality of anxiety, frustration, and unknowns, I have once again found myself struggling to stay on track and meet deadlines. However, with the encouragement of an incredible advisor, a strong sense of deadline-induced pressure, and a *lot* of caffeine, I'm proud to present you with the thesis that you're reading today.

This project was produced during a variety of crisis situations, and at times I have struggled to maintain the energy and motivation that once ignited it all. But I also believe that the fact of my perseverance attests to the profound investment I have in this topic and the unwavering commitment that I have to sharing students' stories and putting this content out for reflection. In many ways, writing this has been as therapeutic and fulfilling as it has been challenging. I am grateful to have retained my passion for this project because, ultimately, it has helped me make sense of and navigate the events unfolding around me. I truly hope that the value I derived from writing it can be experienced by those reading, as well.

**Acknowledgements**

In many ways, this project was a collective effort, and for this reason I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all of those who helped make it happen.

First, thank you to all of my student respondents, for taking time out of your busy schedules to allow me to hear your stories.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This qualitative study manifests in part from my own experiences as a student of color attending and navigating a predominantly white institution, or a PWI.[2] When I came to Syracuse University (SU) in August of 2016, I hoped that the images of unity, inclusivity, diversity, and pride that I had seen depicted in the school's promotional materials would translate into my own college experience and general social integration. Within the first few months, however, I was thoroughly disillusioned, left to reflect on the naivete that had informed these expectations. As I looked around, I saw informal, yet undeniable racial and ethnic divides across the campus and broader social landscape. While some groups of students appeared to be racially and ethnically "integrated," others appeared to stay in their own, ethnoracially homogenous bubbles.

An incident that stands out in particular to me, perhaps the one that sparked my original pursuit of this research topic, occurred in April of 2017. On an abnormally warm day, I ventured to the campus quad to catch up on homework. As a sunny day in early Spring is practically an informal holiday for a significant portion of the undergraduate population, the grassy area was packed with hundreds of students listening to music, talking, dancing, reading, writing, and sleeping. As I worked on a reading for an upcoming class, I noticed a pair of White men arguing over where they should sit. While one of the men was visibly frustrated that they could not sit in one of several open areas in their immediate vicinity, the other was adamant that they find somewhere else to go. Finally giving an explanation for his reservations, he stated, "No bro, all of the Blacks and Hispanics are over here, we gotta go with the others." I then observed as they gravitated to a segment of the Quad predominantly occupied by White men and women. As I looked around my immediate surroundings, I realized that this stranger's observations were right,

[2] According to Brown and Dancy (2010), a PWI is defined as an "institution of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment."

and that I had chosen to sit in an area predominantly comprised of Black and Brown individuals without putting much conscious thought into it.

Flash forward to March of 2019, when I was studying abroad in Madrid, Spain. A series of bias incidents wherein multiple students and my own professor used a particularly harmful racial slur sparked a palpable sense of anger, sadness, vulnerability, and distrust within the walls of SU's Madrid Center. In the days that followed, I attended an emotionally charged town hall forum, a collection of last-minute meetings with "concerned" administrators, and innumerous, informal venting sessions with other students of color. Within two weeks' time, I accepted an invitation to join a newly formed student task force to address the issue, although I do admit that I briefly hesitated after reading that the work would be "time-consuming" and "as much of a priority as [my] classes." While I had gone abroad with the idealistic expectation of travelling Europe, discovering new horizons, and temporarily escaping the stress of the United States' sociopolitical climate, it quickly became clear that the reality of racism and bias incidents was, in fact, all-pervading, cross-cultural, and for some, inescapable.

In the weeks that followed, I saw a noticeable decline in my emotional energy, as well as that of the small population of students of color around me. While there had already been a discernible POC affinity group in the abroad program, it appeared that this group had become considerably closer knit in the aftermath of the conflict on campus. At school, when I was not in class or a meeting, I frequently found myself in a corner of the campus café, engaged in conversations with other students of color regarding our frustrations over the lack of diversity in the program or the heightened tensions and discomfort in predominantly white classroom settings. It was in this moment that I began to deeply consider the idea of "protective self-segregation" as a means of navigating ethnoracial conflict. What is more, when I repatriated to

SU's main campus in the fall, I discovered that the majority of the student task force's proposals would not be incorporated into SU Madrid's future programming. This led me to scrutinize the administration's investment in enacting long-term, effective change as it related to the embedded racial and ethnic tensions and inequities on our campus.

In the aftermath of each of these incidents, I became relatively consumed by the role that protective self-segregation and ethnoracial affinity groups take on in the context of PWIs. Realizing that pursuit of racially and/or ethnically homogenous spaces is far from exclusive to students of color—on both a historical and contemporary level—I sought to identify the processes that informed this ongoing reality of racial and ethnic division on campus. Given the above anecdotes, I also sought to analyze how the list of microaggressions, bias incidents, and overt acts of discrimination I had witnessed and endured over the years had pushed me to forge or locate my own "space," as well.

Thus, this project seeks to examine the experiences and social navigation patterns of undergraduate students of color attending a PWI. While existing scholarship has attributed patterns of ethnoracial self-segregation to in-group affinity processes and homophily principles (Combs, Stewart, & Sonnett 2017; Lewis 2012), I propose that there are other pertinent, institutional and systemic factors influencing students' actions, perceptions, and tendencies to pursue ethnoracial affinity groups in the college context. This may include their endurance and navigation of "microaggressive conditions," bias incidents, or conflicts relating to race, ethnicity, and/or religion, thus resulting in what Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) identify as 'racial battle fatigue.' Rather than focusing solely on students' complicity in forging racially/ethnically homogenous spaces, it is necessary to approach this phenomenon from a meso perspective, one that transcends the individual student of color's identity, desires, and preferences. This meso-

level perspective examines the external factors that have influenced students' navigation patterns, their physical and emotional welfare, and their strategies for belonging. These factors may encompass institutional efforts and group-level interactions. As such, I define three main research questions: *What impact do the institutional setting and administrative efforts have on the social navigation patterns and feelings of belonging of students of color at PWIs? What effect does a student of color's endurance of macro- and micro-aggressions while attending a PWI have on their modes of interaction and social engagement?* And finally, *to what extent does one's status as a person of color (POC) in a PWI influence their feelings of comfort, safety, and belonging on campus?*

In using the terms *students of color, person of color,* and *people of color,* I draw upon Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's (2017) criteria to refer to members of "those groups in America that are and have been historically targeted by racism. This includes people of African descent, people of Asian descent, people of Latin American descent, and indigenous peoples (sometimes referred to as Native Americans or American Indians)" (p. 94). While some may also refer to members of these populations as "minorities," I have chosen to avoid the use of this term not only due to the negative connotations of this designation, but also because people of color are projected to become the majority of the American population by 2043 (Frey 2018). Nevertheless, the term "ethnoracial minority students" may be appropriate to use here, as students of color continue to be minoritized, disenfranchised, and underrepresented in private universities and their enrollment statistics (hence the use of the term '*predominantly white* institutions').[3]

[3] In the case of Syracuse University, 2019 student enrollment statistics show that, of 15,275 undergraduate students, 8,583 (56.2%) were White; 2,208 (14.5%) were Nonresident Alien; 1,441 (9.4%) were Hispanic or Latino; 980 (6.4%) were Black or African American; 970 (6.4%) were Asian; 85 (0.6%) were American Indian or Alaska Native, and 511 (3.3%) were two or more races (Syracuse University Office of Institutional Research).

It is important to note that the terms "people of color," "students of color," or the broader "— of color" identity tag are also far from perfect. As umbrella terms, they can be complicit in lumping together individuals of different racial and ethnic identities without acknowledging the multiplicities and complexities that distinguish them. Some point to a need to expand on these terms, such as by using 'Black, Indigenous and People of Color' (BIPOC) to locate inter-group differences and "highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context" (BIPOC Project). Nevertheless, I have decided on the terms "students of color" and "people of color" not only because my research participants indicated their comfort in identifying as such, but also because these terms continue to emphasize a structural relationship between race and power that transcends the mere quantitative measure conveyed in the term "minorities." This is all to say, however, that we must remain cognizant of the intersectional nuances that exist to differentiate lived experiences as they relate to race and ethnicity.

**Conceptualizing Trigger Events**

Syracuse University is a potent example of how racial hate crimes and instances of racism, prejudice, and discrimination can manifest themselves in the university context— a context that is, in theory, held to higher expectations of justice, tolerance, and progressivism. Over the span of my four years of attendance as an undergraduate at SU, an ongoing series of racist and/or discriminatory incidents on campus dramatically impacted the general campus climate. Here, I refer to the 2017 exposure of a professional fraternity's blatantly racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, and anti-Semitic filmed hazing activities ("Theta Tau"), the February 2019 assault of a group of students of color at an off-campus house party ("Ackerman Avenue"), the

aforementioned use of the "n-word" by multiple students and a faculty member in an SU study abroad center in Madrid, Spain in March 2019 ("Madrid"), and a string of hate crimes and appearances of racist and anti-Semitic graffiti that plagued the campus for over two weeks in November 2019 ("Day Hall"). It is critical to point out that such incidents are ongoing at the time of my writing. The consistent emergence of reports citing discoveries of hateful graffiti, white supremacist ideology, and accounts of racial profiling, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other forms of harassment on a nearly weekly basis has driven media outlets such as CNN, the *Washington Post*, NBC, Fox News, and even *Teen Vogue* to scrutinize the university for this "spate of bias incidents" (Alsharif and Setty 2020). Moreover, in November 2019, the seemingly never-ending series of racist messages and hate crimes prompted New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo to make a public statement about the campus climate:

> The hateful activities at Syracuse University are most disturbing, not only to the Syracuse University community, but to the greater community of New York. They have not been handled in a manner that reflects this state's aggressive opposition to such odious, reckless, reprehensible behavior. That these actions should happen on the campus of a leading New York university makes this situation even worse. (Cuomo 2019)

In citing and reflecting on the above incidents, it is imperative to note that Syracuse University does not exist in a vacuum. While Theta Tau, Madrid, Ackerman Avenue, and Day Hall may have been specific to SU, they each occurred within a broader, national landscape of division, discrimination, hostility, and hate (Rogers et al. 2017). Here, I refer to post-2016 Trump's America, a context that continued and built upon the United States' longer history of racism, discrimination, and violence as it unleashed virulent and unbridled racist and xenophobic discourse and action on a global scale. Given the plethora of studies that point to increased levels of race-related stress experienced by members of marginalized populations in the aftermath of Trump's election, this is a context that cannot be overlooked (Krupenkin et al. 2019; Rogers et

al. 2017; Abu-Ras, Suárez and Abu-Bader 2018; Albright and Hurd 2019). It is moreover essential to acknowledge how this "polarizing and contentious" political climate has given a platform to discriminatory sentiment and emboldened perpetrators of hate crimes and bias incidents across the nation (Rogers et al. 2017). Doing so not only sheds light on the contemporary context in which the aforementioned events have occurred, but also highlights the distressing climate that underrepresented college students must constantly navigate— both within and outside of their university's walls (Albright and Hurd 2019).

In approaching the questions that shape this study, I am interested in developing an analysis of these ethnoracial conflicts, hereafter referred to as "trigger events," and their potential impact on undergraduate students' social navigation patterns, modes of belonging, and perceptions of the institution. For context, I have defined a trigger event as the occurrence of a social conflict that is rooted in one of the 'isms' or 'phobias' of discrimination, including, but not limited to: racism, antisemitism, sexism, classism, ableism, Islamophobia, homophobia, xenophobia, and transphobia. In the case of this study, however, three out of four of the trigger events I draw upon primarily have implications that concern race, ethnicity, or religion. The key component of a trigger event is that it "triggers" an outcry and/or emotionally provokes the population implicated in or targeted by it. This outcry or provocation can be wide-ranging and may manifest in the form of activism, organizing, protests, institution-wide dialogues and discussion, and/or new planes of anger, fear, and distrust. It may also "trigger" hostility between the opposing parties involved, if applicable. It is important to note that trigger events are wide ranging and go far beyond Theta Tau, Ackerman Avenue, Madrid, and Day Hall. They are also not at all limited to the university context. For some, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 may be a trigger event, given the racial and ethnic implications of his platform, public remarks, and

policies. For others, news of police brutality can be triggering, given the largely racialized nature of this phenomenon. Furthermore, what may be a trigger event for one student may not necessarily be one for another based on context, intersectional differences, perception, and a variety of other subjective factors. It is due to the highly contextual nature of this concept that I do not approach this study with the assumption that discriminatory incidents are the major catalyst of protective self-segregation patterns amongst undergraduates. Rather, I seek to examine the extent to which students of color perceive these "trigger events" as impacting their campus navigation patterns and general college experiences. To do so, I draw upon semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the intention of understanding students' lived experiences, as well as encouraged them to reflect on ethnoracial incidents and how their endurance of them may have impacted their time in college.

In the interest of examining POC modes of belonging in a PWI, I will moreover examine if and how the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives that have gained funding, support, and visibility in recent years have legitimately helped to uplift the campus climate in the face of these incidents, or if they have simply pushed students further into their affinity groups. For as some studies have shown, the implementation of these DEI strategies can actually occur at the expense and/or exploitation of the marginalized populations that they are apparently intended to uplift (Hiraldo 2010; Berrey 2015). As both a student and an aspiring DEI professional, it is vital for me to assess the efficacy of these initiatives in order to restructure them. With this restructuring, I aim to promote a genuinely equitable, inclusive, and diverse environment for all, one that is not simply reliant on numbers and quotas, but one where *all* individuals— that is students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members—of all backgrounds and identities feel welcomed, empowered, safe, and supported. For this reason, I will conclude this

study with a policy-based framework based on suggestions from students regarding what they believe to be possible solutions to forging a more inclusive and hospitable campus climate.

