

A TAPESTRY OF VOICES: NAVIGATING BLACK STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS ACROSS THE
INTERMOUNTAIN WEST

by

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ABSTRACT

Black students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) often navigate unique challenges that impact their academic, social, and personal experiences. This study explores the lived experiences of Black students at PWIs in the Intermountain West, a region where Black student populations are particularly small. Through qualitative, in-depth interviews, this research captures personal narratives that highlight themes of racial climate, sense of belonging, academic engagement, social integration, and institutional support. The study also incorporates the researcher's own experiences to provide additional context and reflection.

Findings reveal that Black students frequently encounter racial isolation, microaggressions, and a lack of culturally responsive support systems. Despite these challenges, many students develop resilience through peer networks, student organizations, and faculty mentorship. The study emphasizes the need for institutional changes, including enhanced diversity training for faculty, greater representation in curriculum, and stronger support structures for Black students.

By amplifying student voices, this research aims to educate faculty, staff, and administrators on the realities of Black student experiences and encourage more effective teaching, mentoring, and policy initiatives. The study contributes to existing literature on racial equity in higher education and offers practical recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus environment.

Keywords: Black students, predominantly white institutions (PWIs), racial climate, higher education, student experiences, diversity and inclusion, faculty mentorship, institutional support

4 INTRODUCTION

Systems, power structures, order. Our society is built upon them. These structures define who holds power and who is subjected to it. They create clear divides, the oppressors and the oppressed. In the United States, a nation that prides itself on democracy and opportunity, these divisions persist in ways that are both overt and insidious. Higher education is no exception. Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) were not originally designed for Black students, yet today, Black students continue to navigate these spaces, often facing racial isolation, systemic barriers, and unspoken expectations to assimilate into a culture that was never built with them in mind. How do those most affected navigate them? This study explores how Black students experience predominantly white institutions in the Intermountain West, a region where their presence is often minimal yet their challenges are profound. Their experiences are not homogenous; some students find ways to thrive, while others struggle against the weight of systemic inequities. Through qualitative, in-depth interviews¹, this research seeks to amplify the voices of Black students, centering their narratives to uncover patterns of exclusion, resilience, and institutional neglect. It examines the ways these students engage with academic spaces, social networks, and campus life, as well as the role that faculty and administration play in either supporting or alienating them.

Unlike traditional academic papers that prioritize detached analysis, this work intentionally deviates from the hegemonic norms of research writing. The standard frameworks for discussing race in higher education often sanitize or dilute the raw realities that students face.

¹IRB Protocol #: 2025-1989-EXEMPT

Instead, this paper incorporates personal narratives—including my own—to disrupt conventional methodologies and offer a more holistic and authentic representation of Black student experiences. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*” To truly understand and address the struggles of Black students at PWIs, we must move beyond conventional academic frameworks and center the voices of those who have long been unheard. This research is not just about documenting challenges; it is about demanding institutional accountability and change. By weaving together firsthand experiences with critical analysis, this study aims to educate faculty, administrators, and policymakers on the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to education. Black students at PWIs deserve more than survival—they deserve to thrive.

Understanding the Intermountain West: Place, Power, and Privilege

When discussing the racialized experiences of Black students in the United States, the conversation often centers around major metropolitan areas or historically segregated regions in the South and East. According to Hawes 2024, “Now, 70 years after the Brown decision, ProPublica has found about 300 schools that likely opened as segregation academies in the South are still operating.” Far less attention is paid to the Intermountain West, a sweeping, rugged, and often overlooked region in the discourse of race and higher education. And yet, it is precisely because of this neglect that the Intermountain West demands closer inspection.

The Intermountain West generally refers to the geographic area situated between the Rocky Mountains and the Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges (USGS.Gov). This region includes Montana, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, and parts of New Mexico and

Arizona. While definitions may vary slightly, the unifying thread is the region's shared topographical features, relatively low population density, and cultural particularities shaped by frontier history, rugged individualism, and predominantly white demographics with most of the states having over a white population of 75% with Colorado being the only one below that with 65% (CensusDots.com). Unlike other parts of the country, the Intermountain West does not have a long-standing, visible Black population. In many cities and towns across these states, Black residents make up less than 2% of the population according to WorldPopulationreview.com with Colorado having the most Black population with the percentage of 5.5%. This reality contributes to a deep sense of racial isolation for Black students who choose to attend PWIs in this region. For many, college may be the first time they have encountered a place so starkly homogenous, so overwhelmingly white, that their Blackness becomes not just visible, but hyper-visible.

This demographic reality is not without consequence. States like Idaho and Montana have been identified as having some of the highest per capita rates of white supremacist activity in the country according to Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) website. Also according to the SPLC, these states are hotspots for white nationalist recruitment, particularly among younger populations and in rural areas. The legacies of groups like the Aryan Nations, which had its headquarters in northern Idaho for decades, linger in the cultural fabric of these states. While outright hate groups may have receded from public view, their ideologies have often morphed and been repackaged into more socially palatable but equally harmful expressions of exclusion, nativism, and racial resentment.

This backdrop of racial homogeneity, undercurrents of white supremacy, and the invisibilization of Blackness makes the Intermountain West a profoundly important region to

study. It is not just the absence of diversity that matters here, but how that absence shapes the lived experiences of those who do not fit the dominant mold. How do we navigate a space that offers little recognition of our identity? How do institutions built without Blackness in mind respond, or fail to respond, to the needs of Black students? Studying this region allows for a deeper understanding of how systemic racism operates not just through overt acts of discrimination, but through erasure, silence, and indifference. It also highlights the resilience and resourcefulness of Black students who persist in environments that were never intended to include them. Their stories add crucial texture to the broader landscape of racial equity in higher education reminding us that inclusion is not only a matter of representation, but of recognition, respect, and radical reimagining.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since November 14th, 1960 when Ruby Bridges at just the age of six became the first African American student to attend a predominantly white institution (PWI), Black students have battled not just external battles and barriers such as racism but also battles of mental health issues such as the feeling of otherness, conformity, and loss of self. All of these examples have led to Black students over the course of the last 64 years to be at a disadvantage to their white counterparts regarding academic success whether that be from the aforementioned knowing or unknowing racist behaviors of faculty and (or) peers or just the mental health issues that plague any person when they sense the feeling of not belonging. With the rise of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives stemming from the events of the wrongful death of George Floyd in May of 2020 and the also recent push for mental health initiatives due to COVID-19, we have seen institutions take the well being of their minority students even more seriously than ever

before. With so much ground made, scholars and academics realize there is still so much more to do regarding the problems surrounding DEI. Now with the riddance of DEI across the country, some schools are finding ways to rebrand it while most are just completely doing away with it.

