

## **An Outsider's Epiphany While Playing the Insider's Game**

A huge colosseum of uninspired architecture, each apartment in my hometown of Miami's complex is a monotonous set of squares hewn out of gray concrete. There is very little color, save for the splashes of emerald from the surrounding trees and poorly applied hunter green paint to offset the gray, and the Black and Brown<sup>1</sup> skin of folks like myself that populate the complex. There is only one way in and out of the complex if you're driving: a single opening in the tall concrete wall that surrounds the apartments. A year ago, this opening was very simple, a mere break in the wall to allow cars to enter and exit. However, when a young boy, one of the residents' son, was shot as a tragic casualty in a gunfight in the complex parking lot, the owner of the complex decided to boost security. They installed an automatic gate, a tall and bristling white one that is, in a very odd manner, a refreshing break in the grimacingly banal gray of the concrete wall. It seems rather out of place, honestly. These types of gates remind me of the upper middle class gated communities dripping in beige and gold that you can find rather unceremoniously with a 30-minute drive uptown. The ones with the obnoxious fountains that glow at night with specially installed "turquoise" and "aqua" lights submerged in their pools, as if the water needed any help being blue.

The wall does a good job of reinforcing the idea of being "inside", though not in the sense that one is safely inside a home or cozily in a bed. This type of "inside" pushes one to strive to get *out* and that pressure is even more palpable now with that unnervingly white gate that always hesitates to open when a car pulls up to it on its way leaving the complex. "Come on, I'm ready to go," I always think as I count the obligatory three seconds it takes for the gate to recognize my parents' car's presence, and then begrudgingly creak open.

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<sup>1</sup> I capitalize the B in "Black" and "Brown" very intentionally, to linguistically reject the diminution of the importance of traditionally marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

I started getting out before the gate was installed. March 29, 2014, I received my acceptance letter to one of the top-10 schools in the country. Prior to this point, I was simply hungry to get into college, and up until that moment, I had not thought too heavily about the possibility that I would go to such a prestigious institution. From the minute that I received my first acceptance letter—this one was my last—I knew I was on my way out. This letter, however, meant I might have been on my way out much more quickly than I thought. People in my apartment complex didn't go to these types of schools. A lot of us didn't even make it to college. College was a source of football and basketball, of rallying cries for the men who stood outside on Sunday afternoons smoking, or playing music on their speakers loudly for the whole complex to hear. College was not a means for advancement for us. It would be for me, though.

As it turns out, to get “out” is to be “in” somewhere else. I should have known; the neighbors remind of that every so often. “Y’all don’t see that car coming? Just playing in the street and not paying attention.” The kids, rowdily scooting and catching and hopping in the complex parking lot, longed to be *outside*, so they could be *in* the street, to be *in* that sacred asphalt sanctum of childhood innocence. By longing to get “out” of the ‘hood, I transitively longed to be in the bubble of my college campus, which clearly defined itself against the backdrop of the city it embeds itself in. Another wall, this time cobblestone, a quaint and soft brown and gray, surrounds my school and defines the inside and outside quite plainly. Yet the outsiders of this new city are let in to clean our halls, prepare our food, and fill out our forms. Is it simply enough for me to strive to get out? Was it simply enough for my college to accept me and the handful of others like me? I ultimately realized that my striving to get out of someplace and into another is part of a larger reality of inequality, and I now struggle to comprehend my role, as well as my school’s role, in playing the inside/outside game of oppression.

I don't usually go to nightclubs to assess socioeconomic injustice. Standing in the "20 and under" line my sophomore year, anxious to dance away the stresses of a long week of papers, lectures, and Impending Doom (in standard English, we would call it "Finals Season"), my mind is absorbed with keeping the sweat and heat of a hundred drunken college students as far from me as possible. Nonetheless, lessons have a way of chasing us down, often when we are least prepared to learn them. Behind me is a young man, Black like myself, whom I do not recognize from my campus. Through conversation, I find out he is not a college student, just a "regular old" citizen of the town. When he asks me if I am from around town, I tell him the school I attend. "Oh, dope!" I thank him for the compliment, and through more conversation, we find ourselves discussing my college's role in reinforcing the economic subjugation of various communities to the backdrop of the hit 2000s hip-hop record "Back That Thang Up" by Juvenile, which is banging through the building's brick wall.