Finally, it is imperative to note that I in no way intend to reify the notion that there is one, homogenous experience for students of color attending a PWI. While my analysis is rooted in empirical evidence, it does not seek to postulate that the perspectives and experiences of 21 students are representative of those of an entire population. What this study aims to do, rather, is use the experiences of my respondents to retheorize our understanding of the widely observed pattern of ethnoracial "self-segregation" in order to identify the broader realities of marginalization, discomfort, and race-related stress that continue to be experienced by members of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups in a setting that not only claims to foster diversity, inclusion, and equity in opportunity, but that also paints itself to be a hospitable space—a home, even—for all who navigate it. In doing so, I hope to establish a framework that can inspire genuine strides toward equity and justice, one that productively envisions and realizes the professed values of a higher education institution such as Syracuse University for its entire student population.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Microaggressions, Inequity, Alienation & Hate in the College Context

Studies that trace the experiences of students of color attending PWIs frequently cite a sense of isolation felt by students—whether intergroup or intragroup—that prompts their seeking out affinity groups or social circles as sites of solace, safety, and solidarity (Tatum 2017; Villalpando 2003). Allen (1992), who analyzed data from the National Study on Black College Students, found that "on predominantly White campuses, Black students emphasize feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration" (p. 39). According to Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000), these feelings can also be located within the broader population of racial and ethnic minority students, who may "hold more nuanced perspectives of discrimination" than their White peers (p. 180). In a quantitative study of undergraduates' assessments of the cultural climates on their campuses, the researchers found that students of color—in particular, Black and Latinx students— were more likely than their White peers to regard their experiences on campus in a negative light, citing frequent subjection to racial/ethnic hostility, stereotyping, and discriminatory treatment by faculty, staff, administrators, teaching assistants, and other students (p. 183). Similarly, in the 20th anniversary edition of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?,* Tatum (2017) draws on the experiences of adolescents and young adults of color to highlight the enduring realities of racism, racialization, marginalization, subordination, and social erasure experienced by these populations in both academic and broader institutional settings.

Zeroing in specifically on the experiences of students of color navigating predominantly white campuses, Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) engage critical race theory (CRT) to highlight how an individual's incessant endurance of racial microaggressions and various modes

of 'othering' can lead to 'racial battle fatigue.'[4] As a product of "mundane extreme environmental stress" (MEES), racial battle fatigue signifies the "various forms of mental, emotional, and physical strain" experienced by people of color as a result of their frequent endurance or observation of racial microaggressions and ethnoracial conflict (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006: 300). When left untreated or unalleviated, racial battle fatigue can lead to severe health problems, and can even be fatal (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006). In an ethnographic study that tracks social navigation patterns in the university context, Lewis (2012) similarly finds that students of color—specifically Black and Latinx students—report suffering from higher levels of "social energy" expenditure—or effort put into social interactions with others—as a result of frequent discrimination from racial 'others' and general perceptions of an unwelcoming mainstream campus culture.

**The Role of the Institution in Creating Inhospitable & Inequitable Spaces**

In *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, Armstrong and Hamilton (2015) trace how the social and academic infrastructures of universities pave pathways that cater to the success of privileged, socially oriented students (those who benefit the institution economically), while simultaneously disadvantaging those with fewer socioeconomic resources. Although the researchers focus on patterns of class segregation among their sample of predominantly White, female college students, their findings remain significant in that they demonstrate how discriminatory and/or exclusive practices and pathways within the realm of higher education—such as exclusionary admissions criteria, housing policies/costs, limited

[4] Critical race theory is a framework that "draws on many areas of academic scholarship and centers the experiences of people of color to document voices and knowledges rarely taken into account in traditional academic spaces or mainstream mass media venues" (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006: 299).

financial aid, party culture, and even Greek Life— maintain patterns of stratification among undergraduate students over the span of their academic and professional careers. These conclusions about institutional complicity are echoed and extended by Lewis (2012), who examines the disconnect between universities' claims of racial diversity in their student bodies and the lack of social integration among these diverse students. Lewis ties this maintained segregation to a set of institutional inadequacies and outdated and/or discriminatory policies that are inhospitable to the lived experiences of students of color. Hiraldo (2010) furthermore draws on CRT to show how institutions of higher education both maintain and reinforce social inequities because the "systemic reality" they facilitate goes on to enable the "imbedded hierarchical racist paradigms that currently exist in our society" (p. 56). Beyond the realities of undergraduates, their analysis shows that this hierarchy also extends to POC graduate students, faculty, and staff, who more often than not are in roles, divisions, and fields that grant them less autonomy, leverage, and control than their white counterparts (p. 55).

**Protective Segregation in the College Context**

In addition to identifying institutional practices that maintain inequity and demographic homogeny among different social groups on campus, Armstrong and Hamilton (2015) observe that members of "alternative subcultures" navigate and "survive" their college experiences via a strategy of "protective segregation" (p. 7).[5] The concept of protective segregation, referenced here to denote the action of "self-segregating" as a means of social protection from forces perceived as hostile, marginalizing, or threatening to one's identity and/or sense of self, has been

[5] "Alternative subcultures" refer not only to POC communities, but also to students who are "marginal to the mainstream of campus life," such as LGBTQ+ students, international students, and "those devoted to the arts, music, sports, religion, or academics" (Armstrong and Hamilton 2015: 7, 236).

addressed in a myriad of studies (Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr 2000; Villalpando 2003; Tatum 2017; Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Feagin and Sikes 1995). This includes the work of Smith and Jones (2011), who draw on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen to show that the establishment of—or gravitation towards—racially/ethnically homogenous social groups may stem from 1) students' need to combat discrimination, 2) a desire to maintain a positive and cohesive group identity, or 3) a sense of isolation and alienation from the larger campus community. Patterns of self-segregation—as they are exhibited by students of color *and* White students— have been additionally attributed to a variety of other factors, including, but not limited to: an interest in avoiding in-group perceptions of inauthenticity or disloyalty (DaCosta 2007; Smith and Moore 2000); one's lack of "preadult integrative experiences" to normalize interracial group processes (Smith and Moore 2000); a need to curb the physical and emotional drainage resultant from social energy expenditure (Lewis 2012); homophily, homogamy, and endogamy principles (Smith and Moore 2000; Armstrong and Hamilton 2015); a general fear and suspicion of racial 'others' (Chang 2016); and the United States' long, tension-filled history of race relations that has facilitated resegregation over the last five decades (Chang 2016).

Smith and Jones (2011) furthermore zero in on how intraracial harassment of students may operate as a demonstration of 'borderism'— that is, a form of in-group discrimination that deters individuals from crossing the 'color-line' and associating with members of other racial/ethnic groups. While borderism may be practiced by and between students of all identities, their study specifically examines the role that this unique form of discrimination plays in maintaining in-group solidarity and a sense of supportive community among students of color navigating PWIs. In this sense, in-group harassment and judgement may have the potential to

convert a student who may have been more "open" toward interracial mixing into one who primarily pursues "racially homogenous voluntary groups" (Smith & Jones 2011: 1569).

Finally, as it pertains to mixed-raced individuals, Smith and Moore (2009) indicate that in-group "perceptions of inauthenticity" play a major role in affecting patterns of belonging and association for those who identify as two or more races (p. 147). Continuous experiences of borderism may moreover cause multiracial individuals to feel as though they must pick one "side" of their identity and hyper-identify with it, effectively self-segregating in the process (DaCosta 2007; Tatum 2017; Smith and Jones 2011; Dalmage 2000).

Although there is a substantial collection of literature that addresses "self-segregation" in the college context, it is critical to note that some scholars are also deliberate in critiquing the mere notion of this idea, especially when it is wielded to exclusively characterize the social navigation patterns of students of color (Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr 2000; Villalpando 2003). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) point out that, while racial homogeny amongst groups of White students typically goes unquestioned and uncriticized, social groups comprised solely of students of color are often problematized and criticized for their performance of "self-segregation." As Villalpando (2003) has noted, the one-sided association of students of color, but not White students, with the tendency to "self-segregate" is microaggressive and oppressive in nature because it gives rise to the "racial balkanization myth." 'Racial balkanization' suggests that students of color suffer behaviorally, academically, and professionally due to a "tendency […] to self-segregate from the university's predominantly white body and into their respective racial 'enclaves'" (Villalpando 2003: 619). While I do draw upon the notion of "self-segregation" in my own study, I am mindful to avoid the production of a framework that suggests that this is a phenomenon exclusive to, produced by, or inherently harmful to students

of color. Instead, my intention is to trace the micro and macro forces that, for some students, may lead to protective segregation and/or the forging of affinity groups as a strategy for support, safety, and survival.

## Chapter 3: Methods

Data for this research project comes from interviews with 21 undergraduate students of color at Syracuse University. In order to gain insight into the student experience from students themselves, I recruited interview respondents for hour-long, one-on-one semi-structured interviews at a time and place of their choosing. Throughout this process, I established and maintained my identity as a student researcher completing a senior thesis project.

### *Recruitment*

The recruitment of interview respondents was largely accomplished via snowball and convenience sampling and took place in September of 2019. In the early stages of recruitment, I relied on social media platforms (i.e. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) and other forms of electronic communication (i.e. iMessage, GroupMe, WhatsApp) to disseminate a flyer with information about the study and my contact information for prospective participants. I furthermore requested that others share this flyer in order to increase its reach and visibility. After completing the interviews, I often encouraged interviewees to share details about the study with any of their undergraduate peers who they believed could potentially be interested in participating, as well. Ultimately, I found that snowball sampling was an incredibly effective method in the recruitment process; I successfully gained at least 12 participants via direct referrals.

In my recruitment materials, which were directed at "enrolled Syracuse University undergraduates," I communicated that my project was about "SU undergrads' experiences and modes of social belonging on campus," and that I was "looking for volunteers who would be interested in participating in a one-on-one interview with me." I furthermore added that "interviews would run for about an hour and [would] be compensated with a $25 Visa gift card." For those who reached out for more information, I first confirmed that they fit the sampling

frame/criteria (full-time undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30 who were enrolled and on campus at the time of the study). I then expanded on what the interview would entail, explaining that it would involve questions about the ways they have navigated their college experiences, the friend groups they have formed, the organizations and/or extracurriculars they have pursued, their perspective of the institution, and their reaction to and understanding of incidents such as Theta Tau, Madrid, and Ackerman Avenue.[6] For the most part (in 24 out of 30 cases), those who reached out for more information confirmed that they were comfortable with this process and agreed to schedule an interview at a time and place of their choosing. In order to retain respondents, I conducted each interview within a week of their agreement to participate.

It is perhaps significant to note that, in its early implementation, this study was not intended to focus solely on the experiences of students of color. Rather, I had the objective of interviewing a wide variety of students, including those who identify as White, in order to broaden and diversify the breadth of perspective and data I collected. Given that my research occurs in the context of a PWI, I intended to use interview data from members of the racial majority to analyze the roles that power structures and institutional representation play in shaping—and potentially differentiating—students' perspectives and lived experiences. Moreover, I hoped to gain insight into the microcosmic landscape of Syracuse University in order to develop a relatively inclusive framework, one that did not focus solely on the intersectional realities of minority students, but rather delved into the multi-faceted nature of the campus and the wide array of communities it encompasses. As such, when I launched the recruitment process, I was intentional in disseminating materials that called generally for

[6] At the time of recruitment, the trigger event identified as 'Day Hall' had not yet occurred.

"enrolled Syracuse University undergraduates" and omitted any race/ethnicity-specific criteria. Moreover, when elaborating on the topic of my study for prospective participants, I was conscious to avoid the use of terms such as "self-segregation" or "race," as I did not want my researcher bias to potentially drive students away or influence their interpretation of the study.

The narrowing in scope—that is, the transition to a minority student focus—was due in large part to a lack of representation. By the end of the month-long recruitment process (during which I simultaneously conducted interviews), I had successfully recruited and interviewed a grand total of 3 White respondents. In my original sample of 24 respondents, White students represented less than 13% of the population. Despite attempts to deliberately increase this number via focused recruitment efforts, I was unsuccessful. Thus, given the limited data that I had collected from these three interviews, I chose to narrow my scope to the experiences of students of color specifically. Although the shift proved to be productive, this is a quandary I continue to reflect on; while I am conscious that my identity as a woman of color may have assisted in my successful recruitment of— and establishment of rapport with— a portion of my respondents of color (as some explicitly stated in their interviews), I remain curious as to the factors that may have conversely functioned to limit the number of White students that participated in this study.

Nevertheless, narrowing my scope to focus on the experiences of students of color proved to be pivotal in the production of this project, for it led me to zero in on the paths that members of historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups pursue while attending a PWI. Moreover, while I originally began the project focused on the "who" and "what" of 'self-segregation' in the university context, this shift in scope permitted further scrutiny of codes that revealed that patterns of racial/ethnic segregation go far beyond the individual choices of students, and that I

needed to consider the administrative, institutional and sociopolitical forces that were influencing students' pursuit of racial/ethnic affinity groups.

