White Privilege & My Experience at Hampshire

I arrived at Hampshire as part of the majority. I grew up a predominantly white area of the country and Hampshire was no different. While I can't speak for everyone, most white students don't often think about the issue of race. We don't have to. We're repulsed by overt racism but we don't often think about more insidious forms. They don't affect us directly.

But unlike my small town in northern New England, at Hampshire I was forced to confront issues of race head on. Controversies about the Cultural Center, issues surrounding the discussion of race in class, identity based mods. Within my first few weeks I was asked to think about these matters. It is uncomfortable when someone questions your privilege for the first time.

These discussions took me out of my comfort zone. I reacted by attempting to withdraw from all conversations about race.

This reaction is not rare at Hampshire. I vividly remember a class I took in my second year. We had finished reading Richard Wright's "Black Boy" and were supposed to discuss the work in class. There was only one African-American student in the class. He was the only person who talked during our short-lived "discussion." The rest of us were afraid of saying something that would offend him. Our professor sent us home early, clearly disgusted. He knew what was happening. It happens all the time. I don't know what the "right" way to react in this situation is. I just know that it was one of the first times I felt uncomfortable because of my race. It certainly taught me something – and isn't that what college is about?

Something else that happens all the time: white students claim that there isn't any racism on campus. As a first year I'm sure I had the same thought at one point or another. Hampshire is a progressive bastion, is it not? There can't be any racism here. Question that assumption. Don't let it lull you into complacency. Realize that Hampshire is NOT always the bubble you think it is. Racism exists at Hampshire. It is worth saying again: Racism Exists At Hampshire. Folks who argue against places like the Cultural Center and the existence of identity based mods will often say something like "Well, there isn't any racism at Hampshire. Why do students of color need a safe space to escape from something that doesn't exist?" Ask these folks about the graffiti in the Student Affairs office last year. Do they still think racism doesn't exist?

What's the main point of all this? People questioned my privilege – and yes, my white skin does give me privilege. I know that I had discussions with students of color during which I said naively offensive things. I was called out on these things. I listened and I learned and I was consequently less naïve. Yes, it was uncomfortable. But is that such a bad thing?
I've Heard it All Before...

My best friend and I look nothing alike. I am slightly taller than her, she is more dark-skinned than me, we speak in two respective inflections when angered: Brooklyn and South L.A. To this day, I am never sure what people mistook about each of us for the other: the almond eyes, the long straight hair? Or maybe it was because we reacted alike to these incidents: with long, purposeful glares.

The general sentiment among upper-Division students of color, as well as alums of color, is that the Hampshire community experiences a loosely-cyclical process of scandal and malcontent regarding racism, sexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression. These past two semesters constituted what many have deemed another “peak” year. There were incidents of hate, attempts to call out the administration, demands for resources, secret meetings in designated mods, coalition-building between representatives of the safe spaces on campus. With new faces and turnover throughout all of Hampshire’s offices, the sense of history, that we were re-living struggles from the past, trying to answer the same questions over again, was often lost among students, faculty, and staff alike.

What I have gleaned from conversations with other students of color, is that there is a general reluctance in acknowledging whiteness, wealth, heteronormativity, ableness [etc.] as privilege and most importantly, complicity, in various societal systems. Moreover, the “personal” that is my first paragraph, and the “political” (expressed in the second) are products of the same structure.

That is,

the high rate of retention among a consistently-small student of color population at Hampshire, the lack of a true and efficient policy regarding sexual assault in Non Satis Scire, and the inaccessibility of many campus spaces,

is connected to

my professors and classmates looking at me to contribute to their general knowledge of Chinese foreign policy and Asian-American struggle, that same best friend being called a “China Doll” and a “Panda Bear” in the Dakin Quad our first year, someone asking me why I bother to hold PASA meetings on the same night as “Anime Movie Appreciation Night,” or whatever, and the enduring idea that it is the responsibility of the Cultural Center (and the students who frequent it) to make white students comfortable in their safe space.

