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**Immersed in a Sea of Whiteness: How Black Students Describe their Participation at
Trinity College**

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Abstract

This study expounds upon education research exploring Black students' experiences at predominantly white institutions—places that often call for diversity but seldom remember the importance of inclusion. Through nine semi-structured interviews with Black students enrolled at Trinity College, the data answers two questions: “How do Black students describe their classroom participation at Trinity College? How does this change when students have attended predominantly white institutions prior to their enrollment at Trinity?” This comparative study reveals that many participants, no matter their previous schooling, felt intimidated by their classmates and feared looking unintelligent. Still, participants explained these feelings in different terms depending on their K-12 schooling. Despite their discomfort or times they felt disrespected, most resolved to participate in order to achieve academically and enlighten their peers. In the most significant moment of disagreement between participants, students with previous experience at predominantly white schools, namely subset one, rarely increased their participation when there was a higher population of students of color in the classroom. Their responses stand in stark contrast to subset two, comprised of students with no previous experience at majority white schools. Further, most participants asserted their participation increased when they had professors of color, particularly Black professors, for students felt seen and truly heard. In moments when participants disengaged from a course, meaning they stopped participating or withdrew from a class entirely, participants explained they met their breaking points, for the racism they experienced was all too much to bear.

Keywords: PWI, Black students, achievement, silence, participation, curriculum

Introduction

Throughout the last sixty years, the country saw a dramatic increase in the number of Black students attending institutions of higher education, a result of the "push for Black equality" during the Civil Rights Movement (Allen, 1992, p. 26). Throughout the decades, institutions of higher education have felt compelled, and perhaps were forced by the public, to respond to the call that they unlock the gates of the ivory tower to Black students. Walter Allen (1992) adds, "public support for higher education was strong" in the late '60s but argues that these demands soon became whispers. Allen contends that during the late '80s and early '90s the country experienced another shift, wherein the "demand for equality [was] tempered by ambivalence" (Allen, 1992, p. 26). In that vein, colleges and universities have become incredibly focused on retention rates, endowments, and their rankings, casting their commitment to Black students, and their faculty for that matter, aside. Thus, college campuses, particularly those that are predominantly white, often prove to be unsafe spaces for Black students, as is evident in the high attrition rates amongst these individuals. Specifically, only forty-two percent of Black students who enroll in college complete their degree, meaning that something is forcing them from their institutions ("Black student college," n.d.). This particular statistic only increases when looking exclusively at Black students who attended predominantly white institutions (PWI).

While it is apparent PWIs have taken strides to diversify their student bodies, they have failed to do the necessary work to make their schools a safe environment for Black students (Woldoff et al., 2011). Consequently, these students, along with others who are of color, are forced to endure racism from faculty, administrators, and their fellow classmates. In essence, these institutions have forgotten that diversity and inclusion are not one in the same—that in order to truly call oneself a diverse space, students of color must feel included as well (Jack

2019). To that end, colleges and universities seem to forget about the well-being of Black students, which may in part be the reason these individuals are completing college at a lower rate than any other racial group. That is, the racial terrain, coupled with the lack of support, might be all too much to withstand, and as a result, Black students must exit before earning their degrees to protect their personal well-being.

Moreover, due to the low college completion rate amongst Black students, researchers have examined the challenges these students face when they enter the world of higher education. While some consider the curriculum, others pay closer attention to the racial demographics of students and faculty as well as the racial climate. Still, there are many researchers who have taken a more holistic approach to examine how all of these factors affect Black students' experiences at PWIs. As stated, PWIs—more narrowly, the colleges and universities in the New England Small Collegiate Athletic Conference (NESCAC), serve as a space that centers whiteness, wealth, privilege, and tradition; they are essentially where the elite go to play. Consequently, in some cases, Black students, especially those with no prior experience at predominantly white schools, undergo a culture shock, as they are effectively thrust into a new and seemingly foreign land. In their efforts to acclimate to their new surroundings, some find themselves struggling to stay afloat, for their schools failed to adequately prepare them for the academic rigor of college. Their struggles are only exacerbated by the racial demographics, as many of their previous schools had higher levels of diversity or were majority Black.

Although some Black students find themselves in what can only be described as an alternate universe, there are others who have spent years, sometimes a decade or more, at predominantly white schools (Cookson & Perssell, 1991). Thus, they are increasingly familiar with what it means to be Black in these environments. Essentially, they have taken

comprehensive courses in how to persist in spaces that rarely celebrate their Blackness. Furthermore, due to the disparities in the education system in general, these students are often given greater access to resources that other Black students are not typically privy to. In other words, due to their previous attendance at predominantly white schools, these students learn the material and study skills needed for success in higher education (Jack 2019). As a result, in some cases, these Black students have a far easier time adjusting to the academic rigor and racial climate of PWIs than their peers (Cookson & Perssell, 1991). Still, it is important to note that despite their history at majority white schools, some Black students struggle to acclimate socially, as they are perceived as “whitewashed” by other students of color (Alexander-Snow, 1999).

With varying degrees of comfortability in and familiarity with these spaces, past research focuses on the specific classroom experiences of these students, paying close attention to what might hinder their desire to actively participate. Some students described feeling particularly hesitant to speak when their classrooms’ student population was majority white. In a similar vein, when their classmates spewed microaggressive or overtly racist comments, they sometimes silenced themselves to protest their environments (Foley, 1996). Further, Black students relayed that their disinterest in the curriculum or inability to connect to it contributed to their silences. Conversely, when Black students felt as though their identities were seen, heard, and incorporated into lessons, they were far more inclined to actively participate (hooks, 1994). To that end, when they felt their professors respected their identities and, in some cases, found commonalities in their shared experience of being a person of color, they, too, increased their participation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Francois. 2010).

This paper aims to understand how Black students at one particular PWI, namely Trinity College, describe their classroom participation. I ask: How do Black students describe their classroom participation at Trinity College? How does this change when students have attended predominantly white institutions prior to their enrollment at Trinity? To fully examine the research question, I conducted a review of past literature that studied the climate of PWIs, paying special attention to students, faculty, and the administration. After comprehensively exploring the climate, I present how the climate ultimately impacts the classroom. In tandem, I examine how professors' curricula, inflammatory comments, and identity shape participants' classroom participation. Finally, in the last few pages of the literature review, I focus exclusively on Black students who attended predominantly white schools before enrolling at Trinity.

Following the review, I discuss research methods, limitations, and my positionality as a researcher. In the final moments of the paper, I present my findings from the qualitative study and their implications in the discussion. Ultimately, this paper argues that although participants had different K-12 schooling experiences, many of them describe their participation in similar terms—the most significant point of difference being how the racial diversity of the classrooms stands to impact participation.

Black vs. African American

In this study, I specifically used the word “Black,” with a capital “B,” to be as inclusive as possible in my data collection. Over time, society has used an amalgam of terms to categorize Black people. Although “African-American,” a term popularized by Reverend Jesse Jackson,¹ was used for decades to describe this particular racial group, there has been a cultural shift in the last couple of decades: Now, people are more inclined to recognize the diversity within the racial

¹ See Sigelman et al. (2005), for further discussion of the transition from “African American” to “Black” and why the latter lends a more comprehensive, more inclusive, view of the Black Diaspora.

group. As a result, some, including me, have determined African American to be a limiting term, as it fails to recognize that totality of the diaspora. Thus, in accounting for the diversity amongst Black people in this project, I employ the word “Black” to capture the variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Literature Review

The Racial Landscape

Although institutions of higher education have become more accessible to students of color over the decades, the racial tension on these campuses is palpable, wherein students of color feel as though they do not belong in the ivory towers. While these colleges and universities, particularly predominantly white institutions (PWI), have applauded themselves for diversifying their campuses, it is evident they have failed to be inclusive. They seem to forget that in order for “Black collegians” to thrive, they must feel “valued, safe, and accepted” in their environments (Woldoff et al., 2011, p. 1048). As a result, Black students were often confronted with microaggressions and blatant forms of racism on their campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Francois. 2010). In previous research, students of color cited the lack of resources provided to combat these discriminatory actions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In some respects, it was as if administrators and faculty expected Black students to endure, to persist, despite these attacks on their identities. One researcher referred to this added weight as an “invisible tax” that Black student were forced to pay and argued their racial trauma and degree served as the return on their investment (Givens, 2016, p. 57). Consequently, Black students who were hit with these daggers had wholly different experiences on their campuses.

These incidences of racism created rich environments of hostility for students of color. Shaun Harper and Sylvia Hurtado (2007) determined that racially marginalized students experienced feelings of “isolation, alienation, and stereotyping” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 12).

Through their synthesis of fifteen years of research on the racial climates of college campuses, coupled with their qualitative study of racial tensions at five PWIs, Harper and Hurtado confirmed that students of color felt unwelcome due to “the racial conflict on their campuses” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 9). To that end, Black participants reported their institutions did nothing to help students bridge the divide between cultures, which made campus undesirable and unsafe for students of color. The feeling of being unwelcome was expanded in Feagin et al.’s (1996) study. Black students at “historically white” public universities described numerous incidences that displayed the racism of their white peers and professors. Additionally, their participants noted administrators paid them very little attention and often brushed them aside. As a result, these students were left feeling incredibly dissatisfied and like interlopers within their communities (Feagin et al., 1996).

In other instances, campuses indirectly communicated to Black students that they did not belong. These experiences, while perhaps subtle in nature, were incredibly damaging as Solórzano et al. (2000) asserted. Solórzano et al. found that when Black students were confronted with microaggressions, they, again, felt a level of isolation. Therefore, these participants were forced to juggle being a student while navigating the racial terrain: “African American students on the campuses studied must strive to maintain good academic standing while negotiating the conflicts arising from the disparaging perceptions of them and their group of origin” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p.69). The process of negotiating was taxing (Carter & Reynolds, 2011) and as a result, left some participants questioning their academic abilities. These concerns were echoed by Fries-Britt & Turner (2001) who identified the ways in which racial stereotypes aimed at Black students’ intellectual capabilities broke their self-confidence. Specifically, when Black students felt the majority of their campus believed stereotypes about

Black people, most notably those aimed at their intellect, Black students' confidence in their abilities decreased (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Steele confirmed the phenomenon: "Through long exposure to negative stereotypes about their group, members of prejudiced-against groups often internalize the stereotypes, and the resulting sense of inadequacy becomes part of their personality" (Steele, 1999, p. 100). In essence, Black students are deeply affected by the thoughts and actions of their peers.

In a similar fashion, Harper & Hurtado (2007) examined institutional data surrounding the racial climate on predominantly white campuses. Through their investigation, they highlighted that colleges and universities, both private and public, have created environments of immense resistance. The administration tended to gloss over the everyday racism that led to greater incidences of discrimination and racial tensions on college campuses. Since they failed to adequately address these matters on either the individual or institutional level, racial tensions were exacerbated, and students of color were left to feel as though they were secondary to their white peers (Solórzano et al., 2000). In a similar vein, Black students in Feagin et al.'s (1996) study reported incidences of policing on their campuses. Specifically, they spoke about being punished more severely than white students for violations such as playing music too loudly. They also reported that security followed them as they moved around campus, which made them feel like outsiders in their places of study. Hurtado & Harper (2007) noted that these instances of feeling unwelcome were all the more apparent at selective institutions, where wealth, privilege, and tradition intersected. Here, racial tensions may be at their peak, she concluded: Although these schools may have seen the need to diversify, their allegiances were ultimately with their donors, who sometimes failed to take the necessary strides to create safe environments for students of color.

Additionally, in their study that followed the first-year experiences of Latinx students, Hurtado et al. (1996) found that even the most academically inclined students struggled to transition from high school to college because of the environment they entered. Hurtado et al. determined that they were not only adjusting to academics but also a racial climate, “where majority students think all minorities are special admits,” making them feel isolated. Furthermore, Feagin et al. (1996) identified that Black students also struggled to acclimate to their campus due to the racism of their peers and professors.

Black Students’ Experiences in the Classroom: Impact of Microaggressions and Overt Racism on Participation

The racial climate of the campus was found to transfer into the classroom, which made these environments all the more challenging for Black students. Through numerous studies, it became exorbitantly evident that these attacks, no matter their subtly, took many forms. In some cases, Black students were confronted with racist remarks from their professors and peers, which made their classroom environments all the more hostile (Solórzano et al., 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Further, through interactions with their peers, Black students were often abundantly aware that some students believed they received admission due to their race as opposed to their merit (Hurtado, 1992; Harper 2007). Consequently, some Black students felt they needed to prove themselves to their white peers and professors, a manifestation of the stereotype threat (Steele 1996). Moreover, professors, having convinced themselves that all Black people have the same perspectives, leaned on Black students to speak for their entire race. In turn, Black students stopped engaging in class discussions (Harper, 2007). As previously mentioned, these moments were incredibly taxing and sometimes led to adverse reactions within Black students; many felt isolated and exhausted, which caused them to disengage from their

classes entirely, for the burden was all too much to bear (Woldoff et al., 2011). In other cases, however, Black students were all the more motivated to verbally engage because they wanted to represent their race well (Steele 1999; Harper 2007).

Professors' Role in Black Students' Engagement

Shaun Harper (2007) examined the correlation between African American² students' participation in classes with primarily white populations and their involvement with Greek life. From his interviews with 131 members of these organizations across the Midwest, Harper found that African American students participated when they were racially underrepresented in the classroom. Additionally, their engagement increased when they felt responsible for positively representing their race, organizations, and themselves. The results found in this particular study supported and contradicted other researchers' findings. While many agreed professors affected engagement, others found that when immersed in a sea of whiteness, Black students disengaged. Unlike the students in Harper's study who were particularly motivated to participate when they were the only African American student in class, the Black women in Chantal Francois's (2010) research felt differently. Francois found that her participants, all students at PWIs, remained silent when they were the only Black student in the classroom. At times, their silence was amplified when students and professors spewed false narratives about people of color. Harper, on the other hand, found that Black students deemed it necessary to employ their voices to correct these false narratives.

Through her interviews, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) found that participants' professors lacked cultural sensitivity, which only added to students' feelings of isolation. Harper came to the same conclusion; he found that participants were unimpressed by their professors, as many of them

² I use African American when discussing Harper's (2007) research, as he used this terminology in his article.

consistently failed to show they cared for people of color, race relations, or diversity. Consequently, their professors served as an impediment to their participation. Furthermore, Rovai et al. (2005) conducted a literature review that addressed African American college students' experiences at PWIs. They found that professors often taught in ways that devalued these students, resulting in low verbal engagement.

Additionally, Harper and Francois determined that their participants felt uncomfortable when professors put the onus on them to represent their entire race or give the “minority perspective” (Harper, 2007, p. 98). bell hooks confirmed this experience in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, where she asserted that “if there is a lone person of color in the classroom, she or he is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of ‘native informant’” (hooks, 1994, p. 43). While this experience is relayed in both Harper’s and Francois’s research, their participants’ reactions differed. Francois found that her interviewees leaned into their discomfort and answered the questions to the best of their abilities. On the other hand, Harper learned from his participants that they refused to entertain this particular line of question. As a result, their participation dramatically decreased, as they felt it was disrespectful for a professor to expect them to speak for their entire race.

Moreover, in knowing their professors had little faith in them, Black students responded in a multitude of ways—some disengaged while others made it their mission to prove them wrong. The latter response was also the case for one student who articulated her classmates were biased against Black people; as a result, she “want[ed] to prove them wrong” (Francois, 2010, p. 62). Her reaction echoed those of Harper’s participants, who communicated they felt an added pressure to positively represent their Greek organizations. Their experience of overcompensating spoke so wholly to Steele’s research, wherein the marginalized worked tirelessly to “disprove the

stereotype. . .by outperforming in the case of academic work” (Steele, 1990, p. 102). These Black students tried their best to achieve in an effort to challenge the stereotypes of their professors and peers.