*Interviews*

From early September to mid-October of 2019, I conducted 24 in-person, semi-structured interviews. All interviews ran for about an hour, took place on campus, and were compensated with a $25 Visa gift card. With the consent of the participant, I also audio recorded each interview for transcription purposes (See Appendix A).

After taking down the individual participant's sociodemographic characteristics (race, ethnicity, personal pronouns, year of study, college, and major) for accurate reporting, I began by asking questions about their initial transition to SU, and then worked to guide the conversation as candidly as possible (while maintaining the semi-structured framework) so as to build rapport. Questions that universally surfaced to guide the conversation included those that gauged students' feelings of belonging, safety, and comfort on campus and those that sought insight about their identity formation and social group (see Appendix B). During the second half of each interview, I asked students to reflect on campus-specific trigger events, the administrative response, associated DEI initiatives, and to propose their own solutions for change moving forward.

*Analysis*

In analyzing the interview transcripts from my 21 POC respondents, I relied on Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software to conduct a multi-layered coding strategy. After reading through each transcript, I proceeded to conduct line-by-line open-coding, a process that led me to index the text and discern common themes and patterns that ran throughout the data set. From there, I used closed coding to identify and construct a thematic framework that connected (or

differentiated) my respondents' narratives in regard to experience, perspective, and patterns of belonging.

*Characteristics of Sample*

The final sample population consists of 21 self-identified undergraduate students of color who were enrolled, full-time students taking classes on campus at the time of the study. Of my population of 21 respondents, 12 students identified as Black, 3 as Asian, 3 as Latinx, 1 as Middle Eastern,[7] and 2 as multiracial. It is, however, critical to note the limitations of these socially constructed racial/ethnic classifiers, especially in regard to their erasure of in-group ethnic differences. Because this study is deliberate in considering the intersectional nuances of students' identities and lived experiences, at the beginning of each interview I asked respondents to state how they identify in regard to race *and* ethnicity. Thus, as indicated in Figure 1.1, among the 12 Black respondents, 3 identified as Caribbean, 2 as African, 1 as Afro-Caribbean, 2 as Afro-Latinx, and 4 as African American. Of the 3 Asian respondents, 2 identified as Chinese American and 1 as Filipino. Of the 3 Latinx respondents, 2 identified as Puerto Rican and 1 identified as Mexican. The sole Middle Eastern respondent identified as Iranian. Finally, of the 2 multiracial respondents, one identified as Black and White (and, as it pertains to ethnicity, African American and Italian), and the other as Black, White, and Asian (African American, Polish, and Filipino). Of the 21 total respondents, 12 identified as female and 9 identified as male. All of the respondents were classified as upperclassmen, with 12 seniors and 9 juniors. Finally, 6 of Syracuse University's schools and colleges were represented among the sample, with 10 students enrolled in the College of Arts of Sciences and/or Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 3 in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, 2 in

[7] According to the U.S. Census, Middle Easterners are categorized as White, but self-identification among Middle Easterners in the U.S. often diverges from this category.

the Martin J. Whitman School of Management, 1 in the School of Education, 2 in the College of Engineering and Computer Science, 1 in the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, and 1 in the School of Information Studies.

| **Sociodemographic Characteristics** | | | ***n*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Race/Ethnicity** | **Black** | Caribbean | 3 |
| | | African | 2 |
| | | Afro-Caribbean | 1 |
| | | Afro-Latinx | 2 |
| | | African American | 4 |
| | **Asian** | Chinese American | 2 |
| | | Filipino | 1 |
| | **Latinx and/or Hispanic** | Puerto Rican | 2 |
| | | Mexican | 1 |
| | **Middle Eastern** | Iranian | 1 |
| | **Multiracial** | Black *(African American)*/White *(Italian)* | 1 |
| | | Black *(African American)* / White *(Polish)* /Asian *(Filipino)* | 1 |
| **Gender** | **Male** | | 9 |
| | **Female** | | 12 |
| **School** | **College of Arts & Sciences/Maxwell** | | 10 |
| | **Newhouse** | | 3 |
| | **Whitman** | | 2 |
| | **School of Education** | | 2 |
| | **College of Engineering & Computer Science** | | 2 |
| | **Falk College of Sport & Human Dynamics** | | 1 |
| | **School of Information Studies** | | 1 |
| **Year of Study** | **Junior (3rd Year)** | | 9 |
| | **Senior (4th Year)** | | 12 |
| **Total** | | | 21 |

**Figure 1.1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample Population**

## Chapter 4: Findings

While analyzing interview transcripts, I found that my codes presented a relatively linear way of examining students' social navigation patterns. To trace this, I will break down my findings into five main sections. The first relates to students' identification of a reality of bias and systemic discrimination in the college context, and the process of disillusionment that they undergo as they submerge themselves in this reality. From there, it is significant to analyze the role that these experiences play in launching processes of disengagement. Next, I will analyze how students identify a need for "space" and support as a result of the racial battle fatigue and race-related stress of the aforementioned factors. However, I will also contest this to show how intersectionality problematizes assumptions of racial/ethnic homogeneity as an inherent source of in-group affinity. Finally, I will trace how students perceive administrative efforts (as they relate to reactionary, tactical solutions and DEI strategies) as insufficient, ineffective, and complicit in pushing them further into their respective enclaves.

### I. POC in a PWI: The Path to Social Disillusionment

I found that many of my respondents alluded to a process of social disillusionment that they had undergone over the course of their college careers. Here, I use the term "disillusionment" to describe the breaking down of students' positive perceptions of SU as they came to understand the pervasive inequalities that it housed and perpetuated. I also use it to refer to a shift from a non-critical to critical perspective —as it largely pertains to race, ethnicity, and identity processes and politics — that several respondents described experiencing. This disillusionment was multifaceted and wide-ranging in nature; it related to students' feelings of school spirit, their expectations of their academic and social endeavors, and their general

integration into the broader campus community. For some, disillusionment began as early as the first days and weeks of their adjustment to campus. While many students indicated that they had come in with an awareness of the intersectional inequalities that higher education institutions housed and maintained, during this initial adjustment period they still reported feeling "disappointed," "disturbed," and "caught off guard" as they began to discern how entrenched and visible *racial* inequalities and disparities were on campus. With this increase in critical discernment also came a shift in students' patterns of social belonging. Nick, an Afro-Latino respondent, identified what he referred to as a "massive wake-up call" as he described how the perception he had of SU based off of an admissions tour failed to match up with the campus he later experienced as an enrolled student:

> If you look at the admissions brochure and the tour guides and their opinions on campus, you look at what they try to sell to you, it's not the same. It's funny, I went on a tour my senior year of high school, and what I saw on my tour was this happy-go-lucky place where you can come and you can have the four best years of your life. Coming here, I found out there's a lot more to it, there's a lot more negativity and toxicity and racism than that initial presentation let on.

Whereas Nick had come in feeling "crazy excited" about basketball games, community tailgates, and SU's infamous party scene, he came to realize that each of these aspects of campus life had an underlying racial component. For one, he quickly noticed that the party scene was "split up by race," with "Black parties taking place in one hidden corner, Latino parties in another, and White people getting belligerently drunk right outside the library." He additionally told me that, despite purchasing season tickets, he never attended another SU basketball game after a "White dude sitting in front of [him] in the student section yelled 'suck it, n****r!'" at a Black player on the opposing team. In this sense, disillusionment was tied to a development in the student's social consciousness—in particular, as consciousness relates to race, racial processes, and racial identity. Although Nick assured me that he was "very much racially aware" prior to beginning

his undergraduate journey, his comments reveal that he retained certain idealistic expectations of what his college experience would be like, expectations that appeared to relate to positive social integration between students of different racial and ethnic groups. Other respondents similarly discussed how, in considering their initial perceptions of campus, the non-critical promotional materials that they received in the admissions process "skirted around more serious topics in favor of promoting an ideal of 'Orange pride' and diversity."

In time, some students described how their first-hand experiences and observations came to trump their initial expectations of campus life. When I asked David, an African American respondent, what his favorite memory during his time at SU was, he identified the entirety of his first year. Reflecting on the "ignorance is bliss mentality" he believes to have had as a freshman, he stated:

> I guess my most notable memory is freshman year in general because my perception of Syracuse did change throughout the three or four years. I guess I was able to enjoy the campus life a little more. Like I was able to walk around without my eyes being open to everything that's going on around here. […] Like all the tension between different types of racial groups and in how people view each other.

What, then, did students mean when they referenced the "tension," toxicity, and institutional flaws that they began to locate? In my analysis, I found that the identification of an underlying "racial reality" at SU was closely tied to the process of disillusionment and consciousness development. In conceptualizing this reality, many respondents pointed to a certain omnipresence of microaggressions, tokenism, discrimination, prejudice, racism, inequality, and underrepresentation that they had either endured personally, witnessed first-hand, or heard about from their peers. I moreover noted that the majority of my respondent population touched upon this "reality" in at least some capacity, and that it appeared to impact their perceptions of comfort, safety, and belonging on campus.

### *A Reality of Underrepresentation*

Some respondents expressed that they were "unprepared" or "caught off guard" by the "reality of POC underrepresentation" in the undergraduate population. In defining underrepresentation, students mainly referenced their minority status and the fact that White students made up over 50% of the student body. Jess, a mixed-raced respondent, discussed how "low POC enrollment" became evident the moment she moved into her freshman dorm:

> As soon as I got here, I noticed that there weren't a lot of minorities, especially in my dormitory. I would say it was segregated in a sense. It was clearly one or two minorities per floor, and it was 50+ students on each floor. It was kind of unsettling, to be honest with you. I didn't know it'd be that extreme. Real talk, I didn't even know what a PWI was at that point.

Even if they had conducted independent research on the school's enrollment statistics prior to commitment, in some cases students' understandings of SU's racial makeup did not prepare them for the reality that they ultimately encountered. Leah, for instance, commented:

> In comparison to some of the other schools I was interested in, Syracuse actually seemed pretty racially diverse on paper. I intentionally did my research on that, because it's so important to me. Then coming here, it's a lower demographic of White students compared to some schools but it's still predominantly White. When it's not just on paper, when you finally experience it in person, then you really see a lot of the flaws. You're like, "Wait, how come it is predominantly White?" There are so many chances to admit more students of color and to just have this rich experience, why aren't you guys doing that?

In this case, the student's first-hand observations of the demographic makeup of campus led her to feel doubtful about the institution's intent to foster feelings of belonging amongst the POC population.

### *A Reality of Exclusion & Social Alienation*

For others, a rise in racial consciousness stemmed from experiencing being what Collins (1986) refers to as "the outsider within," or being socially positioned as a marginalized figure in predominantly White spaces. For Jess, living on a predominantly White dorm floor, joining a

predominantly White professional fraternity, and existing as one of few students of color in her classes made her feel like an "outsider" and "made [her] realize how segregated and non-diverse this campus is." Aliyah similarly discussed how this demographic reality never left her consciousness, how she was always hyper-aware of the alienation and exclusion she felt as a Black woman constantly navigating predominantly White spaces:

> I feel excluded in almost every aspect, whether it's in class, and I'm like one of four people in a class of 400 people that are of color, or I am on a bus, I notice it, or I'm at the mall and notice it. Like it's just everywhere. It's really bad.

While discussing certain promotional items that referred to SU as a "home away from home," I asked Jakob if this statement was reflective of his own experience, if campus felt like a second home for him. Without hesitation, he revealed that this was not the case:

> Do I feel like this is my home? Absolutely not. I think that, for a place to be your home, you have to feel really comfortable there. And I've never felt truly comfortable here, like I can let my guard down and things will be fine. So no, I don't think this is my home. I think it sucks.

Jakob later tied his need to be hyper-vigilant to the fact that he is a "Black man in America," and commented that "that is a profoundly dangerous thing to be." In this sense, the intersection of his race and gender directly informed his feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, and unbelonging not only as he navigated SU, but also the landscape of the United States more broadly.

When I asked Leah if Syracuse felt like home to her, her response was indicative not only of the detachment that she felt from the general campus community, but also of the unwavering reality of scrutiny and social alienation that she perceived from members of the dominant group on account of her Black identity:

> I don't feel like I'm at home because I feel like when I'm walking through campus, every White person is **looking at and analyzing me like I'm a zoo exhibit.** It can be just for a quick second but I'm like, "I know you're not looking at other people. Why do you feel the need to look at me like that? Why are you so shocked that there's a Black person walking on our campus?" I don't feel at home because I feel like each time I'm walking

> on the Promenade, somebody always has to be looking at me extra. I don't even know how to describe it, but it's like they're really taken aback. It's curiosity but then I don't like that because you expect people to have been exposed to Black people before coming here and I could sense that a lot of people here didn't go to high school with Black people.

In this case, the "outsider" status that Leah feels is on account of the "othering" gaze that she believes to be projected onto her on account of her race. Her feelings of exclusion are directly tied to the hyper-visibility she feels as she merely walks around campus. In this way, she understood herself as holding a position as the scrutinized 'other,' which once again induced feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, and unbelonging.