If black students completely benefitted from DEI what would it look like? Well a simple answer is that their graduation rates would match up with their white peers. A more complicated answer is they would leave the university not only with their degree but with their sense of self still intact and even more enhanced than when they arrived on campus, they fully understand who they are and are unapologetic about it. They are comfortable in their skin and culture. The purpose of this review is to identify recurring themes to which can be pointed out and grown from to put African American students in a better position to succeed at PWI's.

This review will explore the topics of how PWI's affect the mental state and performance of African American students and how endorsing the success of Black students will lead to better success for them. How certain things can be added to DEI policies to grow them as well as what can be done prior to higher education to prepare African American students for PWIs. Also, training for faculty so they can use inclusive language and curriculum. Last, as a whole, accepting the unfamiliar feeling of performing or code-switching (the act of taking on different social appearances to feel the sense of belonging and avoid the feeling of rejection).

The scope of this review is limited to writings that come from or are written by those who have gone or examined PWI's. Studies and experiments that were conducted will be referenced throughout the review as well as findings. Some writings are recent and some are from the late 1980's and early 1990's which will shed light on how far academia has come but also show how far it must go to reach equity among these institutions.

The main problems occurring at Predominately White Institutions

Every student at any university should be permitted the same amount of help on campus to succeed. What shouldn't be permitted is students who have added stressors on top of academic stress just because of the way they look. As stated before, a good metric to view equity on campuses across the nation would be to compare the graduation rates of Black students and White students. Among students who enrolled full-time at a private four-year college in 2011, 65.8% of Blacks and 87.6% of Hispanics completed a degree at their starting institution within 6 years, as compared to 92.5% of Whites (Doughty 2023). So already, there is a discrepancy somewhere located in or on the campuses of PWI's. In 2004 Helen Neville conducted research, and named it the BSSI or The Black Student Stress Indicator, it was a test to gauge the top stressors an African American or Black student experienced at a PWI. The research concluded and the three main stressors experienced were, "Insensitive attitudes of faculty toward Black students.", "psychological/interpersonal stressors" which were interpersonally related issues, such as loneliness, and the last factor being "academic stress" which the fear of failing as well as imposter syndrome (the feeling of being a fraud or someone who doesn't belong) related to that. (Neville 606). To mention, these were just the top three, coming in not so far behind those were, "low academic expectations of faculty for Black students' performance" and "stereotypes Whites have about Blacks". Those top the list of 29 listed stressors for the BSSI with 22 of those 29 being race related. A common stressor mentioned has to do with staff and either how they view, teach, or grade their Black students. Faculty, mainly teachers, have a huge impact on their students, they have the power to make or break a students experience in academia. When a

student believes they are being treated differently than their peers solely due to the color of their skin we begin to see these stressors come up. G Keller in 1989 found that deans and other faculty were insensitive to “multicultural issues”(Karkouti 2016). While this data is dated, we can still look at it and view it in two ways, the first that this may still be true to some extent today and two, how far have we come and how far do we still need to go? The challenges that minorities have faced throughout the nation’s development are evident. Although the concept of race has changed in the past three centuries, research-ers and scholars still promote the concept of intellectual inferiority (Feagin & Vera, 1995). Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, racial biases are still very prevalent today or else this review wouldn’t be needed in the first place. Cross racial engagement and racial climate is something that Karkouti (2016) believed held black students back at PWIs and propelled them at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Allen (1992) found that at HBCUs Black students experienced better relationships with faculty and with cross-racial interactions opposed to those at PWIs because of the environment fostered at HBCUs. The more diverse the staff and environment is, the more comfortable minority students will be. The ability to see people that look like them and understand them allow for a better culture around campus as a whole. PWIs have the problem of recruiting, hiring, and retaining minority staff for a multitude of reasons but that in fact is a way to drive DEI. So all in all, these things are happening to these students because of their skin color but what is it actually doing to them?

Racial Trauma and its effects

Studies have found that racial trauma among students on university campuses can stem from experiences of racial microaggressions or “everyday racism” (Nadal et al.,2014). Racial

microaggressions are a “form of systemic, everyday racism” or racial discrimination (Decuir-Gunby et al. 2023). What does this actually do to the students? Well this refers back to the BSSI and also to something Truong et al. (2016) discovered in research of their own. They found that some black students distanced themselves as a result of this trauma to get as far away as possible from it. For example, not joining groups or clubs they would probably be otherwise interested in if it weren’t for this nagging feeling. On the opposite side of this, they also found that some Black students were overly involved and “exaggerating” their visibility to their peers so they wouldn’t be forgotten, left out, or simply discounted because their voice didn’t hold as much weight. According to Decuir-Gunby et al. (2023) Black students reported both “negative” and “positive” ways of coping. One student expressed that they began binge eating for comfort while another student said they used therapy as their form of coping. That specific student said, “Instead, I have a therapist. I don’t want to talk to a roomful of white people about what is going on and how I’m feeling, because you’re not going to understand...” (Decuir-Gundy et al., p. 51). Avoidance or withdrawal is usually viewed as a negative form of coping, but Utsey et al. (2008) believes that when dealing with racism it can be a good tool for preservation of self for the student. What helped students with racial trauma was joining activism groups, or groups where they could express themselves (Francois et al. 2023).

Negative actions can come from retaliation towards microaggressors due to being emotionally tormented Decuir-Gundy et al. (2023). When a student is forcibly put in a situation of discomfort, their fight or flight is triggered which puts them either in the state to distance themselves or quite literally fight their way out of the situation either with words or actions. One

instance like this can affect a student's well-being permanently and put them in a position of resentment towards the climate, the campus, and even themselves.