Due to the beliefs of non-Black professors, Black students were often thrilled to have Black professors. A student noted that she enjoyed her classes most when a Black professor taught them and added she felt safe to speak in any vernacular (Davis et al., 2004, p. 432). Additionally, Black professors often acted as mentors to their Black students (Fries-Britt & Griffin 2007), as they understood what it meant to be racially marginalized in a space that was never intended for them. To that end, Black professors acted as role models to Black students, as they found success despite the adversity they most ostensibly faced. In Guiffrida’s (2005) study, he focused on Black students’ relationships with their Black professors and illuminated their importance. These professors not only guided Black students academically but also personally, as they helped them grow developmentally and offered emotional support in life’s most trying times. Through his study, Guiffrida (2005), illustrated that the bonds Blacks students at PWIs created with Black professors are akin to “othermothering,”³ "women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (as cited in Guiffrida, 2005, p. 715). That is, their relationships go beyond the bounds of a traditional student-professor dynamic due to this kinship. While these relationships can be positive for the students and faculty, there were also negative ramifications with regard to the undue burden placed on Black faculty members, as they acted as therapists and mentors in addition to their roles as educators.

Students Perceptions and Black Students’ Engagement

³ See Guiffrida (2005), specifically pp. 715 & 716, for greater explanation about the legacy of slavery entrenched in the practice of “othermothering.”

Students of color relayed they feared appearing unintelligent in front of their classmates and, more significantly, being judged by their white male peers. Often the judgement they feared was subtle and sometimes manifested in a “glare. It might not be glares like they’re looking at you in the wrong way [sic] but you feel like they’re looking at you in the wrong way” (Francois, 2010, p. 64). To avoid such looks, Black students refrained from sharing their perspectives. Additionally, in Davis et al.’s (2004) study, they interviewed eleven Black students enrolled at a predominantly white university in the southeast. One participant relayed that in racially homogenous classes with white professors, she felt that, at times, she derailed the conversation and was somewhat self-conscious because of the thoughts and opinions of other students. In turn, these factors lowered her desire to contribute. Conversely, students expressed their happiness and sense of relief when their classes were racially diverse.

Moreover, Black students often attributed their silence to their fear of looking dumb or reluctance to bring topics of race into the classroom, as they feared the reactions of their white classmates. Students of color relayed they did not want their fellow classmates to think they were unintelligent. In an informal discussion, three Black women who attended PWIs relayed their classroom experiences (James et al., 2010). In an effort to avoid their white peers’ negative reactions—whether expressed through an eyeroll or exaggerated sigh of immense disapproval—these three women resolved to keep their comments about race abreast. Additionally, in trying to forgo the label of “angry Black woman,” the participants reported they often withheld their rebuttals when their white classmates made derogatory statements. Still, one woman added she picked her battles, meaning she only responded to some, not all, of the bigoted assertions (James et al., 2010, pp. 64-65). From these interviews, it was clear that participants silenced themselves to protect their emotional well-being.

The Impact of Curricula and Teaching Style on Engagement

hooks (1994) argued that teaching from a color-blind perspective that refused to see the legacy of racism—or even acknowledge gender or sexuality for that matter—was not as helpful as some believed. In some instances, teachers believed that teaching from this standpoint might foster a more cohesive community within their classrooms. hooks, however, said otherwise, as students of color often felt unacknowledged or snubbed when their identities failed to appear in the curriculum. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2007) confirmed hooks's findings in her qualitative study. Through participant-observations, assignments from students, and conferences amongst teachers, she found the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives from diverse groups into the curricula. Among the fifteen Black women at a college in New York, all were more likely to verbally engage in the classroom when the curriculum included these voices. Moreover, when the curriculum allowed for African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and discussed their position as Black women, students' participation increased (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

In a similar vein, some researchers found that Black students' discomfort in the classroom was linked to the disconnect between them and the curriculum. Guiffrida (2005) found that Professors often failed to properly “incorporate culturally diverse perspectives into their curricula” (Guiffrida, 2005, p. 312). As a result, students in past studies weaponized their silence and used it as a form of resistance when the curriculum was not inclusive or when students and professors made racist remarks (Jensen, 1973 & Foley, 1996). Specifically, Douglas Foley's (1996) research illuminated students' weaponization of their silence. He found that Mequaki students at predominantly white high schools used their silence to respond to racism, their apprehension about leaving the reservation, and their interactions with white students. In other cases, students' silence was in response to a professor's teaching style, namely one that did not

encourage student voices. Harper's (2007) participants noted that when teachers were "boring" and strictly lectured, they participated far less, many feeling as though they were not "obligated to even try to participate" when in a lecture hall (Harper, 2007, p. 108).

The Effect of Previous Schooling Experiences on Black Students' Time at PWIs

As previously mentioned, there is a population of Black students who have experience attending predominantly white schools before stepping foot on their college campuses. As a result, one could surmise that their immersion into this environment might differ from Black students who have never been in majority white schools. To that point, Black students who are thrown into these new environments undergo a culture shock of sorts. In turn, they endure a period of adjustment as they familiarize themselves with the language, styles, and beliefs that are shared amongst the white upper-class. These students, however, make only a part of the population. Those that spent time at a majority white high school, and perhaps middle and elementary school, might not endure such an incredible culture shock, as they familiarized themselves with the environment in years prior.

Anthony Jack (2019) and Peter Cookson & Caroline Hodges Persell (1991) found that enrollment at predominantly white institutions—particularly elite boarding schools, such as Phillips Exeter, Choate, and Andover—impacted marginalized students' transitions to higher education. Attending these prestigious secondary high schools as a Black student was an incomparable experience, where students learned how to exist and persist in the white world (Cookson & Persell, 1991). In a sense, these particular students learned the rules of the game, i.e., how to "act" the part" in order to thrive in these environments (Cookson & Persell, 1991, p. 220). They were familiar with terms like "office hours" and "syllabus," for they were surrounded by that language throughout their time at boarding school. Further, they understood

how to communicate with professors and carefully toe the line between professor and student to establish rapport (Jack 2019).

In their study, Cookson and Persell collected data from a national sample of 55 secondary boarding schools in the United States. They found that Black students, were forced “to play a cultural and political game that cannot be won because of their race. . .” (Cookson & Persell, 1991, p. 225). Essentially, while these students earned a good education, they also learned to exist within white spaces. From the research, one would assume students acquired the skills needed to navigate spaces, where tradition, extreme wealth, and whiteness collide. Thus, these students may have felt more comfortable in the classroom, which could have served to increase their classroom engagement.

Still, in her study that followed two African American students, Alexander-Snow (1999) found the opposite. She discovered that while one might assume that her participants’ background at an affluent boarding school would assist them in transitioning from high school to college, this was not the case for Lisa and Monica. Their schools prepared them for the academic rigor of college but not for the social world: “these students’ boarding school background apparently failed to provide them with the social skills. . .need[ed] to navigate” the racial terrain (Alexander-Snow, 1999, p. 115). Monica, in particular, reported feeling “she did not quite fit in with her Black peers” (Alexander-Snow, 1999, p. 113). She expanded that she was not interested in befriending her Black classmates, as she believed they were “corny” and not like those from her high school. Further, Monica found little comfort in white students, as she believed they were only concerned with each other. The racial climate made for a toxic environment for Lisa and Monica. In the end, both students withdrew from their respective schools (Alexander-Snow,

1999, p. 116). Here, their educational backgrounds did not assist them on their journeys of higher education.

Blackness: “Acting” White, “Acting” Black

In an effort to escape the racial climate of the campus and the classroom, some Black students found solace in one another exclusively while others found friendship in white students as well. At times, their friendship with white students made Black students feel uneasy, which created a divide. In some instances, the divide was magnified when researchers accounted for the fact that some Black students attended predominantly white schools before they attended majority white colleges and universities. Black students who found friendship in white students feared the judgement of their peers, as they knew some would believe they were “whitewashed” or “acted white” (Francois, 2010, p.67; Ogbu 2004). Through Ogbu’s work on collective identity in the Black community, he identified “the burden of acting white” (Ogbu, 2004, p. 14). He also detailed the innumerable instances that Black students deemed as acting white, such as using Standard American English (SAE) as opposed to AAVE, receiving high marks on assignments, studying, punctuality, etc. (Ogbu, 2004) As a result, many students refrained from engaging in these activities because they wanted to be accepted by their Black peers.

Summary of Literature

Past research has illustrated the racial terrain of predominantly white institutions. Researchers found that Black students must maneuver racial microaggressions, stereotypes, and overt racism from both their professors and fellow classmates as they complete their degrees. As a result, many felt unwelcome at their institutions, for they were abundantly aware of these negative perceptions. Additionally, in the wake of racially charged incidences, Black students found little support from the administration. In furthering their feelings of isolation, Black

students relayed incidences of policing and racial profiling on their campuses. Many of them recalled instances where campus safety followed them or moments when they received harsher punishment than their white peers for violating the same school policies. As with any person, Black students do not thrive academically when they feel such immense attacks on their identities.

Feelings of isolation only persisted in the classroom as professors and students were both guilty of making offensive statements and subscribing to discriminatory beliefs about Black students. Some researchers found that when students or professors made racially insensitive remarks, Black students took great efforts to correct them. Other studies demonstrated that Black students remained silent when these statements were said in the classroom to avoid the label of angry or aggressive when they attempted to correct their classmates. Additionally, one study illustrated that Black students silenced themselves when the onus was put on them to talk about race. In effect, they weaponized their silence as a form of protest. Studies also showed that Black students feared bringing race into discussions because of the reactions they might receive from professors and students.

Many Black students felt as though they needed to prove their classmates and professors wrong, as they knew many of them had little faith in their academic abilities. As a result, some students were more inclined to participate while others silenced themselves to avoid saying something wrong. In a similar vein, Black students chose not to speak, as they did not want to be judged for using AAVE. Often the hesitancy to use this dialect dissipated when the classroom was racially diverse, or the professor was Black. As a result, their participation increased. Additionally, they noted that when professors incorporated marginalized voices in their curricula, they participated more.

For Black students who had previous experience at PWIs, studies showed that in some cases they had an easier time acclimating to predominantly white colleges and universities. Due to their time in these white spaces, they acquired the tools needed to maneuver this world. Thus, one might conclude that they, too, felt more comfortable in the classroom. In other studies, researchers found that despite having a similar schooling experience, the environment was not conducive to their social lives, as they struggled to find their place. Further, participants felt disconnected from both the Black and white communities on their campuses, which culminated in their complete disengagement from the school, meaning they transferred to other institutions.

Using the data found in the literature as a basis, the research will aim to make sense of how the racial terrain at Trinity College, specifically the professors and students, affect Black students classroom engagement. More broadly, this project will add to the research surrounding Black students' experiences at predominantly white institutions. Ultimately, this paper responds to the following question—*How do Black students describe their classroom participation at Trinity College? How does this change when students have attended predominantly white institutions prior to their enrollment at Trinity?*

Data and Methods

Purpose of Research

The purpose of my research was to examine Black students' verbal participation in classes at Trinity College, a predominantly white institution and explore whether their participation changed when participants attended a PWI before enrolling in the institution. Specifically, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of how peers, professors, curricula, and the racial landscape of the College impacted Black students' willingness to engage in the classroom.

Through qualitative, open-ended interviews, I collected data from Black students, namely sophomores through seniors to address the above-mentioned research question.⁴

Sample

I used purposive snowball sampling to identify nine participants for the study. With the selected method of recruitment, I set my exclusion and inclusion criteria to identify participants who fit the parameters of my study. My participants included current Black students, ages 19-22, at Trinity who were in the midst of completing their undergraduate degrees. Specifically, I interviewed two sophomores, two juniors, and five seniors from a variety of majors. Despite the assortment of departmental interests, most participants were exclusively in the humanities and arts, with the exception of two with majors in the social sciences. One participant had not declared a major at the time of the interview. Of this group, two identified as male and the remaining seven identified as female. Additionally, four of the interviewees attended predominantly white institutions before their enrollment at Trinity, and the remaining seven only attended schools with diverse or majority Black populations. Two out of the four students with previous experience at PWIs attended them since elementary school and one began in ninth grade. It is also important to note that one student was enrolled in her high school's majority white IB program, but the school she attended was populated by mostly students of color. Still, she took all of her classes with white students and generally spent most of her day with them as

⁴ Initially this project aimed to incorporate participant observation, looking more narrowly at how the course curriculum and racial composition of classrooms impacted Black student's participation. In this investigation, I planned to also account for Blacks students who attended PWIs before coming to Trinity to examine how they engaged in the classroom. I hoped to observe four classes with varying levels of diversity, both in terms of the students and syllabi. Through participation observation, I planned to record the number of times Black students participated. In tandem with these observations, I would interview ten Black students from these classes, using convenience sampling. Due to COVID-19 and the length of this project, it became evident that these observations were not feasible, so I altered my project to be exclusively interview based. In so doing, I shifted my research question to its current form.

well. Furthermore, she attended predominantly white elementary and middle schools. As a result, I have placed her among students who had experience with predominantly white schools before coming to Trinity.

I selected participants using mixed-methods sampling. Initially, I identified two students whom I knew fit the criteria through convenience sampling. These participants were individuals I met through classes and on-campus jobs. After these two interviews, I used snowball sampling to identify other potential participants. Specifically, at the close of each interview, I asked whether participants knew of anyone who would be interested in being a part of the study and fit the above-mentioned criteria. Additionally, as I proceeded through the interview process, I continued the practice of asking interviewees to identify other participants. In some cases, I limited my inclusion criteria further, using stratified sampling. I did this to ensure I interviewed a collection of sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Data Collection

I conducted nine semi-structured interviewees. Seven interviews were in-person and the other two were over Zoom to accommodate all participants. Each interviewee received a \$10 Peter B's Gift Card as a thank you.

Recruitment

Prior to conducting interviews, I submitted an application to Trinity's Institutional Review Board and received approval for my project. With the exception of the first two interviewees (who I identified through convenience sampling and therefore recruited in-person), I sent recruitment emails to all potential participants. In the email, I introduced myself and the purpose of the study and asked whether they would be interested in being a part of the project

(for the email, see **Appendix A**). In addition to the formal email, I communicated with participants through text and GroupMe to confirm the day and time of their interview.

Pre-Interviews

On the day of their interview, all participants signed and dated a letter of informed consent that detailed the purpose of my research, their anonymity in the process, and noted their participation was voluntary. It also clarified the benefits, risks—all of which were minimal—and procedures of the study (for consent form, see Appendix B). In addition, participants completed a survey regarding their classroom engagement in high school and college, previous schooling, involvement with the Trinity student community, and comfortability with professors. The survey also inquired about their parents' or guardians' highest level of academic attainment (see Appendix C).

Interviews

Following the completion of the survey, I conducted the interviews that lasted between thirty to sixty minutes. The questions were pre-written and open-ended, which allowed for participants to offer as much or as little information as they felt comfortable with (see **Appendix D**). They were also reviewed by my thesis advisor to confirm they were non-leading, which helped produce genuine responses from the interviewees. To that end, I used previous research to shape my questions, which, in turn, increased their effectiveness. Coupled with the pre-written questions, I asked probing questions as well to gain greater insight into participants' classroom participation. As a result, students were able to provide their honest opinions about their classroom experiences. Additionally, I structured my questions in such a way that they carried a conversational tone, which perhaps made the participants feel at ease as they responded. Seven out of the nine interviews were conducted in-person, face-to-face, and the remaining two

occurred over Zoom. For those that were face-to-face, I recorded them using voice memos, and I used the recording feature on Zoom to record the remaining. Throughout their interviews, I took notes on each participants' interview guide to remind myself of the parts that needed further clarification.

In the beginning, the questions centered around participants' high school and classroom engagement. These first set of questions relied heavily on participants' answers to the survey questions about their previous schooling experiences. If the participant indicated they had never attended a PWI prior to Trinity, I asked them to characterize their high school in terms of the racial composition of students and teachers, size, and location. For those who did have this experience, I asked about their time at their predominantly white lower, middle, or upper schools. To supplement these questions, I inquired about their transition to Trinity in relation to their previous schooling experiences. The following questions concerned their participation in the student community; how they described their participation in general; moments of disengagement and engagement; participation in their least and most racially diverse classes; and how they reacted when professors depended on them to speak about race. Finally, I asked participants about other students who might be interested in the project.