### *A Reality of Bias, Prejudice & Racism*

For some students, continuous endurance of bias incidents existed at the top of their radar as they regarded their experiences at SU. Respondents described hostile interactions with a wide array of social actors, including campus and city police, peers, administrators, food service workers, and professors. Joshua, a Puerto Rican respondent, described how being racially profiled by campus police left him feeling "disrespected" and "jaded" about the "reality" on campus:

> So, I was on a run, it was like 8 at night. DPS stopped me, and they were like, "Oh, you're a student here?" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm a student here." I gave them my SUID and everything. The officer goes, "Oh, well somebody had called in about a disturbance." And I'm like, "I'm the only one here running at three o'clock in the morning. What disturbance are you talking about?" If I was doing anything, I wouldn't be stopping standing in the middle of the street, stretching. And he was like, "Oh, it's fine. It's just protocol. Maybe it's not you, but we're hearing complaints." Mind you, I'm the only one outside. They checked me, and then asked, "Where are you staying at? Who are you with? Why are you here?" I'm like, "I'm a student here. I'm living in such and such place." I literally gave them all the information. He still wanted to waste my time for another half hour to tell me, "Have a good day sir." I just did not like that.

Moriah, an African American respondent, outlined another experience with racial profiling on campus:

> This one time, I was waiting for my food at [one of the campus café's]. When they called my name, I took my wrap and started walking away. All of a sudden, I hear one of the workers—a White lady—screaming at me, telling me to get back here, that I didn't pay for my food. I'm like, huh? You literally just saw me swipe my card a second ago, what are you talking about? I look around, all of these people are staring at me. She keeps yelling, accusing me of stealing. Finally, I pulled out my receipt to prove that I had paid, and she just kind of screw-faced me and brushed it off with a quick "sorry." So, yeah. I haven't been back there since.

When I asked whether she felt comfortable in academic spaces, Abenaa, an Afro-Caribbean respondent, pointed to an enduring reality of tokenization and a myriad of other microaggressions that she had experienced in her classes over the years. Her account spanned from professors asking Asian international students why their English was so good," to peers going unchecked after making disparaging comments about "third world countries." One of the incidents she described involved being both tokenized and generalized by a professor:

> One time in Econ 203, because I was the sole Black person in the class, my professor asked me to explain the reasons for the end of slavery. And he asked me to explain if I had any personal experiences with the end of slavery, to which I had to kindly explain that I am not African American.

After the above example, Abenaa went on to describe a display of Islamophobia that came up in a different lecture setting:

> Another time that comes to mind is my Global Management course, International Business, Management in the International Context, something like that. My professor just said some wild, out-of-pocket stuff about how people from Middle Eastern countries, and especially those who follow Muslim traditions, that the reason their countries have such bad economic trades is because they beat their women.

What stood out in many interviews was the relatively nonchalant tone of those recounting their stories. When Nadia, for example, described how a White woman had "dumped a cup of coffee on [her] and accused [her] of being a product of affirmative action" after she had been selected over the woman for a competitive internship, she spoke in such a casual manner that it

took me a moment to process the gravity of the situation. In fact, she laughed as she told me this story, as if she had normalized this hateful incident and others like it. This tone was similar with Keith, who recounted how, during his first week at SU, he was denied entry to a "party at a White frat." He laughed—albeit somewhat bitterly— as he told me the fraternity brother-turned-bouncer's provided explanation, which was "We don't want any n*****s" here."

Thus, regardless of the social role they were performing (i.e. students, customers, partygoers, civilians), respondents repeatedly pointed to a reality of racism, racial profiling, and microaggressions that seemed to follow them throughout their undergraduate journeys. In some cases, it appeared that students had even come to normalize and expect these incidents, to view their occurrence as both inevitable and inescapable. For Leah, the frequency at which she had experienced racism, bias, and microaggressions over the last three years led her to operate with an "assume the worst" mentality:

> Navigating white spaces now is so suffocating and I feel like in each class I have to assume the worst with everybody. I've found myself having to train myself to think, "Okay, this person's going to be racist." Or, "This person's going to make me experience a microaggression."

While some may criticize Leah's mentality as an unfair projection of stereotypical assumptions onto her White peers, I conversely interpreted it as a mechanism of protection that she felt necessary to incorporate into her social navigation patterns on account of her past experiences. Her comments reveal the extent to which she had been made to feel vulnerable in the university setting, thereby suggesting a need to critique structures of racism and inequality, not the individual student's strategy of combatting these structures. By operating with this mentality, Leah reported feeling "less vulnerable" and "more prepared" as she navigated what she perceived to be an inhospitable campus environment. Moreover, it is important to note that this mentality of distrust was not limited to just one respondent, but rather was expressed in several

interviews. A comment that was perhaps the most comprehensive in summing up these particular students' feelings was provided by Jakob, who stated, "Honestly, I figured, wherever you go, as a person of color, racism will follow you. Even if you pick and choose where you go, it's inevitable. You just gotta keep your guard up at all times."

### *A Reality of Trigger Events*

While conducting interviews, I quickly found that, given the rate at which students had experienced bias incidents and marginalization over the years, 'trigger events' such as Theta Tau, Ackerman Avenue, and Madrid carried significantly less influence on their patterns of social navigation and belonging than I had originally conceptualized. This is not to say that these incidents were viewed as insignificant, but rather that they functioned less as a "trigger" and more as a confirmation of the underlying "problem" or "reality" that students had already been disillusioned to see. Instead of operating as a "wake-up call," they served to further alert students to the reality of institutional racism and violence that they had long been conscious of navigating.

In recalling the release of the leaked Theta Tau footage, Joshua described seeing "two video clips showing members of SU's engineering fraternity using racist and derogatory language and making violent comments about Jews, Mexicans, Blacks, Hispanics, pretty much every marginalized or minority population on campus and within the world." When I asked him how he felt about it all, his response was indicative of a disillusioned awareness about the campus climate:

> I was disgusted by it, but I wasn't surprised by it. I guess it just kind of confirmed everything that I already felt on this campus, like with the racism and everything. I guess the main difference from the leaked footage in comparison to what we experience on the daily is that they were so demonstrative about it. They were so blatant about it. But I wasn't surprised because I always felt that that was something that was prevalent here.

For Joshua, as with many others whom I interviewed, exposure to this conflict did not surprise him or alert him to a new issue, but rather provided undeniable evidence of the reality that he already knew as a Latino student navigating a PWI. In fact, in some cases students' astonishment was not sparked by the nature of the incidents themselves, but rather by the fact that certain members of the campus community had failed to recognize the pervasiveness of racism and other forms of discrimination on campus until confronted with hard evidence. Elle, for example, described her reaction to hearing groups of White students discuss how "shocked" they were to see the footage:

> Honestly, I was just so sad in the aftermath of it all, because these White people around me were saying, "Oh, my God. How could this happen?" I'm like, "You should see the shit that they say behind our backs," you know?

Lisa similarly reflected on the frustration she felt as she witnessed other students expressing their surprise at the "derogatory and hateful" content of the videos:

> It was just the exposure of something that we all knew was happening. I don't think it should have been a surprise to anybody. Anybody who said it was a surprise either was lying or just has no idea how the world works and is just super blind to everything that's going on around them, because nothing new came to my attention. I was like, "Okay, obviously."

Here, Lisa attaches a certain sense of privilege to one's ability to maintain idealistic understandings of the campus climate. Her expressed disturbance was based not on the incident itself, but rather on the ability of 'others' to be "super blind to everything that's going on around them," in particular as these ongoing social processes relate to racism, prejudice, and other forms of identity-based discrimination. As students considered other trigger events, such as Madrid and Ackerman Avenue, they maintained that "this has been happening forever," that they already knew that "we have a problem," and that they were "not surprised." And, while they were in no way passive or emotionally numb to any of these incidents, many were doubtful that any real

steps would be taken by SU on the administrative level to mitigate this reality of hate crimes and bias incidents. Some respondents informed me that even their parents viewed this reality as "normal" and "unsurprising." When Ilana called her mom in a panic after seeing the Theta Tau footage, the reaction she received was indicative of the pervasive reality of institutional racism, violence, and inequality that members of marginalized groups have long been accustomed to on a global scale:

> My mom was like, "This has always been like this. We left Iran because of this. This isn't anything that's new or scary." And she had said that at least it's out loud, that it's almost a little bit more comforting that it's out in the open.

The fact that numerous students—and even some parents— viewed the occurrence of ethnoracial conflicts as "normal" (or, as one student put it, "a day in the life") is indicative of a larger social issue. Their interpretations suggest that racist and discriminatory incidents were just another feature of the reality that they had become familiar with navigating as POC in both a PWI and in the broader social landscape. These incidents were byproducts of the omnipresent "problem" that they could not seem to escape. Rather than functioning as "wake-up calls"—as they apparently did for some White students—'trigger events' really served to vindicate students' pre-existing feelings of distrust, discomfort, and marginalization at SU. As Jay, a Jamaican respondent, remarked, they functioned to "further jade the gaze of the POC community when it comes to any of these types of institutions."

**II. From Disillusionment to Disengagement**

These realities of exclusion, discrimination, tokenism, and marginalization not only led students to feel disillusioned, they also pushed some to pull away from the broader campus community. After describing how they had come to lose their "Orange pride" and belief in a

campus collective on account of their feelings of unbelonging and social estrangement, several respondents alluded to the concept of *disengagement* as a new strategy of social navigation. For some, disengagement meant adopting a mentality of "social cynicism," or the belief "that idealism and involvement have few payoffs and that social distance and emotional detachment are superior ways of life" (Kanter and Mirvis 1989:16). The students who this applied to were most cynical about SU's potential to enact positive change in the campus climate—particularly as this change related to the achievement of racial/ethnic justice and equity. Rachel, for instance, commented that "there's really no point in even trying to make a difference because it's always going to be the same. This institution is always going to prioritize money over the safety and wellbeing of POC." In many cases, then, disengagement was practiced as a protective strategy, as a mechanism of autonomous escapism from the inhospitable and "irreconcilable" realities that students described experiencing. I found that conceptualizations of disengagement were largely subjective and varied by context, but that, overall, it could be broken down into two main forms: 1) physical disengagement and 2) emotional disengagement.

### ***Physical Disengagement***

I use 'physical disengagement' to describe a student's physical departure from a "space" or setting that feels inhospitable or marginalizing to them on account of their identity. In many cases, I found that students referenced a need to remove themselves from "white spaces," which one respondent memorably defined as "settings that are predominantly white in regard to those who occupy it, with few, if any, people of color around. And if the POC who *are* around are in service positions, then they don't count."

Examples of physical disengagement included multiple respondents who had dropped out of predominantly white student organizations because other members continuously used racial

slurs and/or made racist jokes in their presence. Nick, for example, moved out of his predominantly white dorm and into a multicultural learning community during his first semester after his White roommate told him to "go back to picking cotton." Camila also described a process of physical disengagement from predominantly white spaces after realizing that the microaggressions and bias incidents that she was experiencing in said spaces were taking a toll on her mental health:

> I think the problem is the environment feels toxic because these things aren't being addressed and, again, the University isn't taking accountability, so you feel the need to almost remove yourself from white spaces because the issue isn't solved. I guess it's almost me segregating myself away from other people and just doing my best to protect myself and other students of color.

The decisions that students made to remove themselves from environments that felt inhospitable and "toxic" can be understood as strategies of physical, mental, and social protection. In Camila's particular case, physically disengaging was a strategy that she believed to be necessitated by an administrative failure to acknowledge the looming "problem" in the campus climate and take effective measures to eliminate it. It is significant to note that Camila aligned this action with "segregating [herself]," for in some cases, physical disengagement may potentially be conflated with the idea of "self-segregation." However, in my analysis I have come to understand that this process is dynamic and complex. Rather than being an entirely autonomous decision made by the student, there are often larger social forces that lead one to feel a need to physically remove themselves from an environment. Moreover, there is a protective component that underlies this process of disengagement, one that is necessitated by a broader reality of marginalization and exclusion that makes students feel a need to pull away. To cast the label of "self-segregation" onto students' acts of physical disengagement is to overlook the inhospitable conditions that drive them to pursue this path to begin with.

***Emotional Disengagement***

'Emotional disengagement,' on the other hand, refers to a student's process of mentally "checking out" from the "space" that they are in (i.e. conversations with peers or academic lectures laden with microaggressions and oppressive language). As Moriah stated, some students of color were "tired of being tired"; they reported feeling emotionally exhausted from the toll of being relentlessly tokenized and discriminated against in settings and "spaces" such as classrooms, student organizations, friend groups, and workplaces. It is important to note that emotional and physical disengagement can—and often did—occur simultaneously. However, a key difference is that, in some instances, a student may remain physically present in a space while they disengage or "check out" on an emotional level. In some examples, emotional disengagement meant that a student had stopped participating in or paying attention to class discussions after becoming fed up with the "offensive, alternative viewpoints" that went unchecked by professors who promoted the heavily critiqued, performative ideals of "inclusion" and "diversity in thought" (Ahmed 2012). In Moriah's case, her eventual refusal to participate led her to suffer academically.

In other examples, emotional disengagement involved an abandonment of one's passion for social justice and/or activist efforts because of the toll that race-related stress and racial battle fatigue was taking on them (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006). Elle, for instance, described how, when she first assumed her role as a Resident Advisor (RA), she was set on changing the opinions that some of her White residents had about race—opinions that were sometimes showcased in the form of blatant racism and derogatory remarks. Over time, however, she gave up on this ambition:

> I used to want to sort of basically change every student's mind that I saw, but after maybe like a semester and a half into the job, I was just like, this is not feasible. Most of them

> don't care, and I can try, but I've realized that it's just not a thing. I would end up having to talk to people who understood, other RAs who were also people of color, or also just my friends who have had to go through the same shit.