Through my time in college, I came to discover that my school is really a huge corporation. The family that originally founded my school also tacked the school's name onto the power company that monopolizes the energy market in the state. The school's medical program is also housed in its own hospital, under the same name as the school.

My school is aggressively everywhere, and my new friend outside the nightclub confirms this: "Around here, we say your school signs your birth certificate, puts you to work, keeps your home lit and warm, and then signs your death certificate when you die. It really is a modern-day penitentiary." At that point, I realized that being in the college bubble came at a cost.

Interestingly, the community surrounding the university is simultaneously outside and inside. Many of the town's residents are Black and Brown, not unlike my hometown of Miami, and yet the population of students attending my university—which benefits heavily from its place in the

city—is overwhelmingly white and upper middle class. Many of the town's residents struggle to imagine themselves or their children as future students of this university and are thus consistently faced with the pushback they experience. This pushback manifests itself with the presence of a wall that is at face value aesthetically pleasing, but sends a very clear symbolic message. At the same time, however, these same people are surrounded by the very thing that is trying to keep them out. In a vicious taunt, my school is somehow everywhere, and yet nowhere where they are needed. When these people want out, where do they go?

Caught in this strange limbo of simultaneous disenfranchisement and painful ubiquity, the Black and Brown locals' presence on campus is represented mainly through the non-faculty workers that perform the tasks that are often diminished in importance, but all-too-essential to maintaining the campus culture so lavishly celebrated and enjoyed by the students within our precious Elysium. I awake every morning to shower in a bathroom newly pristine, the smell of cleaning product lingering faintly, stirred with the swish of the just-sprayed shower curtain being pulled back. When I am hungry, I grab a freshly prepared meal at the newly constructed eating hall, reminiscent of an upper-end mall's food court with its abundance of glass. Should I long to escape the hum-drum of my academic rigors, I can go and relax in a sprawling on-campus garden, frequented by students and off-campus visitors alike. All of this is made possible by workers, disproportionately Black and Brown, some of whom cannot even afford to pay for childcare for their children. Some late-night study breaks to the college's McDonald's have found me in line behind the children of a worker who is just finishing their shift. These same individuals will likely not get the opportunity to attend the same university they work for.

As much of an opportunity that the university has afforded me in accepting me, I cannot ignore two glaring facts. First, for my university to exist in the capacity that it does, it must be

complicit to embedding itself in certain systems which benefit certain groups and present barriers to others. I recall one instance when I was tutoring with a program that is a supposed "partnership" between my university and a local public school. A school for the arts and sciences, it is responsible for educating a sizeable portion of the considerably large ethnic minority population in the town. The student I was responsible for tutoring, upon hearing the name of the college I attend, responded rather unceremoniously. He was *not* impressed, but he had enough proximity to my school's presence to understand that the students who attend it do not simply drift into it. Yet in the same breath that he acknowledged my school's prestige, he carried out a very personal rebellion: "I don't really want to go there." I will not claim to know this child's story or his motives, but through our conversation, I came to pick up on a certain dejection, one that echoed the penitentiary-like presence my school carried in the minds of the residents like the one who waited in line with me that night outside the nightclub.

My school prides itself in producing graduates who are worldly-minded and community-oriented, such that they would have no problem participating in such tutoring programs like the one I just mentioned. As a matter of fact, universities like mine are so invested in the narrative of its student-servant hybrids, that they claim that the humanitarian projects they engage in with and through their students are more than enough to make up for the property taxes they are not paying to the county to take up residence in the town.<sup>2</sup> These taxes are essential to financing such public projects as the funding of public education, a resource essential to developing students that are prepared enough to be competitive applicants to such schools as my own. There is a scalding irony in a university sending its students out to "serve" as tutors and volunteers at schools that are fundamentally unequipped to produce the sort of minds that draw the attention of

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<sup>2</sup> Schneider, Mark, and Jorge Klor De Alva. "Why Should Rich Universities Get Huge Property Tax Exemptions?" *The Washington Post*. N.p., 8 July 2016. Web. 9 Feb. 2017.

top colleges, largely because these schools are not being adequately funded because the same school that is sending its student/volunteer hybrids is not contributing to the funds that would help to reverse the tide of socioeconomic subjugation. At that point, who is truly benefiting from this “service?” I have developed my own social and professional capital through these experiences. My tutoring experience makes me a “well-rounded” candidate on my resumé. I gain a valuable talking point towards my participation grade during the discussion session in my next course on socioeconomic inequality. Meanwhile, my tutoring partner gained a little help on his homework and perhaps a bit of inspiration just by seeing a man of minority background in a newly washed hoodie emblazoned with my school's name. Yet odds are that bit of an experience has done much less for them than it has for me.