Privacy

Due to the nature of the data collection, participants often revealed moments of racial trauma or thoughts and opinions that were private in nature. Therefore, it was imperative their identities remained anonymous. To ensure confidentiality, I conducted interviews, both in-person and over Zoom, in private rooms. Similarly, I used my personal password protected laptop to record during each interview. To protect the anonymity of the participants, I did not share any

identifying information from the interviews. At the conclusion of the project, I followed IRB protocols for storing and later destroying all collected data.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I transcribed the in-person interviews using Otter Voice Meeting Notes. For those that took place on Zoom, I made use of the provided transcripts. In both cases, I compared the transcripts with the original audio file to identify and correct any inconsistencies. During the initial round of thematic coding, I reviewed the transcripts of participants with no previous experience at PWIs to gain a better understanding of the participants' engagement and experiences on campus. During this round, I aimed to gain a general sense of participants' comments. As a result, I highlighted areas of repetition to identify emerging themes that aided in my analysis. In the margins, I made a few notes that served to remind me of the contents of longer paragraphs of text.

In round two of the analysis, I read the transcripts with the intention of formally beginning the process of data analysis. To assist in the process, I highlighted emerging themes and made comments in different colors to easily differentiate between codes. Specifically, I highlighted instances of disengagement in red, engagement in yellow, impact of the curriculum and professors in green, and racial climate in purple. From these initial codes, I identified sub-themes that accounted for the nuances found in students' responses. In addition, I created an Excel coding sheet that presented sixteen coding labels. As I reviewed these themes, I looked for coding titles that shared similar meanings and condensed them into one. In so doing, I started to whittle down the themes. Additionally, during this process, I identified specific quotes from participants that served to represent these themes. I nestled approximately eight excerpts under each column heading.

On the third round, I created a new excel sheet. In the process of making it, I reviewed the selected excerpts from students to evaluate whether they truly belonged under the coding label. If I determined a quote perhaps fit elsewhere, I made the appropriate switch. In addition, I added another column in this newly formed Excel sheet that summarized the findings listed under each theme. On the last and final round, I printed the excel sheets in order to view the data altogether. I took notes to the side of the columns in an effort to organize my thinking, and as a result, I condensed these themes once more. Ultimately, I identified the following four categories: “Campus Climate,” “Classroom Engagement,” “The Impact of Diversity, Black Professors, and Diverse Curricula,” and “Disengagement: A Symbol of Resistance and Displeasure.” Under each of these headings, I created subcategories to organize the data once more. To provide a more comprehensive look at these categories, I created subcategories as well, which I explored as follows: “Academic Preparation”; “Impact of Previous Schooling on Engagement at Trinity”; “Engagement Throughout the Years”; “The Talkers”; “Altruism & Professors’ Dependency on Black Students to Teach”; “In the Name of Academic Achievement: Persistence Through Racism, Isolation, Invisibility, and Disrespect”; “The Effect of Racial Diversity in the Classroom”; “The Impact of Professors of Color—Particularly Black Professors; “Multicultural Curriculum; “Silence as a Form of Protest”; and “Complete Withdrawal: When the Disrespect is too Much.”

To analyze the data from participants who had previous schooling at PWIs, I completed a similar process. Although I used the same method to complete rounds one through four, I added another round to compare data between the two subsets. In doing so, I identified instances of similarity and difference between the groups of students, furthering my analysis. While the coding Excel sheets remained separate, I made one document that noted the above-mentioned

themes. I used the same process to examine the data from participants with previous experience at predominantly white schools.

Positionality

My identity as a Black woman comes before all other intersecting identities—before my socio-economic status, religion, or ability. I carry both of them, my Blackness and womanhood, as I work to understand my research question. Further, as a researcher studying an experience that is my own, meaning I have attended PWIs for sixteen years while carrying these identities, I am closely connected to my project. Although my participants were unaware of my lengthy history of attending PWIs, my race and gender were, of course, on full display during the interview process. As a result, my interviewees might have felt more at ease when speaking with me, as they knew I could relate to their experiences to an extent. Thus, their comfort levels may have increased, making them more willing to provide truthful answers to my questions.

Additionally, my participants and I were very close in age, in some cases the same age, which made it easier for the two of us to connect. Although the similarities in our identities proved advantageous in moments, they still may have hindered my research. Students may have been less detailed in their responses because they presumed I understood what they meant. In attempt to mitigate that effect, I often asked clarifying questions to acquire a fuller picture that would later help with my analysis.

Limitations

Although I took great care in creating this project, limitations still remained. With regard to my sampling frame, I was unable to use a randomized sampling technique due to the size of Trinity College and its racial demographics. As a result of the decided upon sampling methodology, the group of participants was not representative of the college's Black student

population. Additionally, because I determined snowballing as the best way to find participants, my sample was highly affected by who I first identified to interview. I knew both students through class and work, and as a result, I have heard their experiences with the institution as a whole and of their previous schooling. Moreover, the study took place on one predominantly white, small, liberal arts institution in Connecticut. The college, namely the student body, is known for its wealth, conservatism, and political commentators. Therefore, it is certainly not representative of other colleges with similar focuses and student populations. Still, the data is representative of the Black students at this particular institution and therefore is generalizable within the context of Trinity College.

In a similar vein, the network amongst Black students at the college is rather strong. As a result, I knew all participants, with the exception of one, prior to the interview. Thus, even with snowballing that asked participants to identify other participants, I still knew those I interviewed in varying degrees. In some instances, I knew participants through on-campus jobs, others from mutual friends, and some from courses I have taken over the years. Admittedly, this didn't always serve as a limitation because there was an already established, sometimes well-established, level of familiarity with participants that may have made them more inclined to speak openly. Still, due to my positionality, participants may have decided they did not need to add as much context as they would with a stranger. In the same token, at times, anonymity elicits more honesty. In other words, participants might not be comfortable sharing deeply personal information with someone they will inevitably see around campus, in class, or at work.

Findings

Table 1

Pseudonyms and Traits of Interview Participants

Name	Gender	PWI Prior to Trinity	Class Year	Major	Parental Education
Beah	Female	Yes	2022	Social Science & Humanities	Master's Degree
Grace	Female	Yes	2022	Arts	Bachelor's degree
Olivia	Female	Yes	2021	Humanities	Master's degree
Paige	Female	Yes	2024	Social Science	Master's degree
Jalen	Male	No	2022	Social Sciences	High school diploma/GED
Eric	Male	No	2023	Social Sciences	High school diploma/GED
Lisa	Female	No	2023	Humanities	Some college, no degree
Bella	Female	No	2023	Arts	Master's degree
Kayla	Female	No	2024	Undeclared	Some college, no degree

Campus Climate

In this section, I comprehensively explored the differences in academic transitions amongst the subsets of participants. For these students, and arguably for the majority of those who attend institutions of higher education, the transition from high school to college was overwhelming. Many participants but certainly not all struggled to acclimate to Trinity's academic rigor and the racial composition of the campus. To that end, in some instances, their struggle to adjust was often exacerbated by the racism deeply entrenched in this institution and therefore the classroom. Still, it must be noted that in some respects subset one's experiences with transitioning to the academic expectations of the College diverged extraordinarily from subset two, often due to subset one's time in predominately white institutions. To that point, subset one was comprised of participants with experience at majority white schools as opposed

to subset two who did not have this kind of history, most of them attending schools with large populations of Black and Brown students. With regard to their academic adjustment, subset one, who often attended private high schools (both boarding and day), felt extraordinarily prepared to achieve academically. Many of them noted that was the primary goal of these schools—to prepare students for college-level coursework. In that regard, they did not feel as though they were leaps and bounds behind their classmates. Subset two, conversely, felt their schooling was inadequate and as a result, felt grossly underprepared. Due to their differing experiences, I explored their academic transitions separately, all nestled under the heading, “Academic Preparation.”

That being said, while subset one’s experiences with making the academic leap from high school to college reside under the heading of “Campus Climate,” those experiences were positive and therefore, did not pose as an impediment to subset one’s ability to acclimate to campus. In other words, for students who had previous experience at predominantly white institutions, their transitions did not necessarily speak to Trinity’s campus climate in the way that subset two’s experiences did. Subset two’s first semesters at Trinity spoke extensively to the culture of the school, particularly the racial landscape—many of them never having stepped foot into an academic institution with so few people of color. Through subset two’s descriptions of trying to catch up to their peers in the classroom, i.e., gain the knowledge they believed they did not possess, they slowly began to expose the dynamics of Trinity’s campus. In their efforts to traverse the rocky terrain, they illustrated how challenging it was for most of them to acclimate to the College’s academics.

Furthermore, in exploring the academic lives of these participants, I considered how their time in high school, and in years prior for some in subset one, influenced their participation at

Trinity. Under this heading, namely “Impact of Previous Schooling on Engagement,” I made room for participants’ nuanced experiences. There I explored both subsets’ perspectives in an effort to gauge their level of preparation for the academic world of higher education. In the last section, under the heading “Engagement Throughout the Years,” I examined how participants’ participation evolved as they matured; often, students expressed feeling more comfortable in the classroom and therefore more willing to express their opinions after their first year, particularly during the latter portion of the sophomore year. Again, I separated participants’ experiences by their subsets. Finally, I found it prudent to make a separate category for participants who frequently described themselves as particularly “talkative” in the classroom. These students did not experience the same struggles as their classmates in this particular area. In this section entitled “The Talkers,” I do not draw a divide between the subsets, as this group became a subcategory of their own.

Academic Preparation

As described, participants in subset one relayed feeling well-prepared for college-level coursework, for their schools, all of them college-preparatory, emphasized establishing strong study skills and equipped them with the knowledge needed to do well in higher-education. The same, however, could not be said for subset two. Subset two did not feel as though they were behind academically. It is exceedingly important to note that these schools, populated mostly by white students, had the resources to provide a quality education to those in attendance, an education that all students deserve but only some receive. Subset two spoke less favorably of their time in secondary school. They often noted feeling as though they did not learn the “correct” information in school, as some said they attended institutions that were underfunded. Many described feeling overwhelmed, as they discussed not being able to compete with their peers who

attended predominately white institutions with incredible endowments. Through this dichotomous image, the inequities in the U.S. education system simmered to the surface.

Subset One. All participants in subset one felt adequately prepared to handle the academic rigor of higher education, as they had already acquired the necessary skills—namely study skills, ability to communicate with professors for self-advocacy, and time management—often needed for success. Specifically, one participant named Beah, who had attended predominantly white schools since elementary school, quite emphatically explained how she “felt very prepared” for the academics. As a result of her comfortability, she “came in not really having trouble adjusting to the academic aspect . . . I had good time management skills, and I was able to get my work done [because] the level of work wasn’t super hard.” Still, Beah admitted the material “definitely was more challenging,” but it was not something she worried she could not complete.

Another participant, Paige, confirmed the sentiments of the former, as she too felt “very prepared” for Trinity’s academics due to her time at boarding school, which put her in a place of immense privilege, she noted. Paige specifically pointed to the differences between her academic preparation and her friends’ who had no previous experience at predominantly white schools. She explained that her majority white school “prepared [her] a lot, especially in comparison to her friends: “Even like my friends who didn't really come from the PWI experience that I did—a lot of them have had that struggle of still adjusting, like, being their first and second year of college versus me.” She also credited her smooth academic transition to being comfortable with small class sizes. At her high school, Paige noted there were classes as small as twelve students, so she “has always been used to the small classroom setting and being one of the only Black people in class.” Beah echoed similar sentiments: “at [school name redacted]

participation was huge. And so, I got comfortable just speaking in situations like that [and] also [school name redacted] kind of trained me in that aspect.” Thus, it was evident that these students’ college preparatory schools were true to their word, as they adequately prepared their students for the rigor of higher education.

Subset Two. Conversely, subset two—those who did not have any experience at predominantly white schools, specifically private boarding, or day schools—had trouble adjusting to college-level coursework. Many of the schools, certainly not all of them but the majority, were said to be under resourced by participants. As a result, students were not afforded the same opportunities, which exacerbated their rocky academic transition to Trinity. Further, it left many feeling overwhelmed and unintelligent, which was detrimental to their self-image. Eric, a junior, recalled how difficult it was for him to make the leap from high school to college: “I didn’t feel ready at all because I didn’t really have as many resources as other Trinity students had at their boarding schools. . . We were really considered a low-rate school because of our low-test scores, low everything, so we really had to find resources for ourselves.” He continued that his teachers really cared for him and his classmates, as they often spent hours crafting lesson plans that went beyond the standard curriculum. He relayed that his teachers felt it was important to include voices of the marginalized and to correct students’ understanding of historical events that were often taught from the white man’s perspective. Even so, Eric felt grossly underprepared when he entered Trinity and thus took great strides to close these gaps.

Kayla, who like Eric attended predominantly Black public schools, reiterated Eric’s sentiments. Kayla said that she “didn’t have like a top tier education.” As a result, when she came to Trinity, Kayla felt as though she was behind. Due to feeling overwhelmed by the academics and being “one of the only Black people in [her classes],” Kayla said it was like a

“step back.” Not quite understanding what she meant by “step back,” I inquired further. She articulated that she was an overachiever in high school, “but then coming here [to Trinity] and just being surrounded by so many white people, it was like everything cannot be perfect. Yeah, as long as I give it my best and it gets done, I’m good.” In a sense, Kayla readjusted, namely took a step back, and acknowledged that her life had completely changed—that she was no longer in the comfort of her high school community. Due to this shift in environment and mindset, she had come to terms with the idea that some assignments were not going to be perfect. Kayla added, “where I’m at right now is kind of like, I’m struggling kind of with the rigor and the dense workload.” Kayla felt the intensity of college-level coursework as well as the impact of this nation’s unequal education system.

The remaining participants, particularly a student named Lisa, noted feeling challenged in the beginning semesters with regard to the level of coursework, but it was not to the same degree as the other participants. Lisa attended an all-girls public school that was majority students of color—she noted Asian American students as the largest population. When asked of her transition to Trinity, she relayed she “chose Trinity because it was predominantly white.” Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Lisa learned that she “need[ed] to know how to work in the real world—and the real world, I guess, being a predominantly white space. So, I went in knowing that I would feel uncomfortable and challenged in every way.” Although Kayla had never attended a predominantly white school, it was apparent she prepared herself for the space she would enter. She leaned into her discomfort, knowing it would perhaps prepare her for the future. Thus, it was relatively unsurprising that she did not categorize the academic transition in extreme terms.

Impact of Previous Schooling on Engagement at Trinity

Despite having wholly different schooling experiences, both subsets had similar participation styles. Specifically, they were both particularly quiet in the classroom during the beginning months, and sometimes semesters, of their Trinity career. As they reached the latter portion of undergraduate, many participants became more vocal in the classroom. Even so, subsets' reasoning for their low participation in their earlier years differed. While both noted they were intimidated and did not want to appear unintelligent, subset one was scared to participate because of the older students in class, which was not necessarily the case for subset two. (Although they feared appearing unintelligent, all participants in subset one described an instance, sometimes two, of being heard and verbally commended for their intelligence by their peers.) Subset two felt as though they lacked the right knowledge to add anything of substance to the conversation, which led to silence in the classroom. Still, they noted feeling intimidated by older students as well.

Subset One. Beah, who spent most of her life at predominantly white schools, noted that despite her academic training, she struggled to transfer these skills over to Trinity. Although her boarding school deeply believed in class participation, Beah in some respects regressed and became quiet during her first and second year in college:

But then it [my participation skills] kind of went away. I didn't really talk a lot my freshman year because I was just intimidated by the fact— it was weird to be in class with people of all years. I was scared to say something stupid as a freshman, that's really what I felt like. So, I was just very intimidated. So, I didn't really speak freshman [or] sophomore year, I would say.

Beah's experience and comments were emblematic of other participants, as they, too, felt intimidated in their classes and feared sounding dumb. Their apprehension, however, did not

originate from fear of confirming racial stereotypes surrounding Black people's intelligence; instead, it appeared to be a result of being young and overly concerned with how others perceived them.

In a similar vein, Grace, a senior who also attended predominantly white schools since elementary school, described feeling like she sounded "dumb" every time she spoke in the classroom. As a result, she also remained quiet despite having found her voice in high school. Upon further inquiry, Grace disclosed she suffered from social anxiety, which she believed was related to her self-doubt. She continued that she "doubts people think I'm dumb. . . Like everyone says dumb shit, but like, we're all learning from each other." Grace's fear of appearing dumb played a large role in her silence in the classroom. Further, while she, like Beah, wholeheartedly believed her boarding school prepared her academically, specifically with regard to participation, she found herself sitting quietly in the classroom. Grace realized "it's not high school anymore, like we're in a college setting with older students." The realization alone "intimidated and overwhelmed" her, which made her particularly quiet in the classroom.