At my time at Hampshire, I’ve seen students become organizers, allies, activists, advocates, lobbyists, often shifting roles within the same day. I know that we are not the first, and will not be the last, to be excited, motivated, demanding, frustrated, burnt-out. Like others before us, we whispered and then we yelled.

If you could not hear us, take a minute and revel in the silence. The privilege of white silence.
"Hong Kong? Where's that?"
My Experience In and Outside the Classroom

Personally, I haven't really experienced anything severe concerning racism. But I have to say that most people at Hampshire (and I think that goes with many Americans in general) are very ignorant about places and cultures outside of the US. For instance, some people think that Hong Kong is in Japan; one guy even said, "Hong Kong? Where's that?", as if he'd never heard of the place before. In terms of culture, they obviously know very little about Hong Kong or China. Many would assume that Hong Kong is just another city in China (when it's a lot more complicated than that!), and they would have many assumptions about Chinese culture. However, I have to say that most people have been very pleasant about it - they would just ask questions and seek to know more politely.

My only experience where I'd been slightly uncomfortable was in my class "*****" where the professor had in some ways been unfair when talking about people of other cultures and ethnicities. I don't remember exact lines now, but I do remember America being portrayed as the only "right way" or "best way" and Middle Eastern and Russian culture being talked lightly about. He also asked my friend from China, and later myself, to go to the writing center after correcting a few punctuations and careless mistakes from our reading responses, claiming that English is our second language. My friend, when arriving at the writing center, was told that her writing was totally fine and they didn't see why the professor sent her there. I never made it to the writing center. I don't remember other exact examples, but this was a class in which I felt extremely conscious being an international student.
The (In?)-Ability to Study Abroad

I always knew I wanted to study internationally. The concept of experiencing and interacting with people and places and ideas rather than reading about them motivated me to initially choose my Div II focus and led me to complete an ethnographic, field-work-based Div 3 paper.

My family was and is middle-class. Not upper-middle class, like rich people say to make themselves feel better, or lower-middle class like my mom's friend who has never left her zip code. Suburban, with two not-paid-off cars, credit card debt and a re-mortgaged house middle class. Maybe someday we will be rich, but when I applied to Hampshire we were middle class, and I had always considered myself privileged to have traveled and be going to college.

Until I came to Hampshire, where I met rich people. Rich people who hopped down to South America for spring break, whose parents brought them cars when they came to visit, and who felt nervous about writing a resume because of the lack of high-school, summer and work-study jobs to put on it.

At times at Hampshire, I was made to feel like I couldn't do quite as much as those kids. One of those times was when I started thinking about studying abroad my second year. I was shocked to find the lack of accommodations for financial aid students. Instead, the lady I met with (who has now since left and maybe things are different, but my message is the same) informed me that I basically had two options for the type of semester program I wanted: Hampshire's small and competitive Cuba program and Hampshire's ally-program, the Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS). I could apply my financial aid award to those programs. But I shouldn't really even look at anything else, she said, because it was unrealistic. None of Hampshire's aid will apply to any other programs, not even 5-college programs and there are few scholarships and aid outside of Hampshire.

Indeed, all of my friends who have gone on other programs, such as the School for International Training (SIT) have had to pay all of it out of pocket, plus Hampshire exchange fees, regardless of their financial status. Since I'm sure that these issues I experienced are symptomatic of financial and political issues beyond Hampshire's control, and since I know that Hampshire do make scholarships available for Jan-term trips, I am not writing to bash Hampshire.