This reveals the second realization: by being a student at this university, whether I am conscious of it or not, I am complicit to my school’s problematic relationship with the surrounding community up until the moment I am doing something to actively counteract it. Because I accepted my school’s offer to become a member of its exclusive band, I agreed to accept certain privileges and a right to various resources. This alone helps to reinforce the chasm between those with access and those without. Much of what makes my school so attractive to students like myself was made possible by it being deeply entrenched in institutional frameworks that allow it access and profit from capital produced by people and communities who could not hope to benefit from their own capital to such a degree. Regardless of intention, I consented to the methodologies the university took to amass such a capital and convert it into other forms of capital which reinforce the “inside” and “outside” dichotomy. It is this dichotomy which fosters a sense of exclusiveness, which feeds the elite status that those invested in the university enjoy.

One might argue that the very fact that I, a Black student of low-income background, am attending a university that has historically participated in these institutional ills, stands in ethical contrast to the problematic relationship my school has had with various communities both locally and globally. It is true that from the moment this university first began to admit Black students, more than a century after its foundation, the number of Black students allowed to attend has noticeably grown, from a handful of less than ten to a sizeable percentage of the student population today. However, merely admitting these students does not automatically translate to sustainable changes in the political, economic, and social currents that have served to drown people of color more than they serve to protect and nourish them. This is a statistical truth that has persisted across the nation for as long as this nation has existed.

Despite an increase in the number of people of color graduating with college degrees, the impact this has had on the average dollar amount of wealth enjoyed by people of color has been disproportionately small compared to their white counterparts. This is in part due to the fact that even though education and income are directly correlated, wealth includes income as well as assets owned, and communities of color have historically been dispossessed of the opportunity to amass capital in the way white citizens have been able to. Redlining and the devaluation of homes owned by Black people, the lack of property taxes to fund education as a result of the aforementioned barriers to homeownership, and workplace discrimination are just a few of the forces that have exasperated the extent to which Black people and other communities of color find themselves all but trapped in a cycle of poverty. These same institutional maladies in conjunction with so many others have created the communities such as the one I grew up in and ached to escape. Moreover, like salt on an already burning wound, these same institutions made these communities so difficult to leave or develop. They helped instate the communities of

"haves" and "have-nots", creating cycles of lack in the former and a cycle of prosperity in the latter, each of which becoming more continuously fulfilled prophecies as people tell stories of the "right" and "wrong" side of town.

However, I realize I did not need to venture off-campus—or even outside of my own experience—to understand how merely admitting students is not enough to solve this moral discrepancy. As a Black student of first generation background, I am one of many students who have struggled more than the average college student to take advantage of their college experience. I quickly discovered that the difference between me and my wealthier and often whiter peers is the amount of time I was given to prepare for such a rigorous academic environment. Although I was an excellent High School student, I found myself floundering initially because the learning curve was much steeper for me than my classmates. Many came in having been exposed to many of the university's institutional organs, or something resembling it, and so could to lay claim to the many opportunities that availed themselves. I, however, had to overcome many psychological barriers to even begin to envision myself as belonging to my freshman class, because I did not have many blueprints to follow in my familial history. I lacked the priming that my more privileged peers had undergone to hit the ground running during their college experience. My sense of being outside is of dual nature: I was simultaneously outside the physical enclaves such as the one my university represented and outside a community possessing a certain knowledge of various intellectual and tangible resources. So many other students who either were or would be on a campus such as mine would find themselves at such a deficit that they would have to overcome, created in part by universities they would attend.