Institutions that are predominantly white negatively affect minority students' academic achievement because of the lack of diverse interaction (Karkouti 2016). There are instances where Black students are ahead academically, they are realized as bright individuals by their faculty and peers. What begins to cause a problem is how they are sometimes labeled, which is as "model minorities" (Apugo 2019). Despite all they have seemed to accomplish, they are still confined to a certain stereotype which is something they are already trying to escape. Kini (2018) described this as "white approved success" which is basically the acknowledgement that that particular student is outpacing their white peers and overcoming different challenges to do so. All this seems to do is reinforce White validation in our education system and this also places those who don't reach this level of a "model minority" then they have failed in obtaining the American Dream (Apugo 2019). Another label that is viewed as something positive to a lot of people is that of the "Strong Black Woman". When you think of that in education you recognize that person as self-sufficient, strong, and resilient. This leaves no room for fault and confines those particular Black students into another corner of always having to be that and the universities and faculty could very well be oblivious to all the hardships that come along with not only being a Black student on a PWI but also being a woman (Apugo 2019). This leads into the feeling a lot of Black students describe as "silent struggling" which is when a person is fearful of being judged for speaking out about how they feel.

Psychological effects

Due to the lack of diversity on campuses African American students will start to have certain psychological effects happen to them. Code- switching or performing is one of those effects. “Code- switching is an identity shifting mechanism used to mask, alter, or soften one’s authentic racial and/ or ethnic identity in an effort to accommodate the culture of a particular environment.” (Apugo 2019). Another psychological effect is that of Imposter Syndrome or the Imposter Phenomenon which occurs when an individual feels a sense of phoniness when it comes to their intellectual ability (Peteet et al. 2015). The loss of identity is a big implication for a person who has mental health issues due to psychological effects. Another effect is acculturation or as Landrine and Klonoff (1994,1995,1996) describe as the ethnic and cultural minorities face the dominant culture. There are simply three levels of acculturation or conformity (Pillay 2005). “Acculturated—having adopted the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the dominant culture; (b) bicultural—straddling the traditions of their own culture as well as the dominant culture; and (c) traditional—remaining immersed in the culture of origin.” (Pillay 51). Having adopted the culture of the majority leads to imposter syndrome and a feeling of being lost within one's self. Being bicultural would seem to be the most optimal you would think but being bicultural leaves the student feeling as if they do not belong to either culture. They are “too white” for their black peers and “too black” for their white ones. When they cannot identify with anyone, loneliness and the lack of internalization which is “the ability to value one’s identity and the ability to empathize and collaborate with other racial groups.” (Pillay 48). This happens when the African American student keeps his/her traditional culture of origin and co-exists with the dominant culture/race. On top of these, there is still depression, loss of self, and alienation.

What Leads to their success

Success at the end of the day is not just measured by the student walking across the stage at the end of their 120 or so credits they earned. While that is a main reason why students attend college, an even more prevalent achievement is discovering who you are in the process. Campbell et al. (2019) believe there is an association between success and satisfaction and that should include the bolstering of self- worth and peace of mind. So if all these students really need is the reinforcement and acceptance of themselves and sense of acceptance from peers and faculty how can we reinforce that? We must pour our effort and time in helping them with their identity development and racial identity development (Campbell et al. 2019). According to Prempeh and Freeman (2023) there are six main steps to promoting the success of black students at PWIs. Those being, 1. Feeling safe and supported on campus, meaning students can feel safe to be who they are without fear of being discriminated against. 2. Combating negative stereotypes, meaning not allowing for negative labels much like those stated in the previous section. 3. Seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the faculty, in other words, having representation of their culture through what is taught on campus as well as having people who look like them in roles of power. 4. Having access to mentors and role models who can help them succeed. 5. Feel like they belong and that they have a voice, which is giving these students places such as clubs or groups as well as the ability to connect with people of power on campus. 6. Just given the opportunity to achieve their academic goals. By using these six strategies we can implement changes at any level as long as universities are willing. Lardier et al. (2019) found that when students of color had access to community and culturally responsive support, they showed greater sense of school belonging and less symptoms of depression.

What can be incorporated for their success

As stated before, preservation of self and the fostering of identity is one of the main things attributed to the success of Black students on PWIs. Collins & Stevenson (2023) believe that proper education can lead to a better transition from high school to college. Through Prep For Prep (PFP) a program which recruits promising students at the elementary level and are given a comprehensive mix of academic, social- emotional, leadership development, and emergency financial support. While this is one program that tries to better equip students of color which includes Black students for when attending a PWI, more things can be implemented at that collegiate level to better ensure transitions as well. For example, the thoughtful hiring of Resident Assistants (RAs) because they play critical roles in fostering first year student success and are quite often the first line of support first year students reach out to because they can relate to what they are going through (Altmaier, 2019; Boettcher et al., 2019). So why should hiring RAs be a thoughtful process? If having a diverse set of RAs in each dorm is possible, it will promote more diversity and allow for more students of color to feel welcome and safe. At the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, they implemented students and paraprofessional staff into roles called “Inclusion assistants” (IAs) whose job is to coordinate with the RAs to collaboratively support the residence life office’s educational priority, learning goals, and outcomes. Its original goal 30 or so years ago was to support African American students living in the residence halls (Williams et al. 2021). This allows for Sophomore and sometimes Junior students the ability to mentor peers who look like them and cultivate a smaller community within the much larger campus. From their research, Williams et al. (2019) discovered that these Inclusion assistants positively affected all students but especially minority students which

includes Black students. As mentioned before, a key to promoting the success of these students is fostering a sense of belonging and that is exactly what these IAs did with their support. One student stated, “It was really important to see people of color that are in leadership positions.” (Williams et al., p.51, 2021). So with the simple incorporation of diverse staff at resident halls, the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, was able to accomplish one feat and that is foster a community where Black students, along with other minority students could seek mentorship and feel as if they belonged to something. Henry et al. (2024) believe there is something that can be done to the curriculum at a PWI to drive DEI and they made a 3 phase curriculum creation process. Step 1, Establishing a framework and inventorying the curriculum. This first starts with establishing a director, a coordinator, and a dedicated team composed of staff and students whose jobs are to develop, implement, and review curriculum. Within phase 1 that team identifies any gaps or opportunities in the current school curriculum. Phase 2, develop curriculum content, this is when the appointed team proposes new course learning objectives that correspond with DEI. Phase 3, implementing, evaluating, and refining the curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the Intermountain West. The goal was to amplify student voices and provide rich, narrative insights into how Black students navigate racially homogeneous environments, both socially and academically. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with nine participants, eight men and one woman, who identify as Black and are currently or were recently enrolled at PWIs across the Intermountain West. Participants were recruited through student organizations, personal

networks, and social media platforms. Each participant provided informed consent and was made aware that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Interviews were held either in person or virtually, depending on the participant's location and preference. They lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and were recorded (with consent) to ensure accuracy during transcription. The interview protocol included open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect on their sense of belonging, experiences with racial bias, faculty and peer relationships, and their mental and emotional well-being while attending a PWI. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and major themes from the interviews. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure deep familiarity with the data, and themes were coded based on shared language, emotional tone, and context. Special attention was given to both commonalities and divergence across individual stories, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the range of student experiences.