Here, we can identify disillusionment as the precursor to Elle's emotional disengagement. While she approached her role with the optimistic objective of "[changing] every student's mind," her first-hand experiences led her to feel disillusioned, to sense that the task was infeasible. In turn, her disillusionment led her to disengage on an emotional level, which then prompted her to abandon her initial ambition. Rather than actively attempting to alter her residents' mindsets about race or curb the occurrence of racist behavior on her floor, she reserved her engagement with the topic for the moments when she was with other people of color who could empathize with her because they had a similar or shared experience.

**III. A Need for "Space"**

Thus, as they reflected on the microaggressions, bias incidents, and overt discrimination they had experienced throughout their undergraduate experience, many of my student respondents referenced a "space" that they could go to in order to process those encounters and find support. More often than not, these spaces were multicultural by design or explicitly built around racial/ethnic identity. As we have seen above with Elle, the "spaces" that she gravitated to in response to her encounters with racism were groups of fellow RAs or close friends—all of whom were self-identified people of color. The value she ascribed to these spaces stemmed not only from the fact that these individuals could provide her with emotional support and validation, but also that they were able to directly relate to what she had gone through on account of their shared status as minority students.

In discussing spaces on campus that made her feel the most comfortable, Jess recalled her

early involvement in WellsLink, a leadership program for first-year students of color.[8] As she explained her attraction to the organization, Jess described the validation she felt knowing that she was not alone in her experiences as a student of color attending, adjusting to, and navigating a PWI:

> I knew that I could come back to that meeting every Sunday, and tell my story, and they'd be like, yeah, that happened to me too. And I didn't feel excluded. I felt like they were also going through the same struggles as I was, like trying to maneuver through this campus that was primarily White.

This feeling of inclusion manifested in WellsLink was similarly expressed by Leah, a Haitian student who was also a member throughout her freshman year. Reflecting on her difficult transition as a "minority in a PWI," she identified the program as one of few spaces where she could find relief and solidarity:

> We had to figure it out ourselves, and within a safe space like WellsLink with other students that really understood the struggle because they shared similar identities, that's where I could only find that sense of relief. In any other space it was like I had to do that on my own and nobody was really looking out for me, and I just came from high school and it was overwhelming. So, yeah. Getting to go into WellsLink and having that first meeting—and for the whole entire semester actually—it was really grounding.

When a group of White students on her floor repeatedly said the n-word in front of her one night, Jess initially tried to let it go because she "knew that she had to see them every day and didn't want to make it worse." After sharing her experience in a weekly meeting for WellsLink, however, she felt empowered to speak out against her floormates' hate speech:

> Going back to that group of people, who actually understood the meaning of that word and how it demeans **us**, it helped me realize that I maybe need to address them [her

8 According to Syracuse University's Office of Multicultural Affairs, The WellsLink Leadership Program "is an academic excellence and leadership program for first-year students who are not already sponsored by athletics or state- or federally-funded programs." To join WellsLink, prospective applicants "must be a member of a historically underrepresented racial minority group in the United States (i.e. African American, Asian American, Latino/a, or Native/Indigenous)" as well as unaffiliated with the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), Student Support Services Program (SSSP), Syracuse University Athletics, or the Posse program (and agree not to participate in the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP) during [their] first year of college." (http://multicultural.syr.edu/programs/wellslink.html)

> floormates] in a certain way and say certain things. Not just let it go. Being in that space [WellsLink] and knowing I wasn't wrong to feel the way I was definitely gave me the confidence to speak up.

Outside of official campus programs, students identified informal "spaces"—such as friend groups—where they could go for support in the face of hostility, bias, discomfort, and/or discrimination. For example, in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election in November 2016, Leah recalled feeling triggered, isolated, and scared as "one of very few students of color on [her] floor." These feelings were exacerbated as she attempted to navigate certain students as they celebrated the new presidential elect just outside of her door. In response to this "triggering experience," she reflected on how her friend group comprised of Black and Latina women was another "space" where she could go for respite and support:

> It was such a safe space because, again, the group of girls that I found I felt like I could really go to them when the rest of my floor was screaming, "Make America great again." I just think getting to be in these spaces that was genuinely a safe space and especially for the political climate that semester, I definitely needed that. I needed to be able to express my opinions because I just felt like where I was situated at—not my suite specifically, but my floor— everyone was on a different level.

Although Leah acknowledged that dismay over Trump's election was not exclusive—nor inherent—to people of color, and that there were "White people [on the floor] that were more left-leaning and crying about the election, too," she perceived the reasoning for their negative sentiment as being different from her own. To provide an example of this, she drew upon an interaction she had with a White woman who lived down the hall:

> Even the reasons why some of them were crying were triggering. One girl, she had a Black boyfriend and she was like, "I don't know how we're going to walk out in public." I'm just like, you're not even your boyfriend. You're complaining because you got to walk with your boyfriend. I'm like, "Well I am Black. So…" I don't know, that just felt extremely isolating.

In this interaction, Leah's discomfort stemmed from what she later described as the White woman's "co-opting" of her experience, her "self-victimization." Although their feelings of

discomfort were prompted by the same event, Leah failed to identify a true affinity with the woman because the expressed rationale for her discomfort was divergent from her own. Whereas Leah felt directly targeted and vulnerable on account of her visible identity as a Black woman, she felt frustrated and isolated by the fact that the woman's "complaints" were not on account of her own identity, but rather because she was romantically associated with a Black person. In this case, race operated as a barrier to affinity between the two women. This interaction ultimately prompted Leah to pull away and seek out support from the women of color who lived on the floor above her, individuals who she believed "really got it," and "could really understand how [she] felt" on account of their shared status as women of color. In this case, she made the conscious decision to exit one "space" marked as inhospitable and isolating in pursuit of one where she felt she could locate true affinity, support, and empathy.

In reflecting on students' gravitation toward affinity groups and spaces, it is important to note that these spaces are not always physical, but virtual, as well. Abenaa, for instance, described an iMessage group chat that she is in with eight other Black women:

> So, with the chat, I feel welcomed in the sense that we are all Black women and if I need to, I can be like, "Yo, somebody pissed me off for xxx reason," or "somebody just said this racist thing in class." And if I text it to them, they'll all be like, "damn, sis, that sucks," or, "damn, sis, **I know how that feels.**"

Titled "Sisters,"[9] Abenaa informed me that she was added to this group chat in the spring semester of her freshman year. Originally consisting of three members, the group's roster has since expanded to include nine women from different academic disciplines and realms on campus— the majority of whom Abenaa now identifies as comprising her primary friend group. Locating this virtual "space" as a source of "therapy" and support, Abenaa's comments indicate the value of simply having a communicative channel to share, discuss, and understand one's

[9] Name printed with permission from all nine of its members.

lived experiences. Like Jess and Leah's comments about WellsLink, these reflections further suggest the value of having an affinity group to process and battle the microaggressions and 'othering' treatment students of color may experience while navigating a PWI.

### *A Note on Trigger Events and the Need for Space*

It is also salient to briefly note that, while trigger events may not have necessarily produced a radical change in students' perceptions of the institution, their occurrence did push students deeper into their affinity spaces or prompted them to forge new ones. Elle, for example, stated that the release of the Theta Tau footage "made some students feel more anxious, which made them burrow deeper into their communities or find more community within themselves." In this sense, the feelings of anxiety induced by the conflict prompted an intensified pursuit of affinity spaces as an emotional defense mechanism.

### *Spaces of Relatability and Empowerment*

As students described the POC-dominant spaces they had gravitated to over the span of their undergraduate careers, they did not solely focus on their therapeutic value, but also went on to express the overall sense of belonging and empowerment they felt there. Camila, a senior who identifies as Afro-Latina, described her gravitation toward programs and organizations where people shared her racial/ethnic identity as a way to find her "place":

> I needed a space where I was going to be with people who look like me and empower me. So that's also why I had to gravitate towards those groups. And also letting other women of color know, there's Dimensions [a women of color mentorship program], there's this. Get involved in OMA [Office of Multicultural Affairs], because that helped me branch out to everything else. Now I'm in a Latina sorority, and other things like that have helped me find my place and my family.

The significance of finding a new "family" in the campus context came up in several interviews.

Familial dynamics often overlapped with the "spaces" that respondents derived the most comfort and empowerment from. Jay similarly reflected on the "family dynamic" that she has established with a group of Black women on campus, and described how she had turned her apartment into a safe, welcoming space to meet as a collective:

> We're such a small community that we have to create a small family dynamic to make it more comfortable here. My girlfriend and I have a whole crop of juniors and sophomores who we refer to as our nieces. We have them over to our apartment so they can all just have their time to bond over shared cultural experiences that they have. It's like a space to know that you can express all of the different facets of your identity, because you've developed a kind of family dynamic.

The significance that Jay ascribed to having a space to "bond" and discuss shared cultural experiences is indicative of the solace and relatability that many other respondents also described feeling in their respective affinity groups. When discussing the "Sisters" group chat, Abenaa not only conceptualized it as an outlet for venting, but also as a space where she "felt like [she] really could relate with everyone in it." It was a place that she could go for "hair care advice," for shared cultural understanding, for sisterhood, for belonging. As Jay put it, spaces like these— whether physical, virtual, or figurative— are "sites of visibility for 'us' [students of color]"; they provide and signify a critical outlet to experience solidarity, inclusion, and empowerment in a setting that may otherwise feel inhospitable or exclusionary to one's identity and lived experiences.

### *A Need for More Space*

Despite acknowledging their accessibility to certain 'protective' spaces, many respondents expressed a need for more space, for more accessibility. Some students tied spatial accessibility to their general feelings of belonging; others correlated what they perceived to be a lack of "safe" spaces to the University's lack of consideration for the wellbeing of marginalized

student populations. Michael, for example, was explicit in his critique:

> It's evident that the school doesn't give a single fuck about us [students of color]. They don't want us to have spaces to call our own, and when we do have those spaces, they rip them away and give us some bullshit excuse. You're blowing up my phone with emails about all of these great diversity and inclusion initiatives, but if you really want us to feel included here, then let us have a place to call our own. I feel like, besides the moments when we can congregate in someone's cramped and sweaty apartment, we don't have that in the slightest.

As I concluded my interview with Ilana, I asked her about the changes she thought would be necessary in creating a more hospitable and genuinely inclusive environment for students of color on campus. Her answer? Creating more physical spaces specifically for them:

> I think that it would be giving spaces to students of color that actually mattered. I love the idea of having spaces like multicultural Greek Life where students feel comfortable. I hate the idea that the parties for the Divine Nine are relegated to South Campus or UV. They should be having their own houses in the same way.

Ilana's comments are in reference to the reality that, while Panhellenic and IFC fraternities and sororities (referred to by many respondents as "White Greek Life") own and occupy houses in close proximity to SU's main campus, the majority of chapters that belong to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (referred to as NPHC or, as we see here, the "Divine Nine"), the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), and the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), do not own their own homes and, as such, are relegated to less than ideal spaces to throw social events, such as off-campus, rented houses or the University Village apartment complex (UV) located on Syracuse University's South Campus. This reality of spatial segregation largely comes down to two factors: 1) a lack of endowment and 2) the comparatively smaller size of NPHC, NALFO, and MGC (whose members are predominantly POC) in relation to "White Greek Life." Moreover, as Ilana went on to observe, these factors can both be traced to a broader reality of POC underrepresentation in SU's undergraduate student population:

> The reason that they don't have their houses in the same way is because there aren't

> enough people. Well, there aren't enough people because Syracuse isn't accepting that many people of color. They're not making an environment where these people can want to join these organizations for the same reason that they're joining white Greek life on campus.

Jakob's response to my question about increasing comfort for students of color fell along similar lines as Ilana's, although his was more racially specific and deviated from the idea that more POC visibility in Greek Life is the solution:

> We need a Black, non-Greek affiliated organization where Black people can feel welcomed and empowered and safe and meet other Black people. A Black central spot. Not one just for Africans, or just for the Caribbean students, or just for African Americans. Something where everyone can just come together under this umbrella of blackness. That's very important to me. I feel like we don't really have that right now.

In this manner, Jakob associates Black centrality, empowerment, and safety with access to a stable, physical "space." In citing a need to create a "central spot" where Black students—regardless of Greek affiliation or ethnic differences—can come together, he underscores the significance of spatiality in building community and shaping students' experiences. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that this perception of Black unity—that is, one that overlooks intraracial differences in favor of uniting students in their blackness—was one that was contested and deemed "unrealistic" by some respondents. Abenaa, for example, said she thought that "complete and total and holistic racial unity is an impossible reality to achieve on this campus." Before I even had the chance to ask her to elaborate, she did so in a particularly memorable manner:

> In an idealistic world, it would be so nice and helpful if each of the different sub-groups came together. But that's probably not going to happen. Before you ask me why, I will say that it's because we are so divided across our nuances of identity. For example, we have the African Americans, we have me! The Afro-Caribbeans. We have the Afro-Latinx, we have so many other people. Afro-Asians? The self-identifying. And then within that, we have the Muslims, the Christians, the different groups all inter-mingled with them. And there's so much drama within the Black community alone.

> If you go look into the Latinx community, there are people who are like, we're not Latinx, we're literally straight from Spain. And then there are others who are like, hmmmmm, we're kind of Hispanic. And then there are the Central Americans versus the South Americans versus the Cubans versus the Cubans in America— shoutout to those of y'all in Miami. A mess.
>
> The Asians, they have their problems too. You have the Southeast Asians, you have the mainland Chinese, you have all the other microcosms. Honestly, same with the Europeans but they all get lumped in as "white." And somehow, they've managed to stick to that whiteness.
>
> But, yeah, because of this I think it's impossible for these groups— subgroups, I should say—to come together.