Subset Two. Students from subset two spoke directly to feeling intimidated in the classroom as well; however, they described feeling as though they were underprepared to engage in classes like those at Trinity because of their previous schooling. Participants often noted that they were not afforded the same luxury of attending these elite private schools that many of their peers attended, and as a result, they knew different information. While subset two believed their differences in knowledge served as a hindrance to them at the beginning of their undergraduate careers, they realized that their opinions and perspectives were invaluable, which led to higher levels of participation in their junior and senior years.

Eric, a current junior, spoke to this feeling of intimidation during his first and second year and how they affected his willingness to share his opinions in the classroom. As he reflected on his first few semesters at Trinity, he remembered feeling tremendously unintelligent “when other students started spewing all “these big words and trying to bring in all these big new topics, I felt like, ‘dang, what am I doing?’ . . . So that’s mainly why my participation decreased because I felt like, you know, I wasn’t as knowledgeable as everybody else. So, I just kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want to give the wrong answer.” Here, it was evident that Eric felt intellectually inferior to his peers, for he was not afforded the same educational opportunities as some of the students in his classes. Eric believed that because he could not rattle off the same information as his classmates, his contributions were not important. Thus, it was evident he felt his previous schooling experience did not prepare him for the world of academia, which contributed to his low participation in the classroom.

Another student, Kayla, shared a similar experience. Kayla described being unfamiliar with the vast majority of the concepts and material covered in class. Most poignantly, Kayla remembered how unintelligent she felt because she lacked the knowledge of her classmates: “A lot of things that we're learning in class, like, I've never learned before, especially coming from, like, a public high school, and stuff like that. And it's like, it kind of makes me feel dumb, you know?” Although she questioned her intelligence, Kayla astutely reminded herself, perhaps in a comforting way, that she “knows, it’s not that [I’m not smart]; it’s just that we all come from different places and stuff. And a lot of these kids went to like, you know, private schools, prep schools here and had tutors.” Kayla, like Eric, was hyper-aware of the differences between her schooling and those of others on this campus. In turn, Kayla who was currently a sophomore was

often quiet in class, as she was still in the process of learning the power of her perspective and voice.

Engagement Throughout the Years

Although both subsets were quiet in their first years at Trinity, they soon found their voices, as they realized they had something other students could not offer: they knew what it meant to be Black in a nation that has very little interest in seeing their humanity. Their lived experiences, coupled with the perspectives they gained from it, were invaluable and often needed in the classroom. Additionally, many of the participants realized that people make inarticulate comments frequently, and thus, in the grand scheme of life, a few awkward or seemingly unintelligent comments would not define them, nor would they be remembered by their classmates.⁵

Subset One. Both Grace and Beah started their college careers as quiet students, who focused their attention on notetaking. Over time, they soon regained confidence in their perspectives, which resulted in increased levels of participation for both students. Beah recounted that her participation “went away” freshmen year and very slowly crept its way back into her life in the following semesters. By junior year, Beah solidified her desire to participate, which was amplified by her classmates’ casual approaches to participation: “Because like, some white people, they just be saying whatever they want, and they just be chatting. And I’m like, ‘Okay, if you’re saying that with full confidence, I’m gonna just say what I want.’” Essentially, Beah noticed that white students made comments with such an overwhelming sense of self-assurance, even in moments when their comments lacked eloquence, that it eclipsed any of their apprehension surrounding participating in the classroom. As a result, Beah felt it was time that

⁵ Kayla is a sophomore, so I could not come to any conclusions about how her participation might change throughout the years. Thus, she did not appear in this section.

she added her perspective. Furthermore, she realized the power of her voice and how important it was for her to add a “Black woman’s perspective,” because, in her opinion, most white students at this institution “[didn’t] have a lot of friends of color.” Similarly, in Grace’s first year at Trinity, she said she rarely spoke because she was intimidated by the space. Over the years, Grace realized that it was important to “challenge” the thoughts and opinions of her classmates with her experiences. Although a quieter student in the classroom, Grace described her participation was “50/50” now that she was a senior, meaning in some moments she talked frequently and in others she was quiet.

Subset Two. Eric described a similar experience, where he, too, acknowledged that he once failed to see the value of his perspective: however, as he sat before me as a junior, he wholeheartedly believed in and knew the power of his standpoint. Throughout his time at Trinity, Eric began to recognize that all students enter college with different nuggets of knowledge: “I’ve seen a lot, and [my experiences] mainly add an extra lens for white people. . . They typically have not been through the same experiences that we [Black people] have been through.” Eric reflected about how his lived experiences in many ways diverge from white people’s. Therefore, when he shared his insights in the classroom, Eric felt as though he gave white people a window into in his world. As a result of this realization, Eric no longer believed he was less academically inclined than his peers: “So, I don’t feel that way now [that my perspective doesn’t matter]. Because I really value my social and cultural capital. And I will utilize that in any space that I am in.” When asked if he believed this newfound perspective was a result of maturity, Eric replied that it was age and experience. He believed his educational experiences, specifically conversations in the classroom, gave him the ability to see how all knowledge was powerful.

Eric added that it was society that conditioned him to believe that only one kind of knowledge was important.

The Talkers

Although five participants spoke about being quiet during their first semesters at Trinity, four, Jalen, Olivia, Lisa, and Paige, described a different experience. These participants were often self-described as talkative and frequently found themselves carrying class discussions in the majority of their courses. As mentioned, I forwent categorizing these participants by their subsets, as this group of students became a group of their own.

With regard to subset one, Olivia did not enjoy sitting in silence for prolonged periods. As a result, in high school, Olivia often used her voice to fill them, which is something she carried with her as she transitioned to college. Further, Olivia spoke of students almost expecting her to speak when they did not feel up to the task, a responsibility she often accepted. In some cases, Olivia spent the entire class period conversing with her teachers as the other students looked on. While it was taxing in high school, Olivia spoke favorably of the experience in college: “But I think in college—now that I’m doing my interests—I sometimes don’t mind being the only person in class talking to the professor because like, I’m getting really good conversations.” Fairly early in life, Olivia recognized the power of participation and has carried that understanding with her to college. In turn, she found herself talking, sometimes *only* conversing with the professor, quite frequently while in class.

Paige, who mentioned participation was particularly important at her private school, came to Trinity ready to engage in the classroom like her counterpart Lisa. When Paige came to Trinity, she maintained her active participation, unlike Beah and Grace. She said that it was wholly ingrained in her to speak during class. Even in instances when she had not done the

reading, Grace spoke because her high school believed so wholly in participation. Further, she wanted her classmates to know her perspective, even if they disagreed. Similarly, Lisa, from subset two, described regularly speaking up in her classes, saying that “if it’s something that’s really weighing on my mind, I’m gonna say it, because I try not to limit my participation based on what I think other people might be thinking.” Lisa felt it was important to say her opinion and tried not to let anyone affect her participation.

Jalen, a senior who went to a majority Black high school described himself as being “very vocal in class.” In some respects, Jalen seemed to be the most vocal participant, as he very rarely shied away from speaking, even in life’s most uncomfortable moments. Jalen noted that in high school, he frequently participated, as his teachers “reinforced [the need] to participate at least once or twice in class.” These lessons in participation were bolstered by Jalen’s immense dislike for silence; he described getting “this sort of weird, like anxiety letting silence permeate the class,” one that Paige also experienced. As a result, he frequently added to the discussion. To that end, he never made any comments about feeling intimidated by upperclassmen. In fact, Jalen described several instances of him holding others accountable and questioning other students perspectives. For instance, over the years, he noticed that students repeated the arguments he made. As a result, Jalen started to press his classmates to understand how they arrived at such a conclusion: “Like I would say something and someone else says x [the same thing]. So sometimes I’m like, ‘oh, so what did you mean by that?’ Or like, I’ll engage them further, because I’m really curious to know how they arrived at that answer.” Of course, Jalen knows they arrived at that conclusion because of him. Jalen remarked, in many cases, students in his classes essentially parroted what he said back to the professor. Through his frequent participation

and ability to question his classmates with such ease. It was evident Jalen was very comfortable in the classroom and had little issue making his perspective known.

Social Transition

Attending Trinity as a Black student had a host of challenges with which even those in subset one struggled, often due to the culture of the school. Thus, I deemed it imperative to formally identify the tenor of the College, as it undoubtedly seeped into the classroom and ultimately affected the way participants engaged in academic spaces. While both subsets' had difficulty acclimating to the College's climate, subset one's troubles often differed from subset two. Students with experience at majority white schools relayed that Trinity's student population was like that of their high schools but tremendously intensified. That is, while subset one grew accustomed to being in majority white spaces and learning amongst children from the upper echelons of society, Trinity's student community proved to be of a different breed—their wealth and displays of whiteness of epic proportions. Still, it is important to note that only one student in subset one spoke of feeling as though she underwent a culture shock. While all of subset one nodded, and sometimes spoke at length about, navigating this particular kind of whiteness and wealth, one participant added that she also felt excluded by the Black community on campus, who, according to her, believed she was “whitewashed.” Conversely, all of subset two, with the exception of one student, experienced a culture shock but to varying degrees. Eventually, these students found ways to adjust, which ultimately helped enhance their experiences.

Despite their varying transitions, all participants, were involved on campus in some capacity. Most participants held a few jobs on campus or were a part of the multicultural organizations—a few participated in both. Additionally, one student played a sport, but she still

remained heavily involved in other organizations that focused on supporting and uplifting marginalized students on campus.

Subset One. Subset one all agreed their experiences at predominantly white schools prepared them for the racial dynamics of Trinity, as they felt as though they were “kind of used to this” type of environment. Most importantly, they were equipped with the tools needed to protect themselves from the microaggressions and overt forms of racism. To that point, many found ways to shield themselves from culture shock as they transitioned from one predominantly white institution to the next. Olivia, who was a part of the majority white IB program at her high school, recounted that her time in secondary education was quite “isolating,” as she was one of two Black girls who successfully made it through the program. As result of the racial composition of her classes, Olivia often found herself pushing against her classmates’ offensive comments. Despite her efforts, Olivia quickly realized that she did very little to change her classmates’ minds. Consequently, she soon came to the realization that she could not help everyone, and it was more sustainable to “choose my battles and protect my peace.” Olivia believed it was an important lesson to learn in high school because “I would have been more exhausted in college had I not.” Essentially, Olivia learned how to navigate white spaces through trial and error in high school, which prepared her for the Trinity community, wherein students made offensive statements regularly.

Analogously, to avoid the culture shock she endured when she first enrolled at her private high school, Paige contacted as many Black students as possible during the summer before her first year at Trinity. Essentially, this participant attempted to create a community for herself and others before the school year even officially began. She described the process as follows:

And it was like, if you're black, I DM [direct messaged] you. And I'm like, 'Hey, I'm starting a group chat—do you want to be a part of it?' Because I knew having that sense of community before coming on campus was going to be really, really vital to my investment in college. And I think even though it was only like a fraction of the POC population that was in my year, it still very eliminated that culture shock that I first had when I came to high school.

Paige, like Olivia, learned how to protect herself when entering these white spaces, and it notably helped with their social transition. Having attended a majority white school, Paige configured an army of sorts, comprised of her new classmates, with which she knew she could find community. In turn, she created a safe space for others and herself.

Grace also nodded toward her experiences at her boarding school that made the social transition to Trinity relatively easy; still, it was not without moments of fear. Grace recounted that her high school was an incredibly “scary” and unsafe place for her due to the racial composition. Grace’s school had no more than twenty people of color, four of them being Black girls, she said. Although the participant did not describe these traumatic experiences in detail, it was clear her time in high school was far from good. Even so, it showed her the “reality of what America is like.” On a smaller scale, it showed Grace the realities of attending a predominantly white school, and thus, as she argued, prepared her for the Trinity student community that at times leaned to the right politically. She added that “the people that I met in high school are like literally the same characters and creatures [here at Trinity].” Further, in some respects, the culture of the College also reminded Grace “of [her] school.” She even likened it to “a boarding school with no rules.” When asked if it was comforting to see these similarities, Grace replied asserted, “no, it was scary” to recognize these moments of convergence between institutions.

Still, since she had experience in an environment like Trinity's, Grace already identified ways to persist in moments of despair. She relayed how she often reminded herself that this was a temporary moment in her life, that it, too, would come to an end. Grace also admitted that although there are similarities between Trinity and boarding school, Trinity was a vast improvement due to its size.

In using the coping strategies identified in high school, participants Olivia and Paige asserted that they surrounded themselves with people of color, which also heavily spoke to the racial dynamics on campus, they argued. Both participants noted only having friends who were color, for which they said was not a conscious decision but instead a result of the separation between Black and white students. Olivia, in particular, gestured toward the organizations she was a part of on campus as well as the jobs she held—most of which were heavily populated by people of color, she argued. Due to this “separation,” Olivia asserted that “I won’t be able to meet [white people] in class, they often don’t come to the multicultural events, which is where I’m at most of the time. So, it just feels like we’re on two different sides of it. Like I’m involved in Hartford; they are in West Hartford, I feel like our paths don’t really cross.” Olivia described how white students on Trinity’s campus did not attend events run by people of color. As a result, Olivia argued that she and her fellow friends of color lived in a different world than her white classmates.

Furthermore, in Olivia’s explanation, she also noted that this divide between students of color and white students reached beyond the borders of campus and often influenced where students spent their time when venturing into the city and neighboring towns. Hartford—a city with majority people of color, 85 percent to be precise—often attracted students of color, Olivia explained (U.S. Census Bureau, “Hartford,” 2021). Whereas West Hartford, a town that was 78.1 percent white, happened to be where white students frequented, which, according to Olivia, further crystalized the

racial divide on Trinity's campus (U.S. Census Bureau, "West Hartford," 2021). Paige also discussed these divisions, wherein she, too, spoke of her friend group's racial composition. Unlike high school, Paige did not interact with many white people beyond the classroom. In a moment of reflection, Paige said she did not know "if it's a good thing or a bad thing [to only have friends of color]. But I think at the end of the day, I just mind my business, and I feel comfortable." Evidently, Paige felt most comfortable in spaces with other students of color, especially Black students. Paige, like Olivia, was greatly aware of the racial divisions on campus and noticed how they took shape in her circle of friends.

Although participants in subset one identified ways to protect themselves, this is not to say they never experienced isolating moments at Trinity, which, at times, stemmed from these racial divisions. In some cases, there was no amount of preparation participants could do to help them through these painful experiences. Olivia recounted that her white classmates, even those she knew since her first semesters at Trinity, failed to acknowledge her presence outside of the classroom: "So there's times where, like, I'll be seeing people at events and stuff like that, and I'll try and say hello. After [having] . . . several years of classes—like we're both in the same major type B—and they just like, won't speak to me" outside of the classroom. Olivia described the classroom as its own world and therefore, any relationships she formed with white classmates inside the lecture hall often failed to transfer over into other spaces. In turn, Olivia mentioned being particularly caught off guard when a white classmate of hers spoke to her outside of the classroom: "It was the first time [she] had ever done that despite having classes together for like three years." Olivia pondered "what made [her] approachable that day versus like any other day." Olivia was far from the only participant to comment on the fact that white students frequently

forwent acknowledging their presence outside the classroom. In fact, every single participant, meaning all nine of them, made a comment about having this experience.

The remaining participant, Beah, had a somewhat different social transition to Trinity, which seemed to be a result of the fact she entered Trinity with quite a few classmates from her high school. Furthermore, she did not have the opportunity to meet other students of color during her first semester at Trinity, as she spent most of her time with her teammates, almost all of whom were white. While other students of color had the opportunity to go to multicultural events, Beah had to attend practice, games, and team bonding events. As a result, it made it extraordinarily difficult to befriend students of color, which left Beah feeling as though she was an outcast in her own community. Further, Beah believed that students of color thought she was “white-washed” because she was frequently in the company of other white students, specifically those from her high school who also attended Trinity and her teammates. She recounted, “I know a lot of Black students thought I was whitewashed or whatever, just because I have like white friends.” Overtime, Beah became friends with other students of color, but it took an incredible amount of effort on her part to make these connections. Specifically, she remembered forcing herself out of her comfort zone with every ounce of strength to find community with this particular sector of the student community. Fortunately, Beah’s efforts were rewarded, as she finally felt accepted by the students of color on campus. Even so, Beah remembered being slightly irritated by the fact that these students judged her because she was friends with white students. Despite her irritation, Beah made the astute point that she may have intimidated or confused the students of color around her, for she knew how to exist within the white world while they did not.