My own background as a biracial student attending a PWI is acknowledged as part of the analysis. This positionality allows for deeper empathy and connection with participants but also requires reflexivity throughout the research process. While narrative subjectivity is present, it is embraced as a strength in this research design, aligning with critical qualitative traditions that value lived experience. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the project, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw at any time. The study was approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection.

FINDINGS

From the nine interviews conducted, several core themes emerged that highlight the complex and often painful experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions in the Intermountain West. These findings do not exist in a vacuum—they are layered, deeply personal, and intimately tied to both identity and place. What follows is not a list of generalized statements, but a weaving together of stories that speak to isolation, resistance, resilience, and the emotional labor that comes with being Black in environments not built for your thriving. A recurring thread in every interview was the acute sense of racial isolation. Whether students came from diverse communities or already majority-white spaces, nearly all described feeling deeply out of place on their college campuses. They spoke of being the only Black face in a classroom, in a dormitory, or at a student event. That singularity came with a weight—being expected to represent an entire race, having to navigate constant stares, or enduring subtle shifts in tone and body language from those around them. This invisibility, paradoxically paired with hypervisibility, left students feeling both unseen and constantly scrutinized.

Another prominent theme was code-switching. For many, adapting their speech, clothing, or demeanor became second nature. It was not done for self-expression but for survival—to avoid discomfort, exclusion, or even conflict. This performance of fitting in was not rooted in a desire to change who they were but in the unspoken rules that dictated success in these white-dominated spaces. Students spoke of the emotional toll this took on them. Of laughing at jokes they didn't find funny, of policing their own tone to avoid being labeled "angry," and of shaving away pieces of their identity in hopes of acceptance. Racism was ever-present, though not always overt. Participants recounted moments that ranged from explicitly racist incidents—such as Blackface at student events or being called racial slurs—to more subtle forms of exclusion and

bias. Faculty and peers alike played roles in this dynamic. Several students shared how professors dismissed their experiences or avoided conversations about race altogether. Others described being labeled “aggressive” or “difficult” simply for asserting themselves.

Students also reflected on the institutional barriers they faced. Whether it was the lack of representation in faculty and leadership, the erasure of Black history in curriculum, or the absence of culturally affirming spaces, they made it clear that these institutions had not considered their needs. And yet, despite all of this, every student I spoke with remained. Not because the space welcomed them, but because they chose to stay—for themselves, their families, and future students who would come after them. These findings are not meant to simplify or universalize the Black student experience at PWIs. Instead, they serve as evidence of the shared challenges students endure and the strength with which they continue to navigate them. Their voices do not just echo, they demand to be heard.

VOICES

The air felt thick, charged with something unspoken, something I can’t and couldn’t quite put my finger on. I could hear the low hum of students passing outside the room, the muffled echoes of footsteps in the hallway and the ring of the clocktower signifying the start of a new hour, but in this space, between myself and the young man sitting across from me—there was only silence. When I asked, "Have you ever felt isolated or out of place within this environment?" Jon² hesitated. His gaze dropped to the floor, his hands folding together as if holding on to something fragile. Seconds passed, then a full minute. He was searching, reaching

² Any reference of name given to interviewees are pseudonyms

for the right words, but I felt I already knew the answer. Finally, he looked up. His voice was steady but laced with something I recognized—an exhaustion, a quiet resolve, the tone of a person who has come to accept reality for what it is. "I would say most of the time, I felt out of place, even when I kept a positive mindset about it." He paused, exhaled sharply. "I would get a lot of stares, weird looks. I think it's because I'm not just Black, I'm dark-skinned, with dreads. People here... they're not used to that. Not used to me." His words sat heavy in the air between us. I nodded, not just in understanding but in recognition. I had felt that weight before. The feeling of being watched—not with admiration or curiosity, but with something else. Suspicion? Discomfort? An unspoken question: *Why are you here?*

Race, as we know it, is a construct, one designed by those in power, perpetuated in schools, in policies, in everyday interactions. We teach it without even meaning to, through avoidance, through fear, through the subtle ways we signal who belongs and who does not. And for Black students in predominantly white spaces, that message is often deafening.

What determines success? Some might say intelligence, hard work, or perseverance. But for many, success is shaped by something far more subtle: belonging. To thrive, people need spaces where they feel seen, heard, and valued. Where they fit. But what happens when that sense of belonging is missing? Every student I spoke with carried stories of feeling out of place, of walking into classrooms and campus spaces that seemed to shrink around them, pressing them into invisibility. Their experiences echoed my own. Though I am both Black and white, to many, especially to white people, I am only Black. That distinction, that imposed singularity, shapes the way I move through the world. The stares, the double takes, the moments when I step into a room and immediately feel the weight of being the only one, it's a quiet but persistent kind of

isolation. And for many Black students at PWIs, it is an everyday reality. When you don't feel like you belong, you learn to adapt. You shift, mold, perform, or code-switch, not as a conscious choice, but as a survival instinct. You change your voice, your demeanor, your expressions. You laugh at jokes that don't land, soften your words so they don't seem too sharp, too loud, too different. Enunciate every single letter vowel and consonant as they do, you cut your hair when it gets too long and nappy because that isn't "professional". You cover your culture and mask it with theirs, rather with what works within this system. "I would code-switch around certain classmates," Emanuel told me. "When people formed groups in class, I always felt like the odd man out. So I'd change how I spoke, laugh when they laughed, just to fit in." It's a performance that never really ends, and over time, it takes a toll. The exhaustion of constantly shifting between selves, of being hyper aware of how you're perceived, breeds something deeper—doubt and sometimes that doubt isn't even something that is held by others but within the very person putting on this persona. They begin to doubt their own self, their own identity, "Who am I? Who am I really?" their mind begins to slip because who they once knew is now gone, forced out by what this environment and the people within it perpetuate on them and force them to be.