In this sense, Abenaa's astute and detailed observations reveal the subjectivity in students' perceptions of intraracial unity, identity, community, and belonging on campus. They furthermore speak to the strength that intraracial distinctions—not just interracial ones—carry in differentiating students within the microcosm of identity observed on campus.

### *Schine: The Space That Once Was*

In consideration of some students' calls for more space, it is critical to consider how many students viewed the University as taking active measures to diminish the number of ethnoracial affinity spaces available to them. A common discussion topic for many of my respondents was the recent closing of the Schine Student Center ("Schine"), a location described by one student as "the premier black spot on campus." Due to a University-wide, multimillion-dollar construction project, the majority of Schine was shut down for renovations in the Spring semester of 2019.[10] This included the cafeteria-styled dining center ("Schine Dining"), a lobby-area often used for tabling by student organizations, and multiple lounges and study spaces. Offices located within Schine were also relocated to other buildings for the duration of these

[10] The closure of Schine remained in effect at the time of my interviews in Fall 2019.

renovation efforts. This included the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), which was relocated to the basement of a considerably less central building on campus. For many students, the relegation of OMA to this new setting was a particularly controversial move; according to Michael, it signified that "all we're worth is a place in the basement, hidden out of sight."

In commenting on the significance of Schine more broadly, several students reflected on the strong sense of community they had experienced there. Some identified this space as their habitual "break spot," a place where "a lot of people of color would gather and just talk between classes and stuff." In discussing her habit of going to Schine Dining when she had a break from class, Jess observed:

> I felt like it was a space where we could all just share knowledge or just laugh around certain topics that weren't "PC"—things that would've made us mad to hear coming from our White peers but that we could laugh and joke about and it would be fine. Because we understood the context. It was just a nice place to go to and just chill out and everything. It was comfortable.

Here, we see that the comfort that Jess derived from Schine stemmed from her ability to join a collective with other students of color who may have shared a similar perspective and/or sociocultural understanding. It presented an opportunity for knowledge sharing, humor, and comfort.

In a poignant commentary, Jay also reflected on how Schine existed as a physical and emotional respite in the face of the microaggressions and tokenism she experienced in her classes:

> Schine was definitely a spot I felt hella comfortable in. It became this cradle of blackness for a minute, honestly. You would come to campus, go to this class about global development, get all of these obtuse, White opinions about third world countries, go to your next class that's also filled with White students. Just a lot of uninformed or ill-formed opinions about things that you yourself might have experienced. And then you gotta become the spokesperson for it, and then teachers making non-critical use of Black and Brown achievements, or just hyper-venerating certain White figures without being critical of them or context or anything. But then you come to Schine and you see people

> tabling for their orgs, dance troupes stepping or doing a routine. You could go to Schine Dining and all you hear is people laughing and you hop in with your friends, talk about how your classes been that day. Talk about a meme that was popping off on the weekend. Like it was really just a place where you could go in and out and **just breathe and be human** and just laugh real quick. There were so many times when I would go into Schine in between classes to recharge because I was just whipped by people.

Here, we once again turn to the therapeutic value of affinity spaces. In the face of the microaggressions and tokenism that students may have experienced in their classes, Schine presented an outlet for some students of color to debrief, to let their guard down, to "be human," to "breathe." The word "comfortable" was repeatedly used in describing this space; some went so far as to even describe it as a "home." The attachment of solace and respite to this space is why the closing of Schine carried so much significance. In its closure, one respondent reported feeling "robbed" of one of their central sources of comfort and belonging; another viewed it as "a direct attack on our college experience." In this sense, it is salient to acknowledge how space—whether physical or figurative—can serve as a respite, a mechanism of comfort, defense, and belonging in the face of the less hospitable realities that my respondents reported facing in their navigation of a PWI.

It is also crucial to acknowledge, however, that not all of my respondents saw Schine as a hospitable space for them. In fact, some were relieved that it had been taken away. Lisa, for example, reported feeling "on edge and self-conscious" every time she walked into the building, and like she "had to be with somebody whenever [she went]." If she chose to enter by herself, she would "feel like people were staring at [her] and wondering "[why] she was alone." Abenaa cited similar insecurities, and visibly cringed while explaining the extensive preparation that she would undergo in order to feel confident and validated when she entered the space:

> Thank the Good Lord Schine is now closed down. I remember freshman year, I would purposefully sit down and put makeup on my face just so I would feel like I met the

> standards of being a Black girl on campus. I would pick my outfit explicitly so that I could walk in there and everyone would be like, okay, she checks the box. She's a Black girl, she looks good. I felt that I *had* to fit this mold. It was exhausting and uncomfortable. I'm so glad I don't have to deal with that anymore.

The anxieties experienced by Lisa and Abenaa reveal the subjectivity of comfort and belonging. While some students reported feeling in-group affinity with other students of color on account of the fact that they shared a marginalized identity, others denied this notion wholeheartedly. As observed in Abenaa's comments, the pressure that she felt to meet the standards of her peers introduced an added sense of discomfort, one that she experienced in addition to that endured in the broader campus context. Thus, in a setting regarded by some as a "safe space" where POC could finally let their guards down and feel that they belonged, Abenaa continued to experience vulnerability. With this in mind, it is once again critical to reject any notion that implies that there is one, homogenous experience for students of color, and that a space which serves as a welcoming "home" for one student may not necessarily be experienced that way by another.

**IV. Intragroup Exclusion**

It is beneficial to further consider the feelings of intragroup unbelonging expressed above. For in acknowledging how some POC may seek out spaces of inclusion to reconcile the marginalization they feel in the broader campus context, we must also recognize that there are students who do not feel a sense of belonging in smaller racial and ethnic enclaves, either. What happens, then, if a student cannot locate a "space" of inclusivity, empowerment, and belonging? Conversely, what if spaces viewed as inclusive by one are not holistically hospitable to another on account of intersectional differences?

Ilana, an Iranian Jewish respondent, recalled her inability to locate a space that attended to both her religious and ethnic identities. She expressed feeling profound barriers of belonging

not only within hegemonic spaces, but also within cultural sub-spaces she hoped would be a better "fit" for her:

> I think at one point I was the only Iranian Jewish student on this campus at all. And I went looking. **I really did, because I went to places where Jewish students hang out. And I went to places where Iranian students hang out and I was the only person who did both.** And there just weren't any others like me.
>
> People usually ask me, "Oh, is your mom Jewish? And maybe your dad's Iranian." It's like, no, both are both. And they're like, "we didn't know that that was a thing," because there's a lot of nuances in Judaism. Because the Judaism that's available on campus is European Judaism. So even that is like a whitewashed Judaism to me. Their traditions are different than mine. Their foods that they eat are different than mine. And while it is the same sort of religious thing that I wanted, culturally it's not the same.

Whereas until this point, we have seen students describe their journeys to programs, groups, and organizations perceived as inclusive of their identities, Ilana describes an inability to fully "belong" in any space due to the intersectional nuances of her ethnicity, culture, and religion. When I inquired about the extent to which she felt that she could fit into these spaces, her response revealed an additional layer of dissonance:

> It's hard. It's hard. It used to be harder than it is now because I used to just not know how to conduct myself in spaces that I was supposed to belong, because **the reality is that I just kind of didn't belong.** I found myself kind of clustering with other types of culturally Jewish people [Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrachi, etc.] because I couldn't find anybody else fully like me.

Amongst students of color, Ilana expressed a barrier to belonging that she understood as stemming from her identity as a "white-passing Middle Easterner."[11] Rather than feeling readily welcomed into spaces advertised as being for POC in general, she explained how she had to navigate perceptions of suspicion and distrust on account of her lighter skin tone:

[11] This barrier to belonging is furthermore problematized by the fact that the U.S. Census does not recognize Middle Easterners as people of color, despite many self-representing themselves as such.

> POC don't usually see me as a person of color. So sometimes when I need to bring up my story or I need to show my perspective, I have to say it. And it's weird in these spaces, because people would just assume that I'm an ally or I'm just a white person that's trying to listen and trying to learn. But then I have to say, "listen, I also have a story to tell."

Here, we see how Ilana felt a pressure to "qualify" herself in order to feel welcomed and seen in POC spaces. Despite also experiencing microaggressions, discrimination, and exclusion on account of her marginalized identities, some of her peers continued to delegitimize her lived experiences because of her physical appearance. The disconnect and lack of validation that she described was similar to that recalled by Jess, who explained how her mixed-raced identity placed her in the predicament of feeling that she never fully "belonged" or neatly "fit" in a single space:

> Even in the multicultural organizations, I don't always feel like I belong. Because out of all the minorities, if you're talking about people of two races that were light skinned with long-ish curly hair, there were only two of us. So, it was only me, and my other friend. And even then, we would talk about Africa, or being descendants of Africans and stuff, or how we came here through slavery and everything. Sometimes they would look at us and be like, "Did you really though?" Or I'd talk about some kind of discrimination I'd experienced, and they'd kind of just look at me like, "Yeah, right." Like I was just making it up.

Jess's experiences further challenge the notion that POC spaces are accessible sites for *all* students of color to feel affinity and bond over a shared reality of marginalization. On account of being Black *and* White, some projected an assumption of privilege onto Jess that appeared to invalidate her experiences and make her feel like even more of an outsider. Thus, in multicultural spaces where the student desired to feel accepted and included, overlapping identities and physical appearance once again surfaced as barriers to belonging. Jess went on to discuss how this treatment made her feel "inauthentic," like she had something to prove. In turn, she described how she had come to avoid acknowledging her European roots in favor of hyper-identifying with her Black identity. Her actions are indicative of what Rockquemore (2002)

conceptualizes as ‘multiracial identity negotiation.’ Scholarship that zeroes in on multiracial identity negotiation and development has found that individuals of two or more races will sometimes pick one “side” of their racial identity and hyper-identify with it as a way of facilitating in-group belonging in racially homogenous spaces (DaCosta 2007; Rockquemore 2004). In Jess’s case, her process of identity negotiation involved hyper-identifying as African American in order to feel validated by her POC peers.

As compared to Jess, Ilana’s discontent did not necessarily result in a need to pick one “side” of her identity. In response to her inability to locate a space where she existed comfortably, she described how she was motivated to branch off and forge her own:

> Things have definitely changed since then [freshman year]. Now I have spaces that I feel like I truly fit in. Like Jewish spaces that I have and there are Iranian student organizations that we have, that **we kind of built around, just us not being able to find a place.**

As a Filipina international student, Elle similarly felt a need to create a space specifically for students of her nationality and/or ethnicity. In turn, she founded the Filipino Student Association in her sophomore year. Elle smiled as she recalled “people flocking in. They were so excited that we finally had a club and a name for ourselves.” Here, then, we see two instances where students built their own, intersectional affinity spaces in response to the exclusion that they experienced not only within the dominant campus culture, but also within POC sub-groups.

In other cases, the reality of intersectional exclusion was detected by respondents who felt that other, non-racial and non-ethnic aspects of their identity posed a barrier to in-group belonging. This included sociodemographic characteristics such as geographic origin, class status, and sexuality. Zach, a Chinese American respondent, commented that he felt excluded from “Asian spaces” on campus (i.e. student organizations and social groups) because he was “kind of out of touch with the culture” and “had a hard time fitting in.” He also reported feeling a

sense of unbelonging with "other racial groups, like Black students and Latino students because they all seem to stick with each other and to their own spaces," thereby highlighting how interracial differences complicate the notion of POC affinity. Although one student felt that, "if you're POC, you're cool with me," this feeling of inherent belonging and inclusion between all minority students was far from universal.

In another example, one Black student stated that "being queer" meant that they failed to meet certain heteronormative expectations at social gatherings—in particular, as this related to "Black parties" and the styles of dancing between men and women that often took place there. However, what is interesting is that this respondent was also one of the most fervent promoters of the idea that there is a strong black community on campus—referring to this community as "HBCuse"— and commented that, overall, they still felt a stable sense of in-group belonging within it. Thus, although they reported feeling excluded on the basis of their sexuality, this exclusion was not enough to curb their gravitation toward these spaces, nor to dramatically detract from their sense of comfort or perception of "HBCuse" as a "safe space" for Black students navigating a PWI.

On the basis of geographic origin and class status, Moriah told me about how her lower socioeconomic standing and identity as a Syracuse native led her to feel "judged, dismissed, ashamed, and excluded" in "White spaces, Black spaces, POC spaces. All the spaces, really." When she first came to SU as a commuter student, Jada hoped to "feel a closer connection with the Black community" by joining a black sorority. After going to an informational, however, she discovered that being a Black woman was not enough to make her feel welcomed or as though she "belonged" in this space:

> I think the first time I realized how really jacked up this place was is when I went to an informational for [one of the Divine 9 Greek organizations] and one of the members kept joking about how they don't accept townies, they don't accept Syracuse locals because they're not as impressive and not as involved with the community. She was laughing as she said it, but I crossed the whole org off my radar after that. How you gon' preach black solidarity yet be that ignorant?