Furthermore, although Beah entered with white students from her high school, she tried her best to establish friendships on her own, partially a result of the racism she found on campus. This proved to be difficult as Trinity's social scene heavily centered around Greek Life, where it was widely known that students of color were not always welcome. In knowing her presence at these venues might lead to racial attacks, Beah frequently avoided these environments, which furthered her isolation. However, in the few moments that she tried entering these spaces of immense whiteness, namely fraternities, Beah remembered standing outside "while all these white people were walking in in front of me [even though I was] being told there's no space." Beah articulated that these venues discriminated against students of color by denying them entrance. She also added that some of her friends "were being told that they [would] look better if they were white." Ultimately, Beah quickly realized it was not beneficial for her mental well-being to be in these spaces.

Olivia, like Beah, expounded upon the divide between some people of color on Trinity's campus. While Olivia stated she had no issue with her fellow classmates of color having white friends, she was particularly wary of those who she believed "assimilated" and, in a sense, rejected "where they came from." Desiring further explanation, I asked her to expand upon her point. Olivia described that in the process of assimilating, some people of color learned to "look down upon other POC" in return. To crystalize her point, Olivia relayed an incident involving a Black girl in her class who subscribed to this particular mode of assimilation, she asserted. Olivia believed her classmate, who she described as "light-skinned," "made herself part passing, you know, and like digestible for the white body. I think that's like my problem . . .when I see POC people [changing] themselves and [forgetting] where they came from." Olivia did not approve of her classmate, for she rejected her culture and her people, according to Olivia. Paige added

another layer to the conversation regarding the community of students of color; she noted, “if you fall off with someone that's a person of color, like it definitely affects the social relationships that you have with other people, just because of how close everyone is, and how much they know each other.” Paige noted that due to the small population of students of color at Trinity, it was at times difficult to navigate friendships, as many people knew the intimate workings of one another’s relationships with other students.

Despite these divisions, students of color heavily relied upon these relationships, and they were often a part of the reason students felt welcomed at times. Olivia, for instance, attended many events through the various multicultural organizations on campus. The participant noted that she found great “comfort within the POC spaces on campus.” Additionally, when reflecting on her friendships, Beah recounted that while she maintained relationships with those who went to her high school and joined her at Trinity, she also befriended many of friends of color, who made her feel like she belonged. These relationships between students of color were equally important to subset two, who experienced a culture shock as they acclimated to college.

Subset Two. Black students that came from schools with diverse or majority Black populations described undergoing culture shock, as they had never been in an environment like Trinity. Many participants, particularly the younger students, remarked feeling like they did not belong. While the older participants remembered feeling this way, they appeared to feel more content with their surroundings at the time of data collections. Rather, it was evident they grew accustomed to their surroundings. As these individuals reflected on their first semesters, Jalen, a senior, gave a particularly astute assessment of why it was difficult to adjust to Trinity culture:

This is what I would consider like a boarding school feeder, everyone has a very similar experience from high school. And if you don’t have that similar experience, you just kind

of feel out of place. So, you know, people are like, ‘oh, you know my friend that went to Exeter? Oh, and I went to Andover, and oh, I went to Deerfield.’ And they’ll know each other through this informal network that I just don’t know about.

Jalen described the informal, but very important, networks that existed on Trinity’s campus that made many students feel isolated. Jalen added that feeling like he did not belong made him particularly angry. He felt his racial identity along with other intersecting identities were not represented on campus, which proved to be “very disheartening” because he “didn’t really have community.” Over the years, however, a Jalen made his own community. While far from what he dreamed of, Jalen has become “okay with the fact I’m not going to have a picture-perfect experience.” Essentially, Jalen settled.

Eric also had a particularly difficult time acclimating to the College atop the hill. Coming from a “predominantly black community and high school,” he was not prepared for such a space. He continued that he had “never seen this many white people in my life, not an ounce of this amount of white.” Kayla shared similar sentiments. She, too, grew up surrounded by Black people, so she struggled to find her place at Trinity. Kayla explained that “coming here and just being surrounded by so many white people, it was like a step back. I’ve never been around this many white people and stuff like that.” Additionally, Kayla remarked that the culture of her city, equipped with a particularly large Black population, did not prepare her “for life outside of that.” As a result, navigating the social world of Trinity college was a trying experience for Kayla. To that point, with a chuckle, Eric said that one cannot “avoid a white person on a PWI.” As a result, he, like Jalen, had to acquire a different perspective to get “acclimated to these white spaces.” Still, he spoke extensively about the importance of “protecting your own Blackness,” something Olivia, from subset two, also believed was imperative. In holding onto these perspectives so

tightly, Jalen found that he needed to learn how to acclimate to the campus while also maintaining his Blackness, as he deemed it paramount to his success. While difficult in the beginning, he has mastered this skill, he said

Similarly to the sentiments of other participants in subset two, Bella also underwent a culture shock, perhaps two. Being an international student, Bella had to adjust to a new country and culture in addition to a new school with its own set of norms. She describes the shift as being seismic, as she “was coming from a very warm and friendly environment, not only in terms of the climate but with the people, to a more isolated [place].” Unlike Bella’s home country, she described the U.S. “as [having] an everyman for themselves kind of culture.” Consequently, the country and her place of study were the antithesis of everything she knew, which made it extraordinarily difficult to adjust. To that end, she was not well-acquainted with the racial terrain of America, despite feeling as though she knew what it meant to be in racially homogenous environments. Specifically, Bella noted being in spaces where she was “surrounded by a lot of white people,” and as a result, she thought she knew how to handle Trinity’s brutal terrain. Nevertheless, after coming to college, Bella quickly realized what it truly meant to be Black in America at a predominantly white institution. Most importantly, and perhaps alarmingly as well, Bella recalled not “really knowing what racism was before coming to Trinity. Indeed, it was this institution taught her what racism was and what it felt like.

Bella made another distinction between her experience and those of the other participants in subset two. She described that while she had a bumpy transition, Bella noticed that students, especially white students, welcomed her in ways that other Black students were not received. She believed the difference in response was due to her country of origin. Bella described that white students were particularly excited to meet her. As Bella explained her experience, there was a

sort of hesitation in her speech as she thought aloud about why she received the warm welcome. It was evident that Bella's methodical phrasing was not a result of her failure to understand why she received this treatment; instead, it was in response to choosing her words carefully. Nearing the end of her comment, she argued "that she was warmly welcomed because I was from some kind of erotic [sic] island."⁶ Bella described that being from an island "was a more of a praised thing than being from somewhere in the states." She continued that there was an "excitement" and "thrill" around her country of origin that made the white community on campus more accepting. Through her description, it appeared that there was a certain kind of exoticism at play, wherein students were captivated by the fact she was from a different country— in a word, they "othered" her.⁷

Lisa, like Bella to an extent, diverged from the pack, as she did not mention feeling incredibly out of place at Trinity. When asked about her transition to the College, she mentioned knowing she would feel uncomfortable and "challenged." Further, as previously addressed, Lisa chose Trinity because it was predominantly white, so she prepared herself for the environment. Still, as the interview progressed, Lisa relayed she "definitely [felt more] comfortable compared to freshman year." She continued, "I think my freshman year I was a little nervous. I felt like I stuck out a lot more. And I don't know, I just, I don't want to say like I guess I got used to the microaggressions, but like, it just doesn't bother me anymore." Lisa seemed to desensitize herself to the racial attacks over the years in order to feel comfortable at Trinity. Additionally, she noted that perhaps she gained a greater level of confidence as she grew older.

⁶ Although Bella used the word "erotic," it was evident through further explanation that she, in fact, meant "exotic."

⁷ See Spivak (1985), for further discussion of the historical and colonial implications of othering and exoticism.

While students mentioned the challenges of being in such an incredibly white space as the culprit for their discomfort, Kayla offered another perspective. Kayla contended that the Black students at Trinity were different, which was a particularly devastating realization for her. She recounted that “the Black people up here [in the North] are a different breed, they are different from what I’m used to.” When asked to expand upon that point, Kayla pointed to the cliques amongst Black students and the way some interacted with one another: “On one occasion, we’re speaking, you know, laughing and talking about stuff like that until we see each other outside of those spaces.” She described trying to say hello to Black students on the Long Walk or in Mather and getting very little acknowledgement in return. Interestingly, Kayla believed that Black students failed to exchange basic pleasantries, something other interviewees condemned white students for doing to them.

Furthermore, Kayla speculated that Black students were “different up here” because some spent years, sometimes a decade, attending schools with white students at college preparatory schools. She said that many of them were complacent with their classmates’ racist comments, which made her uncomfortable. Whether her assertion was true, it was the way Kayla felt and contributed to her feeling like she did not belong. Additionally, when asked if she felt welcomed on this campus, she replied with a forceful “no.” In fact, I had not reached the end of my sentence before she answered, which demonstrated how out of place she felt within the gates of Trinity.

Although Kayla believed Black students were guilty of not being friendly, she was still of the opinion that white students failed to acknowledge her as well. She recalled trying to say hello to acquaintances as she walked by them, but they “look away or don’t say anything.” Kayla found this to be particularly rude, as she was raised to have “Southern hospitality” and “to

speak” when someone engaged another in conversation. Trinity, however, did not embrace that culture; in fact, it very obviously shied away from it, Kayla asserted. Further, her sentiments echoed those of Olivia who noticed the same phenomenon.

Classroom Engagement

In this section, I explored the ways in which participants’ classroom environments, often a reflection of the racial climate, influenced their participation. Despite the environment that participants were thrust into, many of them participated in the classroom, especially the older students. While some were fairly quiet in the beginning of their Trinity careers, as noted, they now described themselves as students who successfully and frequently participated in their courses. Grace, who revealed she had social anxiety, was quieter than her classmates, but she made strides in increasing her participation. Amongst the two sophomores, Paige who spent four years at a predominantly white high school and frequently participated in class, remained stagnant in her participation, for she always contributed. Kayla, on the other hand, was still fairly quiet in class, if anything, she regressed. Furthermore, the talkative bunch, consisting of Paige, Jalen, Lisa, and Olivia did not see a tremendous change in the number of times they participated in class. The most variation in participation centered around participants’ classroom environments. In this section, I discussed the subsets as one group, as their experiences converged quite frequently. The most significant difference was evident in the way they reacted to having diverse classrooms.

Altruism & Professors’ Dependency on Black Students to Teach

Students described their engagement in terms of wanting to enlighten their classmates who were sometimes ignorant to the realities of this nation, especially with regards to race and inequality. In other words, participants frequently took it upon themselves to educate their peers,

as they knew many of them refrained from having these conversations beyond the classroom and certainly would not engage in them after graduation. As a result, seven out of nine participants responded to their professors' intrusive questions about race that often violated the boundaries between student and teacher—although two participants expressed their irritation. (Two participants said professors never asked them—whether directly or subtly—to speak about marginalized groups or lead discussions on race.)

As discussed in previous sections, some participants realized their experiences were valuable at Trinity while others seemed to enter college with that belief firmly in place. Participants from both subsets explained, at times, their engagement was wholly tied to their desire to educate and, in some circumstances, correct false narratives. In recognizing the level of affinity bias that permeated the campus, Beah explained, “white people aren’t hearing it [her experience as a Black woman] anywhere else. Because if we’re going to be honest, a lot of them don’t have friends of color, and if they do, it’s their token friend. And so, they’re not hearing it anywhere else. I’m gonna make sure they hear it.” Beah, like many of the interviewees, was of the opinion that white students at Trinity were detached from reality. Jalen echoed her point, as he cited Trinity as “a pitstop before daddy [handed] them [his white classmates] the interview with their friend they met at their NESCAC.” He continued, “for some students, this is camp trin. For me, this is Trinity College.” Jalen made the point that for the ultra-rich at Trinity, meaning the 26 percent of the student population that makes up the 1 percent at this institution,⁸ Trinity was merely a place to party, receive passing grades to graduate, and eventually secure a job through a network of wealth. For Jalen, and students like him, those kinds of networks did not

⁸ See “Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent than the Bottom 60. Find Yours” (2017), for further discussion of the economic disparities found on college campuses.

exist; thus, he must find success using other avenues, which is why he treated Trinity like a place of higher education as opposed to “a boarding school with no rules,” as Grace called it.

In returning to the original point of this section, participants shared Jalen’s and Beah’s perspectives about finding it important to educate the masses. Paige believed that her “perspective [could] help.” Specifically, when they discussed urbanity in her classes, Paige often “supplement[ed] [it] with personal experience, because not a lot of people have had like the urban experience that I’ve had.” Paige noted that she went the extra mile to share her experiences with her classmates because she wanted to. To that end, while Paige never found that her professors depended on her to share these experiences, Jalen spoke at length about a professor using events in his life to explain a sociological theory. In one particular class, Jalen recalled a professor spending thirty-five minutes analyzing his experience in a college-readiness program. In reflecting on that day and other instances where professors depended on his experiences to teach, he recalled being incredibly “forthcoming.” Jalen added that he was “very okay with it,” as his classmates may have gained a deeper understand of the material and, in turn, understood that “it’s not just reading, [making] it more real for some people.” Jalen did not mind putting his life on display for his classmates to gawk at, as he thought it might assist them in their learning.

Grace experienced similar instances where professors used her experiences or, in some instances, called upon her to teach. She recalled many a professor “who would call on me to go like, ‘Oh, [Grace]. Like, you’re from [city name redacted], like talk about the community, talk about the area.’” While she admits that in most instances her professors were genuinely trying to understand her perspective, there were some, “where it’s like, ‘Oh, I see an opportunity for you to give your personal experience.’ I don’t appreciate them volunteering me all the time, because

some stuff is like, I kinda have a really hard time talking about [city name redacted].” Despite her uneasiness and slight irritation, Grace fully answered the questions.

Ultimately, participants knew that some professors and students were ill-equipped to handle discussions on race. Beah added that in some departments “like women’s studies, sociology, and like international relations, maybe like I don’t know,” they needed students of color to help the class progress. Without these students, without them “giving their input on these topics,” Beah asked, “what would you really have?” She figured that professors “would be talking at students; essentially, [they] wouldn’t be able to have conversations.” Beah argued that in some departments, students of color were tasked with the undue burden of teaching, as “professors here depend[ed]” on them. Her sentiments were also echoed by Jalen.

The lone participant who did not entertain this particular line of questioning felt similarly to Grace, but she responded differently. Kayla noticed that professors volunteered her to answer questions about race or marginalized identities, for which she did not answer; instead, Kayla “backed off,” meaning she wholly disengaged from the conversation. Kayla believed it was not her “responsibility to teach you [the professor] about something that’s out there.” Essentially, she echoed the sentiments that flooded the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. Kayla believed that to remain ignorant to the racism of this country when the internet was readily available was unacceptable: “Everybody has access [to the internet], right? And it’s kind of like, we’re not living in—Like we have access to everything else.” She sarcastically quipped that if people want to learn about Black people’s experiences, “search Black people’s struggles on the internet. . .because it’s not my job [to teach anyone].” As a result, Kayla did not respond to her professors when they asked her questions about race, unlike the other seven participants.

It is important to note that participants who shared these experiences, and thereby educated their peers, received mixed non-verbal and sometimes verbal responses from their classmates. In some cases, Black students felt as though their white classmates heard them. Beah felt that “people listen[ed] when we [Black people] talk[ed], like, that's what I recognize[ed]. And maybe it's not listening to the degree where they're, like, really hearing you. But they recognize when you're speaking.” While she made no comment about how it affected her participation, one might assume that it would positively impact her participation.