I asked another student, Victor, if he ever experienced any racial bias or prejudice on campus. Again, with a question like this you begin to feel the space around you transform, either the thermostat significantly dropped in temperature or the answer this student gave sent a chilling sensation starting at the back of my neck through my chest and reaching all the way through my arms, into my fingertips. He said. "Some students were labeled as "aggressive" when they were really just misunderstood. Others were deemed unteachable because they weren't raised to let people talk to them a certain way, or even labeled as "thugs" simply because they dressed and

spoke differently. It was frustrating to see how quickly people were judged based on assumptions rather than understanding their backgrounds or perspectives.” Thug I thought, “yeah I have heard that before” what is this image of a thug conceived from? Main-stream media or maybe word-of-mouth? If the people of this region have never truly seen what a *thug* actually is then where are they getting this information to label individuals as such? Going back to what I said earlier, race is something that has been fine tuned to propel and oppress different groups. Black was and in some cases is still seen as evil, this is signified through popular culture time and time again while white is often related to purity. When the student said these students labeled as thugs were misunderstood... It was an intriguing perception of what he believed was going on. Is the problem a lack of communication and understanding? Is there a way we can bridge this gap? What happens when we do begin to understand each other more?

“I couldn’t be mad at them (white people) because that’s all they knew.” Emanuel said with an expression on his face that expressed the feeling of hopelessness “but at the same time I had to enlighten them a few times on some stuff.” Attending a PWI in these communities doesn’t just mean you can escape when off of campus because these towns, these states are primarily white as well. The looks, the stares, they never end. I asked the students if they ever experienced any form of racism while attending their PWIs. Two responses in particular stuck out. One student said, “While downtown a homeless white man said the N-word. Of course, I was shocked initially but then I felt I should just walk away.”. The *N-word*. Nigga, or even Nigger. We’ve all said it, right. At least in our heads if not out loud. A powerful word used as ammunition to tear down a particular race. A word set to confine someone, to oppress them. This word is used quite often in my experience on or in college campus towns by white people. While I don’t mean

every day, I just mean more usual than it should, and it is usually when they're intoxicated so they can get a rise out of someone. These people are the same ones we share classes with on campus; they are the same ones that stare at us and wonder, *why are they here?* A student from Colorado State, James, expressed how he believed he was challenged with the word. "One time someone on the rodeo team was saying the n-word to challenge my character to see if I would do anything about it and I didn't do anything about it, I felt like it just wasn't my place to do anything about it at that time." Black students are often "challenged" a lot on PWIs from other students by using this derogatory word which makes them feel less and less welcome each time.

The other experience I feel is worth mentioning is that of Emanuel's whose experience happened at a campus supported event. "There was a situation where I was at one of our basketball games, and they started holding up blackface in the student section, and it was something like that where it was totally fine to do it. I wanted to go over there and slap this dude but everyone I was with told me it wouldn't be him who would get in trouble, it would be me." My stomach dropped as if I was on a roller coaster hitting a steep drop. That feeling didn't fade until after I went to sleep that night. Angelica, a biracial woman who attended Colorado State university who identifies as German and Nigerian expressed the racial climate of her school as, "It was tense. From the Trump wall protest to nooses being placed on dorm doors and swastikas being drawn in residence halls, it was clear there was a racial and cultural divide. The political split between conservative and liberal students was also very noticeable, which added to the overall tension.". Again, these are our classmates, our peers doing these things. All of these incidents occurred on campus and these students felt helpless. Even when Black students do everything right, even when they achieve, that gnawing feeling remains: *Am I really supposed to*

be here? This is imposter syndrome, a quiet voice in the back of the mind that whispers that success is an illusion, that any moment, someone will pull back the curtain and expose you as a fraud. And it thrives in places where belonging is scarce. For Black students at PWIs, this feeling isn't just about self-perception—it is reinforced by the world around them. The lack of representation in faculty, the absence of their histories in the curriculum, the quiet moments of exclusion that accumulate over time. And yet, they persist. They find ways to navigate spaces never designed for them, carving out pockets of community and strength in the midst of a system that too often renders them invisible statistically but inadequate in reality. “Be prepared to feel isolated, be prepared to feel like you're the only one feeling a certain way in a lot of situations” said Emmanuel. This is how black students find ways to succeed in academia at PWIs. They have to come to the realization that they will feel alone, that no one thinks, talks, or acts like them. They... we... have to be okay with it and due to this, graduation rates at PWIs compared to that of black students at HBCUs are significantly less. It almost seems as if we have to survive this education for four to six years and then we will be done and can join society where we want. But survival should not be the expectation. Thriving should.

CONFINEMENT: EXPECTATIONS, REALITY, SURVIVAL

A lot of those that I interviewed felt they were expected to act a certain way, think a certain way, and learn a certain way. Many had experienced attending PWIs before but when attending higher education realized what comes with being black at these schools. A lot of social expectations, expectations from peers, from teachers. What happens when you meet those expectations? What happens when you don't? A Former student at Idaho state, Harrison, said,

“You know, almost every day if I had a conversation with someone they would ask me what sport I played.” He paused and sighed, a feeling of exhaustion like I was making him relive the probable hundreds of conversations he had like that. “I didn’t even play a sport but I knew why they asked me. It’s because I’m black... they only think I got here because I’m athletic and play sports.” A sense of defeat rushed through the screen of my laptop as if a virus had corrupted my laptop. This “virus” was the lack of representation this school propelled onto this student. At PWIs you will typically find most of your black student body on athletic teams this is a double edged sword for athletes and non-athletes alike because immediately they are boxed into a category, they are a number amongst many other numbers. They are viewed as just that when they are so much more. Another instance of falling short of expectations came from James. When speaking to him I felt a harmonious feeling, an epiphany you could call it. When conversing about the groups on campus meant to support minority students he explained how they were the opposite for him. He said, “Sometimes they would try to check you as you’re not this enough, if you aren’t Latino enough or black enough or native enough in some way or another. There were a lot of people acting as gatekeepers making you feel unwelcome if you’re within their spaces. Overall it repulsed me to go into those areas even though I tried to keep going thinking the fault was on myself.” These groups in which were made to make minorities feel heard and accepted placed an expectation on this student to act a certain way, to be black the way they wanted him to be just like being labeled as an athlete because of your skin color. “I felt a lot of racial bias from black people that I simply wasn’t black enough or I wasn’t this enough that really got to my head and I would usually just bottle it up. That was the most bias that I felt was from other black people expecting me to behave a certain way when that just wasn’t me.”