Ultimately, accepting an offer of enrollment means accepting a moral dilemma. On one hand, I might choose to be unintentional and irresponsible with my education by refusing to



equip myself with knowledge, and ultimately ensure my own profit and welfare while neglecting the larger implications. Conversely, I could not only learn about the historical relationship of my school to communities such as mine but also take purposeful action to turn the knowledge I gain into tangible benefits for these communities. This is a dilemma faced by every student that attends my institution, but it holds an added weight for a student that was originally forced “outside” certain arenas while being trapped "inside" others. Outside of the blue, green, and gold opulence of the high-rise condominiums that pepper the South Florida coast, but stuck inside the concrete scowl of my apartment complex. Outside of the processes that produce the political and economic decisions our local governments make but entrenched within the complex outcomes that they produce. I longed to be beyond the wall, as many of my neighbors do. I longed to be within a reality of security and of dignity.

Because I understand well and have lived at different points within this complex relationship of place and positionality in power structures, to not allow this lens to frame my learning experience and my intentions concerning the immense privilege of a college education would be a huge disservice to those who are still living under the pressure of social and economic injustice, as well as to the person I was before I started my college journey. As feminist scholar bell hooks reminds us “Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege.”<sup>3</sup> As a student and, by extension, a steward of the university, I have the right and duty to critique its actions whenever necessary. I should be aware of the role my university plays in the local and global community, and be willing to open gateways so that these voices have an audience with those central to the decisions that shape that relationship. This may seem daunting given the demands placed on a student pursuing a rigorous college education, but

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End, 1989. 176. Print.

the truth is the pact that a university makes with its students is one that recognizes the students' concerns and the institution's concerns to be one and the same. We continue to produce the work that the academy applauds and flaunts, we should also possess the agency to question and adjust university-community interactions.

Every so often during the year, I return to the apartment complex where my parents still live, back past the tall white gate and the concrete wall. My privilege affords me the option to *decide* to return to a place many people cannot currently hope to leave. In this moment there is an opportunity to leverage my privilege by bringing back to my community the knowledge I have gained. I can equip the neighborhood's kids with the intellectual resources to be prepared to become competitive applicants to colleges such as mine. Even before I had the privilege of having my name tied to a top-ten university, I had the privilege of a family who did the best they could to prepare me to seize hold of such an opportunity. Now, with not only dreams and hopes but the experience, I am even more equipped than my parents were to be a direct line of support and mentorship to students looking to escape the cycle they were born into.

Nonetheless, even more important than preparing students to venture beyond walled-in communities such as mine is eliminating the presence of walls at all. With this education, I am now equipped with the language and agency to question the institutions that contour the possibilities for people who live in communities such as mine. Long after I have graduated from my university, I should be as committed, if not more committed, to dismantling the stark socioeconomic and racial stratification that allows others to access such educational opportunities so much more easily than others. I should never forget that communities such as my hometown and the neighborhoods that surround my university are continuously plagued by political, economic, and social forces that make it possible for a university valued at billions of

dollars to loom over them, but nearly impossible for them to benefit from. It is paramount that these communities be empowered with the agency to eventually not be places to escape, but homes to develop.

At the close of this past holiday break, my father drove me to the airport, past the white iron gate, past the concrete wall, away from the seclusion and invisibility, out of the silence. Ironically, while both he and I were physically beyond the enclosed apartment complex, only one of us was no longer as entrenched in the social and economic subjugation. My education is affording me an escape. I was getting out. My father would drop me off at the airport and return to our concrete enclave, still tethered by the chains that kept our family bound for years. He was still inside, and I am more than overjoyed at the possibility of bringing my family past the concrete wall with the opportunities this degree will afford me. However, escape is not liberation. True liberation will only occur when there is no longer something to escape, no longer an institutional bondage to fight. It will happen only when the school I attend is no longer a “penitentiary” but a resource to those who live around it. It comes when to be outside a realm does not come with a subtext of hopelessness to ever be able to breach the boundary that defines said realm and the space one occupies outside of it. I must be aware of this as I navigate the inner regions of one such realm, which has done well to reinforce the painful reality of living outside of it. My presence on campus alone is not the catalyst necessary to enact tangible and sustainable change on and around my college campus. I, and students like and unlike me, who have been afforded a great deal of intellectual power, must engage, critique, and challenge the institutional powers that be in order to dissolve the mortar and erode the bricks that make up these walls. To be inside one place and outside the other must no longer be a fate to bear, but a point from which to progress.