Other participants, specifically Jalen and Olivia, had a different, more negative experience, when they tried to enlighten their classmates. Olivia remembered talking extensively about the maternal mortality rates amongst Black women and the violence against Black people in the medical field in general. As she concluded her statement, Olivia noticed that her classmates lacked the decency to even pretend like they were paying attention—something that Jalen also noticed when he shared personal experiences in class. In these moments, Olivia felt disrespected by her peers, as they showed her how little they cared for `Black people, a common theme amongst the participants. Olivia added, “if you [meaning the professor] rely on me to use my experience so much in class, then like, don't make me go through this trauma for [the students] just to not listen.” She rightfully argued that it was already offensive to have Black students share the pain of their people, but it was all the more egregious when professors knew how little other students cared. Neither Olivia nor Jalen made definitive claims about these experiences affecting their participation, but it was something that inspired great emotion within them both.

In the Name of Academic Achievement: Persistence Through Racism, Isolation, Invisibility, and Disrespect

In a similar vein, many participants were unsurprisingly grade oriented. Thus, to earn their participation points, they engaged in class discussion to earn the coveted A. Further, participants took hold of their education and believed to come to class without saying a word was detrimental to their academic success. Despite feeling unseen, isolated, and unappreciated on campus and in the classroom, participants generally participated, speaking to their determination. Additionally, one participant, found it imperative to hold his fellow classmates accountable, which superseded any disgust he had for his classmates who demonstrated how little they cared for Black people.

Participants discussed being treated differently by their professors and fellow classmates. While this sometimes led to low participation amongst participants—which will be explored in another section—many participants persisted and maintained their level of engagement. When students recalled being treated differently, they spoke of it in conjunction with their white peers. Participants felt that white students received certain privileges from professors that were not afforded to them. Kayla recounted her professor treating her unfairly in her J-Term class, where she noticed that her professor continuously allowed white students to retake quizzes, but she, the only Black student, did not receive any second chances. When I inquired about how this experience impacted her engagement, Kayla described emotionally detaching herself from the situation after receiving validation from her mother that she, indeed, was treated unfairly. Kayla added, “I still participated in class because J-Term is only 5 weeks. It goes by like that [snaps fingers] . . . I was plaining on getting an A in that class, and I knew I would have to participate to get it. And I got it, but I had to fight 10 times as hard as the white people.” Despite being treated differently, Kayla continued to participate because it was her grade that was on the line.

In the face of mistreatment, Lisa also participated. She revealed that she felt her presence was “unappreciated” by the professor. When asked to expand on that idea, she described that her professor refused to acknowledge her when she entered the classroom. Although Lisa greeted her professor with the typical pleasantries, her professor refused to respond. Conversely, when her white classmates entered, the professor engaged in conversation with them, which only confirmed that Lisa’s professor made the conscious decision to ignore her. To that point, Lisa, the only Black student in her class, was effectively snubbed by her PhD holding professor for what would appear to be the color of her skin. Nevertheless, Lisa persisted, as she chose “to bite the bullet. Like this might be happening, but I shouldn’t let this impact my grade I guess or impact, like what I get from the classroom.” Although she was in a hostile classroom environment, Lisa chose to continue participating to protect her grade and learn.

With further respect to toxic classroom environments, Olivia relayed to a significant moment in her life, where she felt particularly invisible to her white classmates. In one of her classes, she noted that her professor instructed students to form small groups to complete in class assignments. Despite it being the first day, Olivia noticed students finding partners rather quickly, but no one had the decency to ask if she would like to join their group. Olivia noted that she was one of two Black girls in the room but specified that she was “the only dark-skinned girl in the room.” The distinction Olivia made was important, as she suggested that her race—along with her darker complexion—may have impacted the way her classmates treated her. Further, Olivia’s classmates had no issue inviting the other Black student who did not share her darker skin tone into their group. To that point, light-skinned Black people are shown preference due to their proximity to whiteness. Even so, this preference, that is most certainly conditional, does not negate the racism that light-skinned people experience. Ultimately, colorism is a tool of white

supremacy that only upholds the inherently racist, classist, and sexist status-quo that is entrenched so deeply in society.

Due to her classmates' flagrant display of affinity bias, Olivia worked alone for the first few moments; she described this experience as "incredibly isolating." To add insult to injury, Olivia's professor did nothing to help her; she expanded, "[I] wished the professor would have saw that [I was working alone]. Because I was just sitting there for a minute." In the end, Olivia "moved [her chair] over to where white girls were sitting and just forced myself in the conversation. And like, this is the first day, so it wasn't like . . . people knew each other. They just did not choose to work with me, and I'm not sure if it's a level of they didn't see me. Because there's a level of invisibility when you're Black." Olivia shared a common theme amongst participants—the feeling of invisibility in the vast sea of whiteness. Olivia recalled trying the best she could to engage in the group. Further, when it came time to discuss as a large class, Olivia shared her group's ideas, despite not being welcomed into their group, or anyone's for that matter. Olivia participated not because she wanted to; instead, she did it "just to participate" to get the grade, which required her to "self-correct and just figure it out and get it done." In the simplest of terms, Olivia made do with what was presented before her in order to achieve.

Both Kayla, Lisa, and Olivia remained present in their classes, and vocalized their opinions despite being treated poorly. In some respects, it would appear that these students were surviving as opposed to thriving. They were, as Jalen described, "running. It feels like [Black and brown students are] always running to a finish line." In a sense, they pushed through these moments of racism to achieve academically. Further, they, as addressed most pointedly by Lisa, had a desire to learn to expand their horizons. Eric shared in Lisa's sentiments, as he

remembered his mother saying, “a closed mouth don't get fed. So, you can't get fed or full from the class, if you don't contribute your voice.” Eric was also particularly invested in his education, which played a role in his participation. He spoke at length of feeling “honored” and “humbled” to be at an institution like Trinity College. Due to his feelings of gratitude, Eric recognized that the odds of success were not in his favor. Still, he noted he continuously rose to the occasion: “And continuously recognizing that this system of, of institutional racism and oppression is going to always be at your back, but not letting that define who you are and what your educational process is going to look like, especially at a PWI like this.” As mentioned, Eric was hyper-aware of how society perceived him and what it expected him to do. As a result, he made the conscious effort to persist despite the environment he was tossed into; this particular persistence took shape in the way he presented himself in the classroom, which was heavily influenced by his mother’s lessons—i.e., “a closed moth don’t get fed.”

Jalen seemingly made the same agreement—to persist—although he added to it. During her first two semesters at Trinity, he remembered being “really angry” because there were very few students who looked like him or shared his experiences. Jalen described that his anger transferred into the classroom. During his first year, Jalen took a sociology course. He enjoyed the course for the most part but described being particularly perturbed by his classmates, especially on one occasion. In class, Jalen and his peers watched a documentary that displayed the country’s treatment of Black people. As the movie played, there were scenes of violence against Black people that traumatized those interviewed in the documentary and moved Jalen and the rest of the students of color to tears. According to Jalen, his white classmates, however, showed very little concern for the events on screen. Due to his location in the room, Jalen saw his classmates’ dimmed laptop screens and noticed most students were shopping or playing

games. He was disgusted, angered, and particularly disturbed by his classmates' disregard for Black life.

After the film concluded, his professor tried to facilitate a conversation. Still angry from what he observed in his classmates, Jalen resolved to condemn them for their behavior: "I was the first person to raise my hand, and I just basically went on a rant for like five minutes of basically saying, 'there's no point of asking us what we think about the film, because half this class doesn't care.'" Wanting Jalen to explain his anger, I asked him why his classmates' reaction to the film, or lack thereof, made him upset. He responded that it was clear to him the white students in his class did not care about his identity or the oppression Black people faced. Jalen found this to be insulting, and as a result, he felt it necessary to say something.

The Impact of Diversity, Black Professors, and Diverse Curricula

In this section, I first explored how racially diverse classrooms impacted participants' engagement in the course. Subset one, with the exception of one participation, asserted that the racial composition of a classroom did not increase their level of participation. Instead, they noted that it only affected the way that they spoke and how detailed they made their comments. That is, when a classroom had a larger number of students of color, one participant noted that she did not feel the need to explain terms, like "codeswitching," as she believed those in her class already understood. Conversely, all of subset two agreed that their participation greatly increased when there were more students of color because they felt more comfortable and better understood. Since subset one and two vary in their responses, I discussed them separately.⁹

In the following section labelled "the Impact of Professors of Color—Particularly Black Professors," I explored participants as one entity, as there were strong parallels between both

⁹ Subset one consisted of participants with experience at predominantly white schools. Subset two consisted of participants with *no* experience at predominantly white schools before coming to Trinity College.

groups. With only one exception, all participants noted that their participation increased when they had professors of color, especially Black professors. They felt that these professors gave a different, more relatable perspective that made them want to engage more. Some also noted that Black professors cared deeply for them; thus, they felt as though they owed them, which increased their participation.

The Effect of Racial Diversity in the Classroom

Subset one argued that their participation did not increase when their classes were more racially diverse—one participant even argued that she rarely noticed the racial composition of the classroom. Instead, their comments changed with regard to how they spoke, sometimes incorporating more AAVE into their speech when there were more Black and Brown students. Further, subset one argued that in classes with more racial diversity, they did not feel the need to explain terms that surround issues of inequity and privilege, for they assumed their classmates had a stronger understanding of these concepts. Subset two, however, reported an increased level of participation when there were more students of color in their classes, as they felt more comfortable.

Subset One. Students with previous experience at predominantly white schools were surprisingly unfazed by classes with more diverse populations. In other words, with the exception of one participant, they all said the amount they participated remained the same, no matter the level of racial diversity in the classroom. Paige described that she “doesn’t even notice” when the racial makeup of the classroom is homogeneous. Following her bold claim, Paige modified her previous assertion and added, “maybe I will take note of it subconsciously.” Still, Paige was more concerned with professors noticing her for her intelligence: “But I will go into class with the intention of just doing my best and trying to make the professor see me like,

as me and my work ethic as a student.” As a result, her participation did not increase, like I expected it to, when there was more diversity in the classroom.

In a similar vein, Beah’s participation did not increase when there were more students of color in the classroom, adding that she “still participates at the same level.” Instead, the kinds of comments she made in class were dependent on the classroom demographics. When there were more students of color in the classroom, particularly Black and brown students, Beah used language that deviated from Standard American English (SAE). Further, she described that if there were mostly white students in the classroom and she mentioned a “concept that we [Black people] have to endure all the time, like code-switching—and I’m sure at this point, I feel like people know what code-switching is now, but like, let’s say they didn’t—I would have to go in and explain what code switching is.” Conversely, if there were other Black students in the classroom, Beah noted “then I don’t really have to delve deeper on that concept.” Essentially, Beah changed the “way [she] communicate[d] a little bit” but did not increase or decrease her participation depending on the racial diversity of her classmates.

Olivia, a student who repeatedly called attention to her willingness to participate in the classroom, followed suit: her participation did not increase when the classroom was more diverse. However, she, noticed that her comfort level changed. Olivia pointed to one class in particular that had a number of people of color. In this class, she “doesn’t feel really perceived at all.” Upon request for further explanation, Olivia described that white students’ “eyes are always on me, and on top of that, they don’t ever speak to me.” To this participant, it was evident her classmates “have like inner thoughts about [her].” Olivia’s classmates’ stares—some of which were judgmental, she believed—made her feel uncomfortable. As a result, when there were more students of color in the classroom, who did not look at her like that, Olivia felt far more

welcomed. This is not to say that she participated more. Instead, Olivia felt safer in these classes, as noted through her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Further, she said that in her more diverse classes, she did not code-switch, which was not the case for her predominantly white classes. In her words, Olivia “feels at home, and like, I can be able to have academic conversations in my language [namely AAVE], with other students speaking my language as well.” Olivia felt incredibly cared for in these diverse classes, which led to a change in her communication style, like Beah. Still, she did not assert that she spoke more in these classes.

Grace, however, broke the pattern; she participated more when there were higher levels of diversity in the classroom. Grace, who had attended predominantly white schools since elementary school, revealed she participated more when there was a higher level of diversity in the classroom. Grace remarked, “Yeah I definitely—like classes where there is more diversity, I’ve talked more, and definitely [when there is] more of a white presence or like a white male dominance, I definitely don’t talk a lot.” She expounded on this point and added that although she might be quieter in classes with white students, specifically those that were dominated by white men, Grace still “challenged” their opinions at times. Overall, Grace relayed that her participation typically increased when there were more students of color in the classroom.

Subset Two. Four out of five participants in subset two expressed speaking more when the classroom was racially diverse, as they felt more at ease being surrounded by people who shared similar experiences. Unlike their peers in subset one, who shared similar sentiments, their level of comfortability positively correlated to their participation. That is, participants’ engagement increased when there were more students of color in the classroom. Lisa described feeling “more engaged” in these classes and “want[ed] to just talk more.” On the other hand,

when she entered majority white classrooms, Lisa “[felt] more like an outsider,” which negatively impacted her participation. Kayla described a comparable experience: “So, if there's more POC, or more like black people in the class, I'm more inclined to speak because we have the same viewpoint sometimes. . . versus a white person. Sometimes they [white people] just don't understand . . . So yeah, so if the setting is more diverse, I'm more inclined to participate.” Lisa and Kayla described a kind of solidarity between people of color that made them feel safe and understood, which ultimately contributed to their desire to speak more frequently in class.

Furthermore, when asked to compare her participation at high school to Trinity, Kayla said she participated far more in high school. She continued that her classmates, most of whom were Black, did not “judge me for like [my] viewpoints or background.” Kayla said that while her high school classmates, of course, had varying opinions, they were all “able to agree on the home front because [they] were all Black. So, at the end of the day, we all understood the Black struggle.” Kayla cited Trinity as being different due to the College’s racial composition. The shared level of understanding about race and privilege was non-existent in some of her classes, as her professors and peers failed to recognize the legacy of racism coursing through the nation’s veins. Thus, in moments when she found herself in more diverse classes, specifically those with more Black students, Kayla knew she would be understood, and as a result, she spoke more frequently.

One participant, Bella, spoke of her engagement in racially diverse classrooms in terms of her professors. Bella noted that when her classes were taught by white professors and the majority of her classmates were white as well, her professors often chose “white people . . . first [to call on] and then everybody else kind of like trickles in afterwards. Sometimes by that time, I'm like it doesn't make sense to keep my hand up. So, I'll just keep my hand down. Because,

like, ‘will I ever be chosen first?’ is what goes through my head.” In some respects, Bella described being silenced by her white professors, as they called on her second to white students. When Bella was in classes with a more diverse student body, she had more opportunities to be called upon, which increased her participation. Essentially, Bella’s verbal engagement increased in racially diverse classrooms, not because she felt more comfortable like her counterparts but because she was given more opportunities to speak.

The Impact of Professors of Color—Particularly Black Professors

Participants noted their engagement changed when their professors were of color. Their participation increased even further when they had Black professors. Seven participants commented their engagement increased, and one noted their comments changed, when they had professors of color. The remaining interviewees relayed professors of color had no bearing on their participation. Additionally, participants described Black professors as being particularly caring and invested in Black students, perhaps because they knew what it meant to be a Black person in academia, an incredibly white space.

Despite their commonalities, participants often noted that Black professors held Black students to a higher standard than those from other racial groups, but the participants, in some respects, appreciated it. Jalen described the amount of time Black professors put in him to ensure his success, which resulted in greater levels of participation on his part:

And they [Black professors] all have genuinely, like, I don't know—they pull me aside in class; they talk to me. They see me on the long walk, they pull me aside. So, it's almost like I owe them. Like, yeah, I owe you guys to be a present person in your class. There's [sic] some professors here who I genuinely feel are researchers that have to teach comparatively to some professors here who love the pursuit of teaching and molding a

student, and I feel like the Black professors here have definitely helped me, molded me. They are like, '[Jalen], come here.' Like, they definitely bring me, and I don't feel like other professors make the same leaps to try to get to know me or try to see what intellectually intrigues me.

Jalen's experiences with Black professors were emblematic of his peers, as will soon become evident. Due to the level of interest Black professors took in Jalen, he was more inclined to speak, as they felt he owed them. Moreover, when Jalen made the comment about professors telling him "come here," he was referring to moments in which the professor understood he was having difficulties, whether academically or personally, and attempted to guide him through the process with a firm but comforting hand. Most significantly, Jalen said that non-Black professors rarely, if ever, showed him the same kind of attention. Consequently, he asserted that Black professors' desire to help Black students was specific to them. In recognizing their efforts, Jalen spoke more frequently in these professors' classes to, in some respects, show his appreciation.