Through both my interviews and broader observations, I have found that "townies" is a frequently used term in the college context, [12] one that students (White and POC alike) used while making disparaging comments or observations about the broader Syracuse community and its inhabitants. Moreover, many of my respondents that were not Syracuse natives acknowledged, reinforced, and even appeared to justify the stigma and discrimination that Jada described experiencing. In all, it was evident that this was a discrimination largely rooted in classism and perceptions of social superiority, as students frequently associated "townies" with poverty and a lack of education. In all, this functioned as an intersectional barrier to belonging for Jada, one that led her to feel "aimless and without a community" for the majority of her college career.

I draw upon each of these examples to show how intersectionality problematizes racial homophily principles and assumptions of intragroup affinity (Smith and Moore 2000). While some students viewed ethnoracial marginality as the key to accessing POC affinity groups and

[12] A heavily racialized term, *townies* refers to the natives of a town—in the context of this research, the natives of Syracuse, New York— who are "not affiliated with the university" (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). The term dates back to 1827, when it was originally used to differentiate the permanent residents of a location from transient passer-by, but in the context of contemporary higher education it is commonly used to establish an "us" vs. "them" dynamic between members of the university population and city locals.

spaces, it is clear, based on each of these students' stories, that there are added, intersectional nuances that inform barriers to belonging in these spaces. Once more, it is critical to reject the assumption that there is one, homogenous reality for students of color navigating a PWI. As Abenaa commented, intragroup differences play a considerably larger role in differentiating students' social navigation patterns and feelings of belonging on campus.

**V. Perceptions of Institutional Complicity**

The final component to be discussed relates to respondents' perceptions of SU as an institution complicit in maintaining a reality of inequity, marginalization, and hate. Here, I specifically refer to perceptions of institutional efforts—or lack thereof—to change the "inhospitable reality for members of underrepresented and underserved groups" on campus. As students critiqued SU as an institution, they were hyper-critical of the school's entire organizational structure and administrative body. This meant that some also viewed campus administrators as being complicit in condoning and maintaining racist practices and structures of inequality throughout the university. In this way, it was evident that many respondents were doubtful that members of administration had any emotional investment in their lived experiences as students of color. Some reported feeling like "just a number," a diversity statistic to "boost the school's reputation." Aliyah critiqued what she referred to as "administrative ignorance," stating that "the majority of admin are so completely checked out from the reality that we're navigating. They really, truly have no idea what's going on here. And that's baffling to me." The negative feelings that respondents expressed were broad in scope, but the majority appeared to focus on institutional responses to ethnoracial conflicts and the "ineffective and exploitative" nature of diversity and inclusion programming and strategies.

*Tactical Responses & Reactionary Measures*

A critique that surfaced in several interviews addressed administrative failures to take effective, preventative measures to curb the occurrence of bias incidents and hate crimes on campus. Students viewed SU's response to trigger events such as Theta Tau, Ackerman Avenue, and Madrid as "reactionary" in nature and expressed annoyance as they reflected on the apologetic emails and press releases that they were bombarded with in the aftermath of an incident. Jakob regarded these reactionary measures as a "smokescreen for nothingness," and went on to suggest that they functioned simply to distract the public from the lack of "real" or "critical" action being taken by the institution:

> So, they'll send their little email, they'll make their little statement about how "disturbed" they are, but it's just an emergency PR tactic to save the school's reputation. They don't care about saving us, they care about saving themselves. 'Cuse loves talking and they love emails and they love press releases and statements. They don't love actions that much.

In Jakob's comments, as in those of several other respondents, there is an implication that SU is reputation-oriented more than it is student-oriented. Students were doubtful that administrators were genuinely invested in their well-being because, as Rachel put it, "rather than taking any steps to maybe, I don't know, *change* the structures that allow for these racist actions to happen in the first place, they just keep apologizing. I don't want your apology. I want your commitment to make a change."

As Joshua commented, "this administration is not very relational. It's guilty of being overly tactical in its responses rather than strategic." In the context of SU, examples of "tactical responses" include reactionary, one-time events such as town halls and campus forums that were held in the aftermath of the Theta Tau exposure, the Ackerman Avenue assault, and the repeated use of racial slurs in Madrid. While these events did technically create a space for students to air

their grievances to administrators and other influential figures who were present, many respondents conveyed that this was insufficient and unfulfilling. As Jay stated:

> I've never seen anyone go to a forum and say that when they came back, they felt like it went well or that it was worth it. I think Syracuse is the #1 school for lip service. They're great at putting out a florally, flowery email. They're great at making sure there are pictures taken of diversity and inclusion. **But when it comes to continuous and long-term practical implementations, I think that's where they lack**."

Here, Jay's focus on "continuous and long-term practical implementations" speaks to what Joshua and many others identified as a need for more "strategic responses" on the part of the administration. Whereas tactical responses are short-term in nature, strategic responses are designed for long-term change. They are preventative, rather than reactionary in their intended effect.

For some students, strategic responses meant taking preventative measures to eliminate the structures complicit in facilitating bias incidents or ethnoracial conflicts. When her professor in Madrid said the "n-word" twice in class, and later stated that she was unaware of the gravity of the racial slur, Leah questioned why the faculty and staff at SU's abroad center had not received "diversity training lessons" or been "previously educated about the n-word's history in the United States." According to the respondent, implementation of racial sensitivity training or a "quick history lesson" would have been an effective preventative measure in avoiding this trigger event. Instead, however, she reflected on how the institution once again opted to react, rather than prevent, and described how faculty, staff, and even students received an email in the aftermath of the incident "outlining why the word is bad, why nobody should utter it, and apologizing to anyone who had been offended." Leah then reported receiving notice that a town hall would be held the next day to "discuss the community's feelings about the situation."

Nick used a particularly poignant "bandage on the wound" metaphor to indicate why short-term, reactionary solutions to trigger events fail to address or resolve the underlying problem that allows for these ethnoracial conflicts to continuously occur:

> After Theta Tau, all of these schools and administrators were being sympathetic and all this other shit. But I'm like, you guys are not healing the wound, you're just putting a bandage on the wound. **Meaning you're just putting it there, but the wound is still there. It's not sewn up; it's not treated with ointment. It's not treated properly. It's getting infected.** The Theta Tau situation was happening in the moment, but we're not thinking about the bigger picture here. To this day, the bigger picture has still not been resolved. We haven't addressed the problem, which is that we're using hatred through a system to bring oppression to those who are minorities.

Here, Nick pointed to an institutional issue that emails, town halls, and conversational forums cannot independently fix: an enduring reality of systematic oppression that targets minority students.

### *D&I at the Expense of POC*

Finally, I found that several respondents viewed SU's implementation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies and programming as a further mechanism of institution-induced discomfort. Rachel had a particular issue with the concept of "inclusion," which she perceived as "a source of uneasiness for some students because it essentially says that someone can have whatever hateful opinion or mindset that they want, and we're just supposed to take it in and engage with it respectfully. Like that person could be a racist, and we're supposed to just talk it out in order to bridge our differences? Yeah, right." In this sense, Rachel critiqued the value that some D&I initiatives place on "diversity in thought" on account of the emotional trauma that could be experienced by a student who is forced to navigate oppressive rhetoric as a means of "bridging differences."

As she reflected on her own engagement with D&I programming, Moriah conceptualized it as a "site of oppression and exploitation":

> I think my main issue with diversity and inclusion stuff is that it's so obvious who the "learning" moment is really meant for and who is meant to be exploited for that learning moment to occur. It's always us. I remember one time at a D&I event, we were doing an activity called "Cross the Line," which essentially has students standing in a line while the facilitator reads off a list of statements like, "if I were in danger, I'd be hesitant to call the police" or, "I grew up in a blue-collar household." When a statement applied to a student, they had to step forward from the line.
>
> The thing that really stood out to me and made me feel really vulnerable was the fact that, when it came to the questions designed to expose privilege versus oppression, it was always the POC who had to step forward while the majority of the White kids stayed behind, staring. Like, obviously it would be mostly POC stepping forward for the statement about calling the police. And when it came to the one about growing up in a low-income household, I was the only one who stepped forward. It's not that that made me feel ashamed, because this is who I am. However, it did make me feel vulnerable and like I was being used as a learning moment for privileged others, ya know? What do I gain from that? **It's like they're saying, 'come and be naked and vulnerable,' but we were already naked and afraid."**

With an activity like "Cross the Line," which is intended to build awareness of diversity in lived experiences within a group, Moriah's experience reveals the adverse, exploitative effects that some D&I programming can have on those of underrepresented and/or underserved identities. Thus, while the activity may have been introduced with positive intent, it is the negative, 'othering' impact that we must focus on. In the case of D&I efforts, then, it is evident that a restructuring may be required so as to ensure that one student's growth is not contingent on the exploitation of another. For as they stand, it is clear that these practices can operate as yet another site of marginalization and unbelonging.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In concluding, it is key to understand that "trigger events" do not necessarily push students to alter their modes of interaction or patterns of social belonging. Alternatively, they function to rationalize students' pre-existing behavior, social navigation patterns, and negative perceptions of the university as an inhospitable space for members of marginalized communities. The occurrence of a trigger event does not introduce a need for an affinity "space" or protective community, but rather pushes students further into pre-existing spaces and communities. As they witness and endure each incident, there is a build-up of evidence that continuously functions to reinforce perceptions of interracial hostility and feelings of unbelonging. This evidence may be derived from the exposed Theta Tau footage, the Ackerman Avenue assault, the usage of racial slurs in Madrid, or any other ethnoracially charged incident that one has faced throughout their college career. When these events happen, they validate the emotions, suspicions, and fears that many students of color have long felt—not only as POC in a PWI, but also more broadly as POC navigating a society built on hundreds of years of structural racism and inequality.

As we have seen from the analysis of disillusionment, many students expressed that, from the onset of their undergraduate careers, they felt marginalized. They perceived hostility and endured incessant microaggressions from White students who lived on their freshman dorm floor. They experienced racial profiling, prejudice, and discrimination from campus police, professors, peers, food service workers, and administrators. A trigger event did not have to take place in order for them to realize this reality of being a POC in a PWI. In this sense, the occurrence of "trigger events" is not as radicalizing as I originally conceptualized when launching this study. We should understand trigger events not necessarily as catalysts, but rather as reinforcers; they may further alienate students and reinforce planes of protective segregation,

but they are not the initial cause of that alienation. The true catalyst is the overall nature of our society, the omnipresent reality of racism, prejudice, and inequity. Although Syracuse University—or higher education institutions more broadly— may not be the locus of the problem, it is important to note how the structures of these institutions are complicit in maintaining it. As students continuously navigate the institutionally housed realities of discrimination, inequity, underrepresentation, and marginalization, some may feel a need to locate "pockets of belonging" or affinity spaces as a means of physical and emotional security. Here, it is important to diverge from the notion that trigger events are the underlying cause of "self-segregation"—a concept that, given the above analysis, would perhaps be more appropriate to understand as "physical disengagement" or "protective segregation." Although these conclusions should not diminish the significance of ethnoracially charged incidents, they do signify that we need to view these incidents in a different light. In this way, trigger events can be understood as tangible manifestations of the pre-existing conditions and systemic structures of racism, prejudice, and marginalization that many students are already subjected to on account of their status as POC in a PWI.

Given the entrenched reality of racism, prejudice, and inequality that students of color find themselves navigating, the implementation of low-risk DEI strategies or conversational forums are unlikely to be perceived as either significant or effective because, at best, students view them as "Band-Aid solutions" for a myriad of structural/institutional problems—problems that cannot be eradicated via reactionary, micro-level strategies, but rather necessitate long-term institutional restructuring. At worst, these strategies and reactionary measures are viewed as mechanisms of publicity, tokenism, exploitation, and forced belonging. As some respondents commented, having a once-in-a-semester chance to vent about one's feelings to an administrator

who seems to only be present or invested as a reactionary measure is not going to make said student feel more welcome, that their voice matters, or that they truly belong. Neither will engaging in an activity designed to exploit and showcase one student's oppression in the interest of encouraging another to recognize their own privilege. As long as these practices continue to occur in tandem with the pervasive reality of institutional inequity, students will remain on the defensive and critical of administrative intent.

Thus, what is there to do? What is the solution? As my respondents expressed their frustrations at the "reality" on campus, they were also vocal in envisioning a new, reformed campus climate, one in which members of underserved and underrepresented groups could "finally feel like they could breathe." Students did not expect a change in climate to mean that "everybody is going to love each other" or that there would be a complete and total eradication of discrimination, marginalization, and conflict on campus. However, they did believe that the dismantlement of "broken systems of oppression" and implementation of race-conscious policies and practices could create a more equitable higher education system. Students desired a substantial increase in both representation and administrative transparency, so as to repair the "breakdown of trust" and build rapport between students and the administrative body.

It has furthermore been made clear that there needs to be a shift from tactical to strategic care on the administrative front. Whereas tactical care is expressed in reactionary responses to bias incidents and hate crimes, strategic care is expressed in policies that are meant to mitigate these occurrences to begin with. On this note, my respondents proposed a variety of policies and strategies that they believed would improve the campus climate, including the launching of an ongoing series of forums and workshops for campus community members to discuss their lived experiences; mandatory racial sensitivity and diversity training for students, faculty, and staff;

an increase in funding and visibility for campus multicultural programs and offices, including the Office of Multicultural Affairs and La Casita Cultural Center; an increase in multicultural living and learning communities in residence halls; an uptick in hiring of POC faculty, mentors, and healthcare professionals; and a revision in the Student Code of Conduct to implement zero tolerance policies for racial harassment and hate speech. In making each of these proposals, students emphasize that the enactment of effective change and achievement of intersectional justice occurs via long-term strategies, not reactionary tactics that function in the short-term to temporarily appease students.