That sense of not being enough or not qualifying is often afflicted by white peers but in this instance it was due to the forced feeling of lack of representation on campus to fill a hole. The Black student union made this student feel like he had to do this because no one else would because there was no one else available. They forced him to be their version of what they needed him to be and that wasn't him.

Another instance that happened on campus with a student, Sam, from Colorado involved a professor. This professor imposed their authority upon this student making them believe that they had to do more work, expend more effort to be on the same level as their white peers to succeed in the class. "There was a time I was targeted by a teacher in a language class, where I had to show that I was being graded differently from my peers. It made me feel like I was on an uneven playing field and made my day to day work a lot more difficult." This educators' actions proved that they believed this student to be in a different category, they graded this student differently, more harshly due to their skin color which is blatant racism. Luckily the student was granted a removal from the class and admitted into a different one because he was able to prove the professor's discrimination and unfair grading. What happened to the teacher? Well, nothing. "There was no real action after that [after moving classes] I was able to basically pass the class and move to the next section but nothing happened to her." I asked him if he felt any type of way about this, that there were no disciplinary actions taken for this professor. He responded, "Of course I did but I was in my graduation year and the University wasn't really trying to impose a punishment so I unfortunately let it off the hook." with a sense of defeat almost I felt radiating from him. A sense of helplessness like he couldn't have done anything to fight for

himself. This teacher still works for the university and was given no punishment for their actions. Again, these are our peers, these are our professors.

Being a black woman at a PWI comes with an added layer of everything, Intersectionality. It is the idea that people can face multiple types of discrimination or disadvantage at the same time, based on different parts of who they are, like their race, gender, class, sexuality, or disability. Angelica allowed me a glimpse into what it felt like for her when she felt microaggressions and how she dealt with it. I asked her if she ever felt any racial bias or microaggressions during her time on campus. With a conviction in her eyes she began to say “Yes—people wanting to touch my hair, questioning my attire, or calling Black women loud and aggressive.” Matching her fierceness was her intellect, her ability to convey feeling but also not allow for any weakness to be seen. I guess a hardened shell formed over the years that allows her to be who she is without caring of what people say or think. She continued. “Unfortunately, it’s nothing new. I developed tough skin, but I also made sure to call it out when necessary. Most of the time, people didn’t even realize how offensive they were being, so I tried to show grace. I also learned that racism is a taught behavior, and for some students, CSU was their first time being around Black people. Learning how to read the room became a survival skill.” A strong statement that made me question again what was said. She mentions giving grace, Emanuel said something similar to me, not becoming angry because of their ignorance. But at what point should we? She again mentions how race is a taught behavior and how she has had to learn certain skills to *Survive*. Why are our students feeling like this, why do they feel the need to survive?

Spencer, another young man I interviewed described his classes in Montana as “Isolating”. “He says, class was definitely isolating. I was normally the only black kid.” Something I felt and heard so many times throughout this process. It began to become redundant. I almost began to omit the information because of how repetitive it became. But what would that do? This feeling needs to be amplified and expressed as many times as it is felt. He continued after that brief realization I had while he gathered his thoughts. “I sat at my own table, and spoke to nobody or approached anybody. Everybody in my business classes already had their friend groups, and I wasn’t a part of any. They also just weren’t the type of people I was normally friends with. But isolating is definitely how I would describe class. This also didn’t do well for my motivation to go to these classes.” He describes a loneliness, a solitude in the fact that he was always the only black student in his classes, confined to being just that as well as doing just that. The room felt isolating so that is ultimately what he did to feel comfortable enough to even attend these classes.

Performing, or putting on an act to feel accepted. What happens when that isn’t the case? Cornelius expressed how he was taken aback when someone commented on his dialect. “I do recall a time where I was complimented on how well spoken I was after I told them where I was from. I don’t remember exactly how I handled this situation but I know I was confused.” The confusion he felt was spurred by the undertone of either ignorance or racism charged by that comment. Either they couldn’t believe how well spoken he was because he was from the south or they just couldn’t fathom he was who he was and sounded the way he did. Cornelius was initially placed in this box, where the person believed he would have poor dialect because of where he calls home.

WALK A MILE IN MY SHOES

Born and raised in Southern California you would think it to be paradise in comparison to states like those in the intermountain west in terms of social acceptance. Fortunately I was able to grow up in a more suburban area opposed to what a lot of my early and late childhood friends did. What this also means is that I was subjected to prejudice, racism, and classism at an early age and I recognized it quite early as well. I have a single mother, a single white mother who had three black children. I remember early on all of the stares we would receive just walking around the grocery store and again that nagging voice appeared. *Why are you here?* I attended PWIs my whole life, from kindergarten to 11th grade to be exact. I remember around the age of 8 or 9 I came home from school one day and started crying while looking at myself in the mirror. I looked at my hair, as poofy and froed (afroed) out as could be. All I could think was why couldn't I be white, I hate my hair, it is so different from everyone else's. My skin is darker and gets even much darker in the summers. *Why am I me?* At this point in my life, I didn't know that there were schools with more diversity, that there were people who looked like me. I felt alone. There weren't any teachers or faculty that resembled myself, I would open textbooks and again, nothing there represented me at all. This persisted all the way through grades 3 through 8. I didn't start to accept myself until I got to highschool and started to see more and more kids who looked like me but again, there weren't a lot of us. High school is a place when you start to become a little conscious of the world around you rather than just your world. I attended Martin

Luther King Jr. High school from grade 9-11. A fitting name for a school right? A man who enacted and fought for change, fought for a world he believed could be real one day. A man who sacrificed his life for a better tomorrow. With news the district would be naming their new high school after a black man the community erupted in anger. Parents saying they wouldn't send their children there and much much more. Alas, the name still stands today because brave people on the school district board back in the early 2000s believed this name was important. With that bit of history, you can get a sense of the climate I was stepping into in my early teenage years. One instance still rings through my head like it was yesterday. White students, particularly white male students started to fly confederate flags on their trucks their parents bought for them brand new. There was a feud between black students and white students because of this. Why fly those flags? I remember one student telling me "It represents our culture and history, something we should all be proud of right?" and this completely blew my mind. This I'm sure was a pathetic excuse for him to fly a flag that represented the approval of slavery. This along with everything else that was heard and seen was brought to the attention of the principal of the school and nothing was done due to "freedom of speech". They didn't care about the well being of their black students at all even when we came to them with our concern for our safety. We felt threatened. I had finally had enough with the antics and transferred halfway through my Junior year to a predominately black and hispanic school where I finally felt I belonged.