Rather I am writing to say that I did spend a wonderful semester in Nicaragua and Costa Rica with ICADS. I am writing as a word of encouragement to financial aid students who will study a language, for example, for four semesters, but not have the correct pronunciation down because they had to work over spring break. I am writing to say that studying abroad for (multiple) semester(s) is possible as a financial aid student.
Navigating Hampshire in a Wheelchair

I navigated Hampshire's campus in a wheelchair for 2 and a half years before graduation this past spring. Hampshire was the best place for me academically, but there is much more that could and should be done in regards to wheelchair accessibility. I always found Hampshire staff helpful with getting housing accommodations and access to classrooms, however, I also sensed that accessibility wasn't taken fully into account during campus planning. Gaining access into buildings and rooms is only the first step in wheelchair accessibility. The most frustrating situations I've come across at Hampshire have been as simple as a bathroom door that swing out. In such a situation, I can open the door to get in the bathroom, but cannot close the door in order to get the desired privacy I need. This is also true of bathroom stalls. Luckily, these problems can be easily fixed, and recently I, another Hampshire student in a similar situation and Joel Dansky, the accessibility coordinator at Hampshire, toured the campus taking note of heavy doors that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to gain entry to Greenwich mods, stairs leading up to the vast majority of Enfield mods, the lack of an accessible secondary fire exit to the accessible rooms in Dakin, places without curb cutouts and bathrooms that are accessible in name, or sign, but not in practice. Some of the problems noted in Joel's report of this tour have already been addressed, and I certainly saw many positive changes during my time at Hampshire.

I push a manual chair around and can easily open some doors. Other doors require more effort, but I still try to open the stupid things. There are people rolling around in wheelchairs with more and less physical abilities than I have. Hampshire needs to adopt a philosophy of universal accessibility to best provide for all individuals. Universal accessibility is more expensive than retrofitting just what needs to be changed for a specific student, but it's the only way to completely level the field for people in my situation. We all know that Hampshire is a small liberal arts college, with a less than endowment, but this shouldn't make accessibility less of a priority. Countless alumni and members of the greater Amherst community use Hampshire's resources, not to mention the 55+ retirees who may be moving into Veridian Village at Hampshire College. If current students and guests who use wheelchairs have difficulty navigating parts of campus and finding truly accessible bathrooms, how can we expect aging retirees to truly enjoy the benefits of living adjacent to our vibrant campus?
“Ableism is alive and well at Hampshire College”

Ableism is alive and well at Hampshire College. Although I have often been given support and accommodations in class because of my diagnosed, documented learning disability, I can’t count the amount of times I’ve heard the words, “Why don’t you just...” from students, professors, and others, outside of the classroom setting in regards to my organizational methods, illnesses I’ve had, my diet. “Why don’t you just organize your papers into binders? Why don’t you just keep your room clean so you can find things?” While I appreciate that these suggestions are usually meant in a friendly way, the phrase “Why don’t you just” implies that I haven’t properly thought through a problem, that I haven’t tried all available solutions, that I haven’t been dealing with my own brain, my own learning style, my own body, for my entire life, and that the solution is simple and universal. There is nothing more frustrating than having struggled against an ableist education system for my entire life, only to be told by an eager acquaintance that all of my problems can be solved if I just clean my room and use binders, like everyone else. At this point, it’s not worth explaining that I’ve tried those solutions many, many times, that because of my visual memory problems I don’t remember where things are if I can’t see them, that because of my sensory integration issues I can barely tolerate opening and closing the rings in binders. When people say “why don’t you just...” they’re not considering that I know myself better than they do, and that they have no right to tell me what I need to do to deal with my disability.

I really believe that the root of all ableism- the oppression and segregation of disabled people- comes from this “why don’t you just attitude,” this idea that able bodied or able brained people understand disabled people better than disabled people understand themselves, and that disabled people should be grateful to able people for showing them the right way to do things. The problems I’ve had with education in general come from teachers and administrators thinking that all I had to do was to learn, to act, to communicate, to eat, to move, and to be just like the other students in my class. Ending ableism at Hampshire will take more than wheelchair ramps, books on tape, and ASL interpreters. Ending ableism at Hampshire involves an entire attitude shift on the part of students, professors, and administrations.