Within the realm of diversity and inclusion work, students identified a need to reformulate pre-existing D&I programming to be more hospitable to members of marginalized populations. These strategies must be reevaluated, reconceptualized, redeveloped and reimplemented so that the "learning moments" they encourage are not premised on the exploitation of underserved and underrepresented groups. In my own experience, I have found that a significant way to begin this process is to shift from a strategy of "diversity and inclusion" to one of "diversity, justice, and equity." Many are cognizant of the "numbers game" that underlies the concept of diversity efforts; many also point to the inefficacy of increasing numbers without also creating safer, more equitable, more just, and more hospitable spaces for the people who are becoming increasingly represented in these numbers. If D&I work is truly performed with the intention of creating a climate of intersectional belonging and representation, then the strategies relied upon to do so cannot exploit already marginalized identities. The emotional welfare of one should not be put at risk in order to enlighten another—regardless of how critical this enlightenment may be.

Finally, the journey to achieving holistic equity and intersectional justice cannot occur without allyship and solidarity. We must have productive, critical, and transparent conversations across lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, religion, ability status, political affiliation, and sexuality so as to dismantle and rebuild an institution that is holistically hospitable in its structures and processes. As one respondent optimistically commented, “we've got to be aware that we have all have something to unite us. We all want things to be better. So maybe we should join together so we can build a better future together.” Perhaps the establishment of an intersectional collective is a pre-condition for the development of a new reality of equity, justice, and belonging.

## Chapter 6: Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of this study is that the sample population is made up entirely of upperclassmen. My respondents were all juniors and seniors who, for the most part, not only had the opportunity to develop their identities and social groups over the past three or four years, but who were also enrolled, full-time students during the "trigger events" in question. Without having the perspectives of enrolled underclassmen to take into account, it is difficult to compare students' social navigation patterns and stages of consciousness development. Would a first-year student of color, for example, diverge in their perception of the university, in their perspective and attribution of salience to racial/ethnic identity, and in their gravitation toward race- and ethnicity-based affinity groups? Or, would their early experiences parallel with juniors and seniors' reflections on the anxiety, shock, and isolation they felt while navigating their own first-year experiences? Gaining insight from members of this population could reveal a critical commentary on the role that time and adjustment play in influencing perspective, as well as spark a consideration of additional factors that shape ethnoracial minority students' navigation of campus and patterns of belonging.

Another limitation is timing. As noted, I conducted these interviews in September and October of 2019, two months before the string of bias incidents and hate crimes that became known as the "Day Hall" events. With Day Hall came the rise of #NotAgainSU, a "Black student- led movement" that defines its intent as "protesting the racial incidents occurring at Syracuse University and the administration's lack of transparency and complicity with white supremacy."[13] Within days of its establishment, #NotAgainSU launched a sit-in at the Barnes Center, SU's brand new, multi-million-dollar wellness center. The collective announced that the

[13] https://www.instagram.com/notagain.su/?hl=en

protest would not end until the administration agreed to sign off on a list of demands designed to create safer and more hospitable realities for "underrepresented and underserved students" on campus. It is perhaps significant to note that many of these demands paralleled my respondents' own proposals for change.

While I considered recruiting new respondents or reaching out to pre-existing ones for follow-up interviews about Day Hall and #NotAgainSU, the timing was not appropriate. Not only were students (including myself) attempting to navigate the stress of Finals Week and the fear that there would be another hate crime, many were also dedicating the majority of their limited free time to the sit-in or other activist efforts. I did not want to make students feel that I was turning them into research subjects and exploiting their vulnerability for my own academic gain during such a tumultuous time. They had already endured enough exploitation; I did not wish to contribute further to the problem.

Nevertheless, the strength and visibility of #NotAgainSU and the support that it garnered from students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members of all different intersectional backgrounds heavily challenges my conclusions about trigger events and their lack of radical impact on students' navigation patterns. It suggests that students were prompted to team up and challenge the inhospitable realities that they were navigating, rather than just disengaging from them. Moving forward, it would be valuable to analyze the contextual differences of Day Hall in order to understand what made this string of events different from others that occurred in the past and what prompted such a wide array of social actors to enter the realm of activism and camp out on the floor of the Barnes Center in solidarity. From my own theorizing, I would suggest that it was partially to do with the frequency and intensity at which the evidence appeared. Perhaps the build-up of racist graffiti, swastikas drawn in the snow, and

outward harassment that ‘Day Hall’ encompassed was so intense that it could not be written off as an isolated incident, but rather alerted a larger percentage of the campus community to the systemic nature of the problem, thereby contributing to others’ disillusionment and prompting them to act, to join the fight for a new reality.

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# Appendix A: Informed Consent Document

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Syracuse University IRB Approved

SEP 23 2019

**Department of Sociology**

**400 Eggers Hall**

**315.443.2346**

**Protocol Title:** *Examining Patterns of Undergraduate Self-Segregation and Modes of Social Belonging in Response to Ethic/Racial Conflict*

**Principal Investigator/Key Research Personnel:**

- **Student Researcher:** Natalia Rice, Senior at Syracuse University (nrrice@syr.edu)
- **Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Gretchen Purser, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Syracuse University (gwpurser@maxwell.syr; 315-443-5848)

**Introduction:**

**The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about participation in a research study and offer you the opportunity to decide whether you wish to participate. You can take as much time as you wish to decide and can ask any questions you may have now, during or after the research is complete. Your participation is voluntary.**

**What is the purpose for the research study?**

- The purpose of this study is to learn more about undergraduate students' patterns of social belonging on university campuses. This includes learning more about how undergraduates form their social groups and identities in response to different contextual factors (political climate, campus climate, personal background, perspective, etc.)

**What will I be asked to do?**

- You will be asked to take part in a one-on-one, in-person interview where Natalia Rice will ask you questions about your college experiences and observations while on campus, as well as other questions about your thoughts, attitudes, and opinions. This interview will take approximately one hour of your time.
- The interview will be semi-structured, which means that Natalia Rice will have prepared a list of general questions to guide the conversation, but it may also go beyond the prepared questions, when appropriate. Natalia Rice will be the sole interviewer. Examples of questions that she may ask include: "Where do you feel the most comfortable on campus?" and "What parts of your identity do you feel most affect your experiences at Syracuse?"

**What are the possible risks of participation in this research study?**

- It is not anticipated that you will be exposed to any significant risk as a participant in this study. However, you may feel potential discomfort when you are asked or are answering certain interview questions, namely those that relate to topics of identity.
- In the case that you feel discomfort when asked a certain question or when a certain topic is approached, you are free to decline to answer without any penalty. In the case that you wish to discuss anything post-interview and/or off-the-record, Natalia Rice will be available and willing to do so.

**What are the possible benefits of participation in this research study?**

- There are no direct benefits of participation in this study. Participants will, however, have the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations that will have the potential to increase their understandings of the role that their intersectional identities (i.e. their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality) have in impacting their choice of social groups, social navigation patterns, perceptions of others, and styles of conflict management. Interviews may also provide an opportunity for participants to identify and discuss any challenges and/or frustrations that they have faced during their undergraduate careers with an interviewer who is open-minded, respectful, and engaged.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

- All interviews will be conducted in person at the time and place of your choosing. Interviews will be conducted one-on-one between you and Natalia Rice.
- Thorough confidentiality measures, including the use of pseudonyms, encrypted data, and password-protected hard drives, will be in place to ensure that neither your personal information nor interview responses are traced back to you. While the interview will take place at a location of your choosing, Natalia Rice will also reserve a private space within this location to ensure that your conversation is not overheard by others.
- Preliminary research data, including interview transcripts, consent forms, and notes, will remain in the sole custody of Natalia Rice and her faculty advisor, Dr. Gretchen Purser. The results of the research will ultimately be shared in the form of a written publication and conference presentation to fulfill certain thesis requirements. Your identifiable information (name, contact information, etc.) will not be included in any of these disseminations. In the case that you share information that you believe will be traced back to you and do not consent to this sharing, this data will be omitted from all publications.

**How will my data be maintained to ensure confidentiality?**

- Over the course of this study, your data will be maintained in a password-protected electronic spreadsheet on Natalia Rice's laptop, which is also password-protected to maintain confidentiality. Interview transcripts and consent forms will additionally be stored in a password-protected folder on said laptop. Natalia Rice will be the sole transcriber of the interview data. For advising purposes, Dr. Gretchen Purser will also have access to this data. There are no additional research staff or individuals who will have access.
- Natalia Rice will use pseudonyms to ensure your confidentiality and will explicitly ask you for permission to use the chosen pseudonym. The code key that associates participants' real names with the correlating pseudonyms will be stored in a password-protected folder on my laptop. Natalia Rice will be the sole individual who has access to this code list.
- File sharing between Natalia Rice and Dr. Purser will only be facilitated in-person or via Dropbox, a file sharing service that uses advanced, multi-level encryption methods to transfer and store data. Data will not be transmitted via email or any other file sharing mechanism. In the case that the interview transcripts are transmitted, the document will only list your chosen pseudonym. You will be referred to using this pseudonym in all audio recordings.
- All of the information that you provide as a participant in this study will be stripped of any identifiers so as to ensure your confidentiality. Your interview data may be saved in an encrypted file for use in future research. In the case that this does happen, identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information. After this removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional consent or the legally authorized representative is not included.

**Will photographs, audio, video, or film recording be used?**

- If you provide your consent, Natalia Rice will audio record your interview for transcription purposes. This will allow her to more thoroughly and accurately report the information you share at the time of analysis.
- Upon completion of each interview, digital audio recordings of interviews will immediately be downloaded from the digital audio recorder to Natalia Rice's laptop. The recordings will then be deleted from said audio recorder to avoid risking confidentiality in the case that it were to be lost or stolen. The audio files will be saved in an encrypted sub folder on the laptop. Only Natalia Rice will have access to these files.
- Audio recordings will be kept for Natalia Rice's future use. Once it is evident that the project has been thoroughly completed and she will no longer be using its data, she will permanently delete the audio files.

**Will I receive compensation for participation?**

- Yes. You will receive a $20 Visa gift card for participating in a full interview.
- If you choose to withdraw during the interview, your compensation will be pro-rated based on the duration of the interview in consideration of your time and effort invested prior to withdrawal. In interviews shorter than 25 minutes, you will receive a $5 Visa gift card. In interviews longer than 25 minutes and shorter than 1 hour, you will receive a $10 gift card as compensation. All interviews equal to or longer than 1 hour in duration will receive the full $20 gift card compensation in recognition of invested time and effort.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary.
- You may skip and/or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- For questions, concerns or more information regarding this research you may contact Natalia Rice at nrrice@syr.edu or Dr. Gretchen Purser at 315-443-5848 or gwpurser@syr.edu.
- If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at (315) 443-3013.

**Please indicate whether you agree to be audio-recorded using the checkboxes below:**

☐ I agree to be audio-recorded.

☐ I do not agree to be audio-recorded.

**All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and by signing this consent form, I agree to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this form for my personal records.**

_____ **Date:** _____

**Printed Name of the Participant**

_____

**Signature of the Participant**

_____ **Date:** _____

## Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

**Interview Topic:** Syracuse University undergraduate students' social experiences, perceptions and modes of belonging on campus

**Note:** Interviews are intended to be semi-structured, and thus will not follow a strict script in the interest of generating authentic and valuable qualitative research data. In the case that the respondent seems interested in transcending the scope of the prepared questions, the researcher will accommodate to this variation and adapt to an open-ended interview style. Below is a list of topics and a flexible guideline for interview questions.

**Demographic Information Questions:**

- What pronouns do you use?
- What year are you at Syracuse?
- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- Where do you live on campus?
- What is your area of study?
- How do you racially and ethnically identify?
    - Do you feel connected to these identities?

**General Campus/Social Experience Questions**

- How, overall, would you describe your college experience?
- What made you decide to apply to Syracuse?
    a. What made you ultimately decide to attend?
    b. Has your general experience met your expectations?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging at Syracuse?
    - Why or why not?
    - In what spaces do you feel that you fit in the most?
- What are the factors that make you feel comfortable in a space on campus?
- Which factors make you feel uncomfortable in a space on campus?
- Where do you feel the most comfortable on campus?
- Where do you feel the most uncomfortable?
- Are you involved in any extracurriculars on campus?
    - What drew you to these organizations?
- Are you involved in Greek Life?

**Identity-Based Questions**

- What parts of your identity do you feel most connected to?

- What parts of your identity do you feel most affect your experiences at Syracuse?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination on campus?

**<u>"Trigger Event" Questions (when appropriate & applicable)</u>**

1) Tracing back to A) Theta Tau, B) Ackerman Avenue, or C) Madrid:
    i) From your own perspective, can you tell me what happened?
    ii) How did this make you feel?
    iii) Did it affect the campus dynamic?
    iv) What is your opinion on the university's response to the situation?
    v) Was it handled properly?

2) When these events happened, who did you feel most comfortable talking to about them?

**<u>Solution-Based Questions</u>**

1) How do you feel about the DEI strategies being implemented on campus?
    a) Are they effective?
2) If members of administration were willing to implement any strategy you suggested to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion at SU, what would you suggest?
3) What would make you feel more welcome on campus?
4) What solutions do you have for building a stronger campus community?