I received a football scholarship to Colorado State University, another PWI. This is when I began to feel those same things I felt when I was younger but this time a little differently and more magnified. I remember walking into my first big lecture class. I gazed around and sure enough, I was the only black person in the room. This world in which we know it is so much

different for everyone. Most all black people will tell you the first thing they do when they enter an establishment, whether it be a restaurant, a class, or really anything, they look to see if there are any other black people in the room. This is usually the first trigger in which I use to know when to code-switch/ perform. I have to be “presentable” and act accordingly because I want to feel like I belong and make everyone else feel like I belong. I talk differently, more sophisticated, I show my education, my vocabulary. I enunciate everything, laugh when they laugh. This probably sounds familiar right? I ran into racists downtown all the time. Drinking and racism come in bunches is what I have learned. I have been called the n-word on multiple different occasions just because they didn’t like that I was there, they viewed me as a threat to them. One encounter I had at CSU was odd to say the least. It all started when my roommate and I decided to go out to one of our first, real, college parties. Of course, both of us were extremely eager to attend. We got dressed and started to walk to the house where the party was being thrown. We got there and as you would expect, there were probably around 100 or so people in this smaller two story college house. The carpet stained with alcohol, food and whatever brown substance you could think of, I tried not to. Also, everyone seemed to be drunk. My roommate and I still being uncomfortable with our surroundings, decided not to drink, just socialize. We went around and started talking to various different people and eventually started talking to two women who were just standing in a corner. We introduced ourselves and were just chatting. I remember distinctly the next few minutes that occurred. Through the old speakers that were probably from the early 2000s and the 100 attendees I heard the song “Dior” by Pop Smoke come on. It had just released a few months prior and was a big hit. As we were talking to these two girls I feel a weird presence come up behind me. From this weird feeling I turned around and

a white male standing around 6 feet stood there. His lips began to move and the words of “what are you niggas doing?” came out of them. Surprised, I looked at my roommate and gave him the look of “did he just say that?” I looked back at the guy and said “what did you just say?” He doubled down and said it again. I paused and thought it was ironic that in a room full of white people they are all listening and dancing to a black music artist and this one guy felt the nerve to come up and ask what we were doing there as if we didn’t belong. Like they just wanted our culture, our music, our look... but not us as human beings, as peers. I quickly became infuriated. He kept calling me this word and I told him to go outside. I was fully prepared to fight this man because he got angry because I assume we were talking to some girl he liked at this party. When we were outside my friend grabbed me, literally picked me up and pulled me away from probably hurting this guy and I am thankful to him for doing that. If I did get into this fight it would not have been him who would be getting in trouble, it would have been me. We walked the same path we took there home and we talked, after I calmed down I thanked him for what he did and he told me, “Try not to let what they say affect you, they do it because they’re jealous and want to make you suffer.” That was the end of this story, or so I thought. I came to find out this same guy was in my geology class of around 300 students. I remembered his face, how couldn’t I? I walked into class every Tuesday and Thursday and had to look at a guy who called me that word and didn’t even remember who I was. I wanted to drop the class but I couldn’t. I needed it to be eligible for football and I couldn’t get behind in credits my Freshman year. Other than a few more occurrences going out and being called the n-word, I didn’t experience any more direct racism. What I did experience was the system and how it was fine tuned to make me feel. I felt so alone going to every class because I was a journalism major, a person who loved to

write. Just like grade school, I didn't learn about any Black writers, nor did I see any around me. At this point in my life I had felt too different than my peers around me and too disconnected from my friends back home. It felt as if I was in limbo, in between everything and everyone but still I persisted.

I transferred to Montana State University halfway through my senior year to follow my dream of playing collegiate football but along the way, a new version of me was awoken. Going from journalism to English writing I began to take more thought provoking classes. In my last semester I took the very first African American literature course MSU had ever offered, it was the year 2023. I also took a Southern Literature class that focused heavily on the gothic. These classes were the sparking of a flame for myself. In the African American Literature class I respected my professor because on the first day of class he came in and stated that he wasn't the optimal choice for the leader of the class, but he was one of the only people who wanted to teach it. He expressed how he could never begin to understand what it was like to be black but he believed the class and the literature needed to be taught. This was the first time in my college career I felt welcomed. The books we read were brilliant, August Wilson, James Baldwin, and so many more. In the Southern Gothic class I had taken, it was a similar experience, the literature I was taking in was the jump start in what I could see myself possibly doing, I finally found people who looked like me doing something I loved. With many classes, especially those centralized around race, I had been quiet, and reserved. As I was most of my undergrad. I didn't want to be the one black guy in this class arguing with everyone about what it was like to be black, I didn't feel like it was my job. I've heard it isn't always the job for the minority to educate the majority of their struggles, it is their job to educate themselves but with a state like Montana how can they

educate themselves when they don't even know there is a problem? So, one day I had a meeting with the professor of a class. They told me straight up, "You are the most important person in this class". Yes, you guessed it, because I was black and the only one in the class. They implored me to speak my mind and challenge the other students. At first I thought, "that's a weird thing to say". I didn't know how to feel about it for a while and even still I don't. But I listened. I challenged and spoke up about my experiences. I started to believe that if I didn't, who would? I was having a conversation with a classmate once and Jim Crow came up on my behalf and they said, "What's that?". Many times in the state of Montana I have felt like I have had to educate my peers on black history, American history because the education system has failed them, at least in my eyes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT & ADVICE FOR INCOMING BLACK STUDENTS

The students I spoke with all had ideas for what Universities could do to improve the environment for their black students and make it a safer environment for them. Jon said staff should, "Be more proactive in the community, sometimes it isn't just about letting things happen you have to be actively looking for things to help support the different communities on campus." It isn't about "not being racist ", it is about being anti-racist and doing anything and everything to combat racism on and around campus. "My major change would be implementing Affinity spaces for students who are interested, I feel like if it was school wide at times it can attract large groups of people who can learn from their peers' experiences.". The advice they wanted black students to hear is, "I would tell them to make sure they establish a strong identity in yourself because your community may not be as big as where you're from. From there figure out ways to

branch out and find the Black people on campus who really care about you and to spend time with them.”