Beah also made comments about the positive correlation between her classroom participation and a Black professor, who she called her "second mom." In responding to my inquiry about a time she was particularly engaged in a class discussion, Beah talked extensively about this professor, who I refer to as Professor Smith to maintain confidentiality. Professor Smith was Beah's first Black teacher, a disturbing fact. Beah described being particularly engaged in the classroom because the professor was a Black woman, for which she was grateful. Beah believed that due to the professor's identity, she participated more frequently:

I don't know if that was part of the reason I was into [the class], because she was a Black woman. I was just grateful [to have] a Black woman teaching me because she had

insights that no other teacher had ever provided before. And so, I was just naturally more interested in like participating.

Beah spoke highly of Professor Smith and affirmed Jalen's comments regarding the importance of Black professors, as they played a significant role in Black students' participation and sense of belonging. Beah was particularly thankful to have a Black woman as a professor because she was captivated by the fact she could share in these experiences with her professor. Further, Professor Smith provided a perspective that deviated from the mainstream and thus opened a new world. Having this connection with this professor and being able to learn dominant ideologies through a Black woman's lens was particularly valuable to Beah and made her participate all the more frequently.

Paige expressed similar sentiments, but she added a new perspective. Paige described a class that she particularly enjoyed and cited her professor, who was Black, as being the prime reason. Although Paige noted she "tend[ed] to participate more in that class," she added that her friends warned her not to take this professor's course. Paige argued that her friends "were more intimidated [by having a Black professor], because they know that the standard would be higher for them as a black person under a Black professor, than as a Black student under a white professor, like how they would probably need to participate more, like actually do the work more." Paige noted that there was more pressure to succeed in her class with a Black professor because there was a "higher standard"—this higher standard called for greater levels of participation. Paige did not speak about this observation negatively. Instead, she rose to the occasion and frequently participated. Bella shared a similar sentiment that she, too, felt additional "pressure from professors of color."

While Black professors played a large role in increasing participants' participation, interviewees also spoke about professors of color more broadly and how they impacted their participation. These professors also made participants feel comfortable in the classroom and changed their participation in terms of quantity and type. Eric commented that he was far more "vulnerable" in classes with professors of color, as he knew they had the ability to relate to his experiences. As a result, he incorporated his personal experiences into the course material, something he could not do with other professors: "And I feel like with white professors, you really can't give those personal events nine times out of ten. Because. . . [they] don't consider racialized pressures within our [the Black] community." While Eric's engagement did not increase when he had professors of color, he noted his comments became far more personal, as there was a level of trust and understanding between him and his professor. Specifically, as Kayla pointed out, people of color shared a level of understanding about race; as a result, Eric was more inclined to share particularly personal comments.

One participant, Lisa, wholly differed from the others, as she asserted that a professor's race has little to do with her participation. Instead, she contended that her participation increased when the professor made her feel welcome and was particularly passionate about their work—their teaching specifically. While Lisa considered the possibility of her engagement increasing when the professor was of color, she clarified her sentiments after a brief moment of reflection:

Yeah, the race was a factor, [pauses] but I think it has more to do with the personality of the professors. Because I've had some white professors who have this [sic] amazing personality and never made me feel like I was kind of an outsider to the class. But then I [also] have some white professors who . . . made that [feeling of being an outsider] very apparent. So, I think it . . . depends.

Lisa credited her increase in participation to whether her professor made her feel welcomed in the class as opposed to their race. Within her response, there was underlying conversation surrounding acceptance—and in some cases, lack thereof—a theme that was at the forefront of participants’ comments. Often, the consequence of Black participants’ feeling isolated or unappreciated was a decrease in participation and sometimes withdrawal from their courses altogether, as I explored in later pages.

Multicultural Curriculum

Courses that included the voices and perspectives of the marginalized were of particular interest to all participants, which was, admittedly, unsurprising. When asked about what classes participants participated in the most, they noted that in addition to having professors of color, the curriculum was especially important. In this section, I refrained from using the subsets to categorize my findings, as participants’ experiences overlapped one another’s.

Eric, from subset two, described being most engaged in a course on sexuality, gender, and masculinity, a topic that always piqued his interest. Eric passionately described the conversations he had in class. Due to the subject matter, Eric was “most engaged [in this course] because I really related these conversations towards my experience.” Eric added that this class was particularly powerful because he saw himself in the material, which made him more inclined to engage. When Beah of subset one responded to the same question regarding what class she spoke the most in, she shared similar sentiments:

I guess learning about myself and other people like me for the first time really opened my eyes to the possibilities that like—this sounds corny—but like what I could do and also like, what I could do for other people of color. Specifically, people who are like me, who

have only been in white environments, but also have to, maintain a Black identity at the same time.

Beah pointedly referenced how this class's focus on marginalized voices not only increased her engagement but also deeply inspired her as a Black woman, who spent the majority of her life in white spaces. Further, Beah got the opportunity, for perhaps the first time in her life, to explore her lived experiences in a significant way that engendered an integral reflection that added to her development.

Lisa shared similar thoughts about the impact of multicultural classes. She agreed that her engagement “definitely increases when the topic is relevant” to her life—even tangentially. Lisa described a course she took on texts written by Native Americans and another that explored “Black art, music, and literature.” Although Lisa was not Native American, she appreciated hearing from other marginalized individuals. Further, she was “able to connect—it was kind of like having that solidarity.” Lisa, once again, pointed to the alliance between people of color that made her time in these courses all the more enjoyable, which inspired a greater level of participation in the classroom.

Disengagement: A Symbol of Resistance and Displeasure

Despite participating in the face of toxic environments, participants noted they disengaged when there were extreme attacks on their identities. Specifically, participants described their disengagement in terms of feeling unappreciated, receiving unfair treatment, disinterest in the course material, and attacks on their identities or perspectives. Due to the small sample size, I explored these themes in terms of how participants described their silence. In other words, some students described their disengagement as a form of protest to indicate their disgust with the comments of their classmates and professors. Others described their disengagement in

terms of complete withdrawal from courses, as they were left with no other option but to leave the course entirely. To account for these varying responses to their environments, I examined these moments of disengagement by splitting them into two categories: “Silence as a Form of Protest” and “Complete Withdrawal: When the Disrespect is too Much.” Due to the way in which I analyzed their moments of silence and their converging responses, I explored participants from subset one and two together. It is important to note that while students persisted through these moments in other sections, and, therefore, resolved to participate despite the situation, there were times when they reached their breaking points, as illustrated.

Silence as a Form of Protest

Lisa noted that in a previous semester she felt extraordinarily “unwanted.”¹⁰ While she did not describe the specifics of the instance, Lisa noted that she responded poorly. With very few options at her disposal, Lisa described disengaging from the class, which resulted in low levels of participation. It would seem that Lisa regretted her response, but she noted that she felt incredibly “isolated” on multiple levels. On one hand, she, like everyone, was isolated due to COVID-19, and on the other, she felt alienated due to the professor who did very little to acknowledge her or make her feel like a true member of the class.

In her senior seminar, Beah noted that her professor leaned on her to guide discussions on race. While Beah accepted this undertaking by participating in discussions of race, she grew “tired” of engaging in this back-breaking work. Beah relayed that her seminar focused almost entirely on race and racial tensions. Throughout the semester, she realized three white women rarely participated in these discussions. Beah noted that while she was used to it, their behavior was particularly bothersome. Her irritation reached a boiling point during a particular class

¹⁰ The incident described here is from a different semester than the one previously discussed. In other words, Lisa came across two professors who made her feel tremendously unwanted in their classes.

discussion. She relayed that her professor asked the class about what it meant to “pull the race card.” The interviewee noted that while most students participated in this discussion, the three girls remained silent. At one point, Beah’s professor attempted to engage them. In response, one girl sheepishly said, “[the] discussion mad[e] [her] really uncomfortable” and asked if the professor could ask someone else for their perspective on the matter. The participant thought that was “stupid” and resolved not to participate during the following class.

While Beah admitted it was quite challenging to remain quiet, she managed to do so. In the final moments of relaying the anecdote, Beah said that her white classmate’s refusal to participate, “exemplifies how much y’all [white people] really like care about what we’re talking about. And like, how scared you are to talk about it.” As addressed, Beah leaned into the task of leading discussions on race, but she was tired of doing the work on her own—particularly without the support of her white classmates. In some respects, Beah felt disrespected as she recognized how little these particular students cared about these discussions. Further, Beah felt unappreciated, as she was doing the task of educating without receiving anything in return. Beah’s comments were previously echoed by Olivia and Jalen, who, too, felt like their classmates had very little concern for these discussions on race or the violence against Black people. Beah, however, differed in her response, as she weaponized her silence to protest the happenings in her class.

Eric also used his silence to protest, but his was directed towards his professor who he believed “undermined” his perspective and education. Eric described broaching the subject of the H.R.55 - Emmett Till Antilynching Act and his professor’s response: “we’ve been asking for that bill or that certain reform for years, decades, and it still hasn’t been passed.” The professor, having wholly missed the point, retorted, “Well, I mean, first off lynching is already illegal in the

United States but that doesn't mean people still aren't doing it." Eric felt that comment was "mad dismissive" and beside the point. Eric added that he thought his professor was "purposefully not acknowledging Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud [Arbery], and normal Black folk who got killed, even though they weren't messing with nobody." In some respects, it would seem that the professor downplayed the significance of the Act by asserting that it would do very little to stop these types of attacks against Black people. In response, Eric "stepped back a little bit." In other words, he stopped speaking to "observe and hear what the [professor] had to say to take note of that." Eric articulated that it "was not a full withdrawal" from the class discussion; instead, it was a moment of pause, where he took the space to collect himself.

Although Jalen described himself as a student who enjoyed participating, he remembered being particularly disengaged the previous school year due to remote learning and the topics of his classes. Jalen described fulfilling a number of his general education requirements during what he called, "The COVID era." He was not invested in his courses and only participated to earn a high grade: "I definitely went to a student that like, got in my participation points, closed my camera, muted myself, and just sat there." To that end, Jalen was not particularly interested in the course material, and he struggled to adapt to life on Zoom, which turned him into a quieter student. In essence, his silence was a result of disliking his environment and the coursework.

Complete Withdrawal: When the Disrespect was too Much

Grace described a class that her professor completely ruined for her due to his unfair grading and interactions with Black students in the classroom. As noted, Grace suffered from social anxiety and had an overwhelming feeling that people believed she was unintelligent. Although she knew this feeling was coming from within in most instances, Grace noted that her professor made her feel dumb through his condescension and disrespectful comments which

affected her participation. Grace remembered repeatedly attempting to participate in class, but she was never able to go through with it: “I tried to participate, but I was so scared of like talking in that class. And like, he [the professor] really made me feel dumb.” It also did not help that Grace was one of two Black students in the class, which made her feel like even more of an outsider. Her frustration came to a head when she received a low mark on a paper on which she worked incredibly hard. Grace’s irritation was only exacerbated when she read her classmate’s essay that received an A. In her opinion, the paper did not deserve the grade, as her classmate “high key got [the assignment] wrong.” This served as the final straw for Grace; shortly thereafter, she withdrew from the course altogether. She added that “I have my gown and I’m out this b**** because if I’d stayed, my GPA would have been so bad.” From a psychological standpoint, her professor confirmed one of her greatest fears —that people believed she was dumb. From an academic standpoint, specifically the achievement ideology, Grace withdrew to save her GPA as well.

Bella also had a negative experience with her professor that led to the creation of an independent study. In order to describe the idea of intersectionality, Bella’s professor pointed to her race and gender to explain how those identities intersected. (Of course, the professor could have used herself as an example.) Bella added that her professor, who was white, went on to try to describe “my experiences of being a Black woman [while] not being Black to white students.” Bella did not appreciate being “singled out and used for an example” and added “it was kind of [a] weird” experience. Despite her discomfort, she resolved to remain quiet and focus on her work. As the class ended, the professor delivered one final blow that left Bella stunned:

While we were all packing up our stuff, she stopped and looked over at me and said out loud, so this means everybody else in class can hear. And she said, ‘you know, I’m so

happy that you're here,' and like, 'thank you for being my token student.' She called me her 'token student' in front of the whole entire white class, and I didn't know what to say. So, I didn't say anything. I just packed up my stuff and I left.

While her professor did not understand the implications of such a statement, Bella believed her classmates did, as indicated by the look of horror on their faces. After speaking with her friends to confirm the comments were, indeed, racist, Bella reported the incident.¹¹ Following meetings with head of the department, the Director of Multicultural fairs, and the professor in question, they agreed to allow Bella to complete the course independently, for which she was thankful. Still, she remembered the director of the department, namely the person Bella's professor reported to, attempting "to do damage control"—that is, he remarked about the department not being racist. While Bella appreciated his help, the damage had already been done. She described that experience as "somewhat traumatizing." Additionally, Bella remembered it as the first time she realized "this is how I'm being seen here," merely as a prop to help white students learn.

Grace and Bella had similar reactions to their professors' racist behavior despite having categorically different schooling experiences. Grace, who had attended predominantly white schools for the majority of her life, withdrew completely from her course in order to protect her well-being and academic career. Bella with experience at schools with higher levels of diversity ultimately did the same. Unlike Grace, however, Bella navigated through multiple channels to find resolution, which made it possible for her to continue the class independent from the instructor.

¹¹ Being from a different country, Bella wanted to confirm with her friends from the United States that the comment was racist. At first, Bella thought this remark was something people said in this country, and, thus, it was only alarming to her because of cultural differences. She quickly learned that only a certain *type* of American made comments like these.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, I aimed to explore how Black students' described their classroom participation at Trinity College, a predominantly white institution. Specifically, I asked: How do Black students describe their classroom participation at Trinity College? How does this change when students have attended predominantly white institutions prior to their enrollment at Trinity? To formally answer the research question, I arranged the following section by the sub-themes created in the findings section: "Altruism & Professors' Dependency on Black Students to Teach"; "In the Name of Academic Achievement: Persistence Through Racism, Isolation, Invisibility, and Disrespect"; "*The Effect of Racial Diversity in the Classroom*"; and "Disengagement: A Symbol of Resistance and Displeasure." As I explored these themes to answer the research question, their implications, especially with regard to theory, were discussed.

Impact of Previous Schooling on Engagement at Trinity

Participants in both subsets categorized Trinity College as daunting and at times overwhelming. Still, they faced different but equally significant challenges. Academically, subset one had very little trouble, if any at all, adjusting to the academic rigor of Trinity. All of them felt as though their schools had given them the proper tools needed to succeed in higher education. Their sentiments aligned with previous research (Alexander-Snow, 1999). Conversely, subset two had a far more difficult time adjusting academically, many argued they had not acquired the same skills or knowledge as those who attended elite or predominantly white schools (Jack 2019). As a result, many felt particularly behind their classmates, which impacted their desire to participate in the classroom. To that point, participants in subset two feared appearing unintelligent, which was similar to subset one. Subset one also refrained from speaking because they, too, were intimidated and feared looking dumb (hooks, 1994).

Nevertheless, their fear and lack of participation derived from different places. Subset two believed they lacked the kind of knowledge professors wanted to hear while subset one spoke more in terms of being intimidated by the older students.

Socially, subset one had a relatively easier time transitioning to Trinity, but that did not mean they had an easy journey. Two participants in subset one described tools they used to protect themselves, specifically their “peace,” as Olivia stated. Paige quickly surrounded herself with people of color through her creation of a group chat that connected Black students with one another. In doing so, Paige lessened the effects of culture shock. Additionally, Paige learned how to protect herself because she already experienced what it meant to transition from a predominantly Black school to a predominantly white one during her time in high school. Similarly, in high school, Oliva learned to pick her battles when it came to confronting people about their microaggressions or racism (James et al., 2010). She described that if she had not learned that lesson then, she would be far more “exhausted” in college. Further, while she had a difficult social transition, Beah also relayed feeling as though she knew how to navigate the Black and white world. She possessed a level of familiarity with predominantly white spaces. These participants’ experiences align with previous research, as they learned how to persist in a sea of whiteness (Cookson & Persell, 1991).