Emanuel expressed his uneasiness with expectations placed on black students and the fields they choose to study, “I think would be cool is removing the behavioral expectation from blacks in their recruiting habits such as not only recruiting blacks to be a part of the liberal arts or the engineering departments specifically or athletics but encouraging black youth that are into geology or entomology or anthropology or construction management all of those areas that you don't see a lot of black people in that. Putting more of an effort into those types of roles and not allowing ourselves and society to pigeonhole us to just a few occupations.” They also said, “I would create a high school to college pipeline of research for researching in different industries and arenas starting in high school or high school age students or even beyond to go to undergraduate and get to research those things that they're interested in that contribute to the world and then release that research to the world for the benefit of it and offer more research-based jobs to blacks.” Their advice for incoming black students at PWIs is, “Discover who they are without forcing themselves into a job and finding workarounds to everything. Find out how to live in a world where there's many undesirable options in living. I would say don't be afraid everybody's scared amidst that, go try new things and don't behave a certain way just because people expect you to.”

Making black voices more heard on campus is what Victor proposes. “ Make Black History Month more evident throughout the university. I feel like every February passes by like just any other month. Make flyers around the campus, and have the Black Student Union speak at more football and basketball games.” Their advice is, “do your research, talk to people from or

who have been to the school you want to go to, and get a good understanding of what it would be like to attend the school. And once you're there, embrace it, have fun and try new things. Also, Be mindful of others and put yourself in their shoes before you judge them.”.

Angelica believes faculty and staff should, “Update the marketing curriculum to teach HubSpot, Mailchimp, Shopify, marketing plans, strategic planning, the “AHA” moment, and graphic design techniques .Expand DEI-focused internships and business networking events with alumni. Fund trips to major networking events, trade shows, and conferences outside of the state.” She would implement, “Entrepreneur pop-up events, like TSU, where students can showcase their businesses, build clientele, and learn real-world entrepreneurship skills.” Her word of advice, “Check everything! Don’t just focus on academics—look at the sports, events, diversity programs, internship opportunities (including out-of-state), and networking trips. Having diversity around you doesn’t just mean being around people who look like you—it helps you collaborate with anyone.”

Spencer begs the question of what the job of an educator is. What the job of faculty is in regards to their students. He says, “I think they could support them by simply doing their job, and treating them the way they would treat any other student. They could even try to find a way to put black kids in classes with other black kids to prevent the isolated feelings that I had. One major change would be to support historically black fraternity or sorority chapters. I think this would bring more pride to black students, and give other students a chance to connect with our culture through parties and step shows.” He leaves this message for black students attending or wanting to attend a PWI. “I would tell a new black student at Montana State to first build a group of people there on campus that you can trust and lean on. Then you have to get out and push your

comfort zone. I never thought that I'd be in love with going to the rivers on campus and fishing all day, or even have the most fun I've probably ever had snowmobiling. There's things to do that I've never done before, and it gets to a point where you have to be creative there. Try everything you can before you leave. Montana isn't a racist place. I do believe there are kids who go to the school that know nothing about black culture, and don't even have any intentions to learn about it. Yet, they aren't disrespectful in any way. You definitely feel like a raisin in the snow there, but it's a chance to get comfortable with the majority in America for sure."

"I think faculty and staff can do a better job at recognizing what it's like as black students, they may not understand but they should be able to see what it's like through a metaphorical lens." Cornelius said to me. "I would implement at least one diversity and inclusion class into each major as well so all students have some sort of background in it." The last few words he says are words of advice. "I would just say to have a really good support system early". Highlighting how important support is to anyone but especially to those who are scarcely represented.

Jarett, a student whose voice I have not mentioned yet, had just a few things to say. "I think just have more organizations out there but also network and advertise them so other people can know about them as well." When asked what he believed staff and faculty could do better. I would implement doing more activities together as black students, host more get-togethers, and put it out there more for other students to feel welcome to come as well. He ends with some really great advice, similar advice to some of the other students. "Don't be afraid to try new things, get out and network. There are thousands of students who are here alone who are also nervous and anxious. Make yourself approachable as well."

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CONCLUSION

To walk through the halls of a predominantly white institution as a Black student in the Intermountain West is to walk a tightrope between visibility and invisibility, between survival and self-discovery, between silence and resistance. This study set out to answer pressing questions. How do Black students experience PWIs in a region where they are numerically/statistically few and culturally isolated? What toll does this take on their mental health, identity, and academic achievement? Most importantly, what systems must change to not only support but also celebrate their existence?

The literature made clear that the challenges are not new. From Ruby Bridges to today's DEI rollbacks, Black students have carried the burden of navigating institutions not built with them in mind. Psychological strain, identity fragmentation, code-switching, and imposter syndrome have become common companions on their academic journeys. Studies like Neville's BSSI and the work of DeCuir-Gunby and Apugo expose the mental health implications and systemic failures that persist. But theory alone can't fully capture what it means to feel like a "raisin in the snow", the interviews in this study bring those lived realities into sharp, urgent focus. Through these stories, we see both the fracture and the fire. We see students forced to perform, pressured to represent, and persistently misunderstood — not just by white peers and faculty, but sometimes by each other. We also see their fight: for identity, for voice, for space. We hear how resilience was cultivated in residence halls, in the rare classroom with representation, in whispered affirmations and rage held in silence. These students do not need saving. They need listening. They need support that affirms them without asking them to compromise who they are.

We can also revisit the question posed earlier: what would it look like if DEI truly worked? The answer is not just numerical parity in graduation rates. It is wholeness. It is students leaving with their dignity, identity, and self-worth intact—maybe even strengthened. As Prempeh and Freeman (2023) emphasize, success includes safety, belonging, and empowerment. The inclusion of affinity spaces, curriculum reform, thoughtful mentorship, and authentic representation aren't just add-ons — they are lifelines. Now with the fall of DEI programs across the country, the need for more allies in this fight for equity is even more apparent. We must all come together to create a space where academics and education can be a safe space for everyone.

This paper does not exist to simply document trauma. It exists to call out and call forward. If universities are to be places of growth and enlightenment, they must first recognize the ways they alienate and erase. Faculty and administrators must move from passive non-racism to active anti-racism. They must stop asking Black students to educate and instead educate themselves. They must foster spaces where Blackness is not just tolerated or tokenized, but valued where students are not reduced to performers or pioneers, but recognized as whole, multifaceted individuals who will one day add productively to our society.

The stories shared here are not anomalies, they are echoes of a much larger truth. And if we're truly listening, we'll realize, thriving is not a luxury. It is a right. Black students deserve more than endurance. They deserve to belong.

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