Beah struggled to find her footing socially despite her tenure at predominantly white schools (Alexander-Snow, 1999). She found that students of color thought she was whitewashed because she spent her time with white students. As a result, she struggled to befriend them in the beginning, making her transition difficult. Additionally, while she spent the majority of her life in schools with white students, Beah noticed that some of the white students were far too “fratty” for her to engage with. Beah’s experience echoed those of the young women in Alexander-

Snow's (199) research. Although they all attended predominantly white schools before attending college, they struggled to acclimate socially. Still, Beah was the only participant from subset one that encountered these challenges, which deviated from the reviewed pieces of literature.

While subset one did not describe their social transition in terms of culture shock, a larger portion of subset two did as they acclimated to their new surroundings. Specifically, four out of the five described their social transition in terms of experiencing a culture shock. Participants explained that coming to an institution like Trinity was not an easy process, for many of them were raised in majority Black communities. Further, participants did not attend elite boarding or day high schools, which made them even more isolated. That is, as Jalen expressed, a significant portion of students attended these schools. Thus, if one had not, they felt as though they are an outsider (Jack 2019). Their experiences with feeling as though they did not belong as a result of the racial terrain confirmed the literature (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1996). Participants also made specific comments about white students, in particular, ignoring their presence outside of the classroom, which negatively impacted their immersion into the community. Essentially, participants reaffirmed what researchers (Feagin et al., 1996; Francois 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000) already concluded: predominantly white institutions are often hostile environments for students of color.

Altruism & Professors Dependency on Black Students to Teach

Participants described the practice of educating their classmates on topics that related to the systems of inequality and made them question the idea they consider the the legacy of racism in the country. They felt it was important to share these nuggets of wisdom with their classmates, as many students came to Trinity having never truly thought about race or inequality. Further, participants were well-aware that after graduation, their fellow classmates most likely

would not surround themselves with people who engage in these discussions. Thus, the interviewees often spoke of instances where they incorporated their perspectives as Black students, sometimes Black women, to educate, which stood in stark contrast to the literature. Often, participants in other studies refrained from broaching topics like those previously mentioned to avoid the judgement and irritation of their classmates (James et al., 2010).

In a similar vein, an overwhelming number of students described how their professors depending on them to lead discussions on race, speak from personal experience, or possess a high-level understanding about the oppression of marginalized people (hooks, 1994). Specifically, seven out of nine participants recounted instances in which they were essentially called upon—whether subtly or directly—to share their experiences. While two participants voiced their irritation with such practices due to its insensitivity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007), six out of the seven reported answering the questions to educate the class, which rejected Harper’s (2007) findings to an extent. Harper found that his participants were disgusted by professors’ attempts to have them share the “minority perspective” and refrained from participating (Harper, 2007, p. 98). Despite a couple of my participants’ irritation, which matched the reactions of the participants in Sealey-Ruiz’s (2007) study, the majority of students answered these questions. In that regard, participants’ willingness to answer said questions fell in line with Francois’ (2010) findings. That is, the Black women in her study responded to that particular line of questioning. The lone student that did not answer their professors’ questions about race, however, confirmed Harper’s research.

In the Name of Academic Achievement: Persistence Through Racism, Isolation, Invisibility, and Disrespect

Participants recalled many instances of racism and invisibility in the classroom, but they persisted and continued to participate because they wanted to achieve academically. In this case, previous schooling had no bearing on participants' decision to forge ahead in spite of their environment. In many cases, they made the decision to keep these attacks and their education separate in order to remain present in their classes. Participants described feeling as though they were overlooked by students and their professors. For instance, despite Lisa's professor refusing to acknowledge her existence upon her entry into the classroom, she showed up to class, not as merely an observer but as an active participant because she was dedicated to her grades and expanding her knowledge. While previous studies discussed professors treating Black students poorly and engaging in behavior that isolated them (Rovai et al., 2005; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Harper, 2007; Feain et al., 1996), the literature did not necessarily discuss participants' desire to participate and their academic achievement in tandem with one another. In other words, past research did not show a correlation between wanting to achieve and participants' level of participation. Instead, the literature demonstrated Black students' desire to prove their intelligence in an effort to dispel any ideas that Black people were intellectually inferior (Steele, 1996). This only proved true for one participant in this study.

The Effect of Racial Diversity in the Classroom

With the exception of one participant, all interviewees in subset one said their participation did not increase when there was a greater level of racial diversity in the classroom. Instead, their comments changed stylistically. One participant in particular, Beah, explained that when there is a higher level of diversity in the classroom, she did not take the time to define terms, such as "codeswitching." She assumed that students were familiar with the concept, as the process might be more salient in the lives of people of color. Olivia, who expressed similar

sentiments, said she incorporated AAVE when the class was more diverse (Davis et al., 2004), but her participation did not increase and neither did Paige's. Grace, however, noted that her participation, indeed, increased when there are more students of color in the classroom, which aligned with past research (Davis et al., 2004). I hypothesize that participants in this cohort strayed from the literature because of their experience in predominantly white schools, unlike those in these past studies. This is supported by subset two. The second cohort of students significantly diverged from their counterparts in subset one, and thus their experiences fell in line with the literature. They responded that having more students of color in the classroom increased their participation (Francois, 2010).

Participants' experiences most notably diverged in their response to having a classroom population with more racial diversity. While one out of four from subset one agreed that having more students of color increased their participation, four out of five participants in subset two said their participation increased when there is more diversity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Davis et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, it would seem that many of them are so familiar with being in these white spaces that the diversity of the classroom had little to do with their participation—a result of their previous schooling experiences. With that in mind, it would appear that subset one's schooling gave them the building blocks for academic success and how to survive, and sometimes thrive, in the white world (Cookson & Persell, 1991). Their schooling experiences and the tools they gained stand in stark contrast to subset two's, as many of them noted feeling academically behind and overwhelmed as they transitioned into the world of higher education.

There was a greater level of cohesion amongst participants in subset one and two when students had professors of color. All participants, with the exception of one, described how essential these professors, particularly Black professors were in their decision to engage. Even

amongst those who are naturally talkative, they relayed their participation increases when they had professors of color (Davis et al., 2004). Participants felt seen, heard, and understood by them because they shared similar experiences with being of color in academia. Similarly, diversity within the curriculum was important to Black students' participation. Broadly, students deeply benefitted from hearing their voices and seeing their experiences in the curriculum (hooks, 1994). More specifically, participants' participation increased when the course curriculum included material that was counter-hegemonic (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Additionally, interviewees also had higher levels of engagement when taught by professors of color, who made participants feel truly cared for. Black professors, in particular, took the time to get to know their Black students and, in some respects, acted as mentors to them as they navigated their way through academia (Guiffrida, 2005). Most significantly, one student referred to her first Black professor as her "second mom," bolstering Guiffrida's (2005) research on "othermothering." Furthermore, Black professors supported students of color. As a result, they spoke extensively about the importance of these professors and how they impacted their participation. To that end, participants repeatedly commented that they were most engaged in classes taught by professors of color because they felt safe with them and like they belonged (Guiffrida, 2005). They added that in tandem with being taught by professors of color, their participation also increased when the curriculum was culturally relevant (hooks 1994).

Disengagement: A Symbol of Resistance and Displeasure

All participants, no matter their previous schooling, described disengaging from their courses when they felt particularly disrespected by their professors or fellow classmates. Additionally, participants silenced themselves when they felt their efforts or perspectives were not appreciated in the classroom. Specifically, Beah resolved to stop talking after repeated

instances of white students refusing to talk about race. Additionally, Eric paused his participating for part of class after his professor refused to acknowledge the significance of the Emmett Till Antilynching Bill. In the most extreme cases, participants left their respective classes altogether— one opted to complete the work independently (Woldoff et al., 2011) Participants used their silence as a form of protest supports the literature (Jensen, 1973). Further, when the material did nothing to capture their attention, participants in both subsections silenced themselves, again, in response to their environments (hooks 1994).

Generally, participants in subset one and two agreed in terms of their participation—more specifically, what increased and decreased their levels of participation. Thus, when considering participants' previous schooling experiences, it was evident that it played a role in the variation of responses, especially with regard to their transitions to Trinity. Still, it was not as impactful when it came to participants' classroom engagement. Both groups strived for academic excellence; as a result, they tried their best to participate no matter their treatment in the classroom. Despite the moments of invisibility, disrespect, and racism, they engaged with their classmates and professor to earn the coveted A. In essence, participants forged on in the face of adversity because for them “this is Trinity College,” not “camp trin.” Additionally, they found it important to educate their classmates on topics on which they were perhaps ill-informed, which, in turn, increased their participation. Still, there were moments when the discrimination was too much to bear and they completely and totally disengaged for a class period or, in the most extreme cases, the remainder of the semester. In other words, the weight of carrying the “invisible tax” eventually became too much. As a result, it was incumbent students found some way to alleviate the crushing weight, as seen through their silence or complete withdrawal from a course.

Social Policy Implications and Future Research

Due to the findings, it is imperative that institutions of higher education actively work to change the culture of their schools, as it is negatively impacting students of color, specifically Black students. It is unethical to ask these students to enter hostile environments, where they most certainly will be subjected to racist remarks and unfair treatment while they earn their degrees. To that end, students should not have to choose between their grades and their mental well-being, like the students in this study. Thus, I call on college and university presidents, deans, and admissions counselors to make good on their promises about diversity *and* inclusion. I call on them to make their campuses the ones they claim it to be on brochures and websites. With respect to Trinity College specifically, although the institution has increased its diversity over the last two decades, the campus is nowhere near as inclusive as it should be as evidenced by participants' statements and the posts that appear on the Instagram account "blackattrin." To that point, Trinity must commit to holding any and every member of its community accountable for their actions.

Additionally, it is imperative that institutions of higher education implement curriculums with multicultural perspectives. Along with the adoption of such a curriculum, professors must be properly trained in how to teach these courses to avoid the problem of depending on Black students to lead their classes and cause further harm. Additionally, institutions must require courses that counter the dominant narratives and the status quo; rather, courses that discuss inequality, racism, anti-Blackness, sexism, etc. must be added to the general education requirements at colleges and universities. With the current system, most institutions of higher education are telling students of color as well as white students that mathematics, for example, is more important than discussing the legacy of racism in the nation. It is also important to note that

these courses are as important for students of color as they are for white students. In addition to having a better understanding of race relations in the United States, researchers have found that white students benefit from courses on diversity i.e., ethnic studies classes (Sleeter, 2011), as they promote critical thinking skills.

Moreover, it was rather apparent through the interview process that participants received vastly different educations, which greatly influenced their academic transition to Trinity College. The phenomenon seen here is one that affects the nation and is rather plainly known as the crater-sized holes in the education system, the nation's supposed greatest equalizer. Thus, it is imperative that policy workers strive toward creating equity within education by first addressing the achievement gap. They must focus on determining the greatest perpetrators of such disparities and identify ways to begin remedying the problem, because as it stands, schools are not equal, which is as clear as day.

Lastly, due to the lack of research surrounding Black students' transition from predominantly white high schools to predominantly white colleges and universities, I argue that researchers must spend more time delving into the topic. In doing so, researchers remind academia that Black people are not a monolithic group, that they, indeed, have varying experiences and opinions. Further, it could aid in these students' social transitions to higher education. Thus, it is imperative the topic is better researched to assist these students. In the same vein, researchers and institutions must work together to help Blacks students, and more broadly students of color, enter these campuses.

To Trinity

Novelist Thomas King delivered a series of speeches at the Massey Lectures for distinguished Canadian authors. He later published these pieces in a book called, *The Truth*

About Stories. At the close of each chapter, nestled immediately after a particularly gut-wrenching scene, King writes, “Take their story, for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story” (King, 2003, p. 29). Trinity College, you have heard the stories of Black students; you have heard their experiences; you have read their pain—repeatedly. In fact, this is far from the first time a student has written about Black students’ experiences on this campus. Thus, it is evident that you are, indeed, aware of how the racial terrain significantly impacts these students and yet I find myself writing this thesis. So, I leave you with King’s sentiments: “don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard [their] stories” because, indeed, you have.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Email

Hi, [Participant's Name]!

I hope you are well.

I interviewed a student for my educational studies thesis last week, and they mentioned that you might be interested in participating as well. To give you more information on my project, I hope to gain a better understanding of how Black students interpret and comprehend their classroom participation. During the interview, my questions will center around how professors, classmates, the racial climate of campus, and the racial demographics of classrooms may affect one's verbal participation.

Let me know if you are interested in being interviewed.

Best,
Ayanna

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in *Immersed in a Sea of Whiteness: How Black Students Describe their Participation at Trinity College*

The purpose of this research study is to determine the ways Black students interpret their classroom engagement, most notably in terms of their participation and the factors that may make it difficult to engage in this way. Participants must be 18 years of age or older and will be asked to answer interview questions. The audio of the interview will be recorded and will require 45 minutes of your time.

The benefits of this study are to give Trinity College a greater insight into the experiences of Black students and to ultimately better their time on this campus. For the interviewees, this offers a chance to think more deeply about their college experience. The study involves only minimal risk, meaning that the probability of harm or discomfort is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life.

To compensate you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$10.00 gift card from Peter B's.

I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty.

I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. At the completion of my study, the recordings will be deleted from all devices. If I have any questions about this study or want more information, I am free to contact:

Principal Investigator: Ayanna Platt, ayanna.platt@trincoll.edu, 763-528-3060, Trinity College
Supervisor: Daniel Douglas, daniel.douglas@trincoll.edu, Trinity College

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Print your name: _____
Signature: _____ Date: _____

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.

Appendix C

Survey Questions

**What is the highest level of educational attainment of either of your parents/guardians?
Place a check by the item that applies to you.**

LTHS (less than high school)
HS Diploma earned/Equivalency (GED)
Some college, no degree
Associate degree
Bachelor's Degree (BA)
Master's Degree
Professional (JD, MD, PhD, etc.)

Participation in High School and College

Think about the class you spoke the most in during your senior year of high school. Approximately how many times did you verbally participate (e.g., responded to a professor's or student's question, made a comment) in class discussions per class meeting? Circle one number.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Think about the class you spoke the most in at Trinity. Approximately how many times did you verbally participate in class discussions per class meeting? Circle one number.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Academics

What is your major?

Social Engagement

What clubs, jobs, sports teams, or organizations are you involved in on campus?

PWI Attendance

Before enrolling at Trinity, did you at any point in your educational experience attend a predominantly white institution (K-12)? Circle yes or no.

Yes / No

If you circled yes, what level? Select **all** that apply.

Elementary
Middle School
High School

Engagement with Professors

Do you attend office hours? Circle yes or no.

Yes / No

If you do, approximately how many times a semester do you attend office hours? Circle one number.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix D

Interview Guide

***How would you characterize your high school?**

- public vs private; urban or suburban; racial composition

****Tell me about your experience at your predominantly white high school.**

- Probe: compare to Trinity

How did this experience impact your academic transition to Trinity?

Describe your classroom engagement at Trinity in comparison to your engagement in your classes at your high school.

- If it changed, why do you think it did?
 - Demographics, teachers, racial climate

Tell me about your experience as a student at Trinity in the student community.

- How do you feel other students perceive you?
 - Describe that in relation to your participation
- Have racial incidents on campus ever impacted your class participation? If so, how?

Tell me about your class participation in general. What does it look like?

Tell me about a time at Trinity when you found yourself disengaging from class.

Tell me about a time at Trinity when you really engaged in a class discussion.

Probes: curriculum, professor, students, mode of engagement

- material (culturally relevant pedagogy vs. Eurocentric), discussions of race
- Do you ever find that you have to force yourself to talk? Describe that experience.
 - what is the racial breakdown of your most diverse class?
- In moments that you find yourself being quiet, what might be going through your mind?

Tell me about your participation in your most racially diverse class.

- Least racially diverse class

Are there times where you feel the professor is counting on you to lead discussions on race? Describe that experience.

Probes: does it change how you participate?

Do you know anyone else who might be interested in being interviewed?

***Only asked to students who attended schools with a majority Black or POC population**
****Only asked to students who attended predominantly white schools before coming to Trinity**