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Welcome to the Sunken Place

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People of Color entering into the field of Student Affairs continue to face discrimination, racism, systematic oppression and microaggressions. The authors in this article aim to 1. highlight personal experiences, 2. relay some approaches that have paved way for folks within their positions to educate others who hold the power to make conscious decisions and changes for student affairs professionals, specifically People of Color. The article also references scenes from the movie, Get Out (Blum & Peele, 2017) which portrays Chris, a Black man, who is the protagonist and relate to the exploitation and isolation of many People of Color in the field today.

As People of Color [POC], we racially identify as Black, afro-Latinx, Asian, and Native American. We use symbolism from *Get Out* (Blum & Peele, 2017), “the sunken place” to speak to the realities we face in the field of student affairs (SA) as professionals of Color and graduate students alike at predominately white

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institutions (PWIs). We aim to shed light on the hypocrisies of higher education's ode to being socially just and inclusive. We address these hypocrisies by applying the symbolism found in the film to our experiences as professionals of color in student affairs. We write with the understanding that there are multiple truths to how POCs navigate SA, and we use these symbols to give voice to our lived experiences.

We hope that current and future SA professionals will engage our truths as counter-narratives in higher education as we speak to the dangers of respectability politics and professionalism.

Silver Spoon

Silver spoon, defined by Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (2018), is the premise that individuals are born with privilege and wealth which stems from the phrase "born with a silver spoon in their mouth." The Armitage family exemplifies the silver spoon expression through the passing of wealth (as well as knowledge) from the grandparents unto the parents of Rose and Jeremy and so on (Blum & Peele, 2017).

The power dynamics within an institution, reflected by Chris entering the house of Missy, exemplifies ownership and knowledge. Chris is new to the space just as we (prospective practitioners, specifically POC), may be new to the realm of student affairs and institutions. Institutions are not what [we] [1] own but what [we] pay into to 'move ahead' in the game of social mobility. In reality, the structures in place do not allow for social mobility to be achieved. Instead, institutions and systems perpetuate class divides. The same can be said for National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) as racial gaps persist throughout education, employment, and wealth.

As discrimination and disparities exist in society, they are perpetuated within higher education. Many may view higher education as the great equalizer that leads to social mobility through the falsehood of post-racial environment (Winkle-Wagner & Nelson, 2009). However, there is a deeper structural problem. Director Jordan Peele tweeted, "The Sunken Place means we're marginalized. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us" (Peele, 2017). In higher education, the sunken place is a symbol of the out-of-body experience that POC are exposed to when embarking on the journey to and in student affairs. *Get Out* embodies a satirical horror genre, but the humor is less of a joke to [us] as [we] are living through the realities of socio-political oppression and race relations on a day to day basis. These are exemplified by NASPA as it is the leading association for the advancement of

[1] *The brackets are intentionally put within the narrative to emphasis professionals of color. While these are experiences that a multitude of folks can relate to, we are intentionally focusing in on us, professionals of color.*

student affairs professionals (NASPA, 2017).

NASPA memberships can cost between \$37- \$242 depending on the positionality of the individual registering. NASPA conferences allow individuals from across the country or region to gather and engage with presentations that contribute to professional development and networking. But first, one is required to pay. When considering registration fees, travel, hotel, transportation, and food expenses, attending a regional conference could easily cost \$1,500. When considering prices, it is of note that Pew Research Center (2015) found that Blacks, on average, are twice as likely as whites to be low income or unemployed (\$43,300 to \$71,300 respectively).

NASPA, The Placement Exchange, and other conferences are for professional development and a way in which one can move ahead in the field of higher education and as a result socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, if institutions are not invested or cannot afford to assist students or young professionals in registering for these conferences, the opportunity to progress is limited. With NASPA comprising of more than 13,000 members, there is little data indicating the approximation of race or ethnicity percentages. Despite the lacking evidence, in a study done on the Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) for NASPA, out of 827 respondents to the survey, (76%) 633 were White (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Another study indicated that there is a rising number of students of color in higher education, but when looking at SA professions, the administration harbors a predominately white demographic of 80% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, 1999). These studies may not be all-encompassing, but they highlight the intersections of race and social capital within higher education.

What should be done?

- Undergraduates: there is a NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) which will open up doors for scholarships that will continue your professional and personal growth.
- Administration: seek out opportunities to provide professional development for marginalized populations
- Entry-level practitioners: propose the significant benefits of professional development furthering the growth of the department or join committees within your region in NASPA. There is potential to attend conferences for free, especially if you volunteer to be a coordinator.
- NASPA administrators: use your positionality to reach out to institutions and individuals that are not members and offer alternatives pathways to join or provide resources for professionals and prospective students that can attend to their growth and opportunities.

- NASPA administrators: reevaluate membership and conference costs, especially regarding a lack of representation of SA professionals of color.

White Women

Overt racism is not the only form of being racist. Racism, sexism, homophobia and other isms permeate the field of SA. Often, claiming to be social justice oriented, an ally and “woke” is accepted by folks without any pushback. Across campuses, you see Black Lives Matter signs, LGBTQ Advocate stickers, safe space pink triangles, and butterflies representing support for dreamers. These items are often interpreted as advocacy, knowledge, and action. My frustration with the abundance of these emblems of so-called “support” is that it is easy to purchase a sign and hang it for the world to see, but what are you as an individual, department, program, and institution doing every day to support individuals with these identities? What conversations are happening in classrooms, office spaces, and divisional meetings to unpack bias, explore tensions, and call folks in and out? How are SA professionals engaging in developing cultural competence and genuinely supporting our colleagues, who may already be feeling unwelcome and unsupported? From my experience in this field as a Woman of Color (WOC) and young professional, I have been harmed by older well-meaning white women who claim their allyship and hold titles of power but continue to replicate and perpetuate systems of oppression in the workplace.

As a WOC, and young professional in the field of student affairs, I am constantly reflecting on how I show up in the world and how my identities show up in the work I do. How are my actions and words affecting others and how can I continue to support my colleagues in ways they need and want? One common thread I keep coming back to is how much white people, specifically older white women in this field, are trusted, acknowledged and appreciated in comparison to our WOC colleagues. There have been instances in which I have found myself questioning my worth, value, and contributions to a system that so often makes me feel invisible. I know I have to work ten times harder, but I never understood what that truly meant until my first job. Being a young professional, I am often not taken seriously and viewed as incompetent. I have seen how white folks judgmentally react to me as I enter a meeting space, or share my position title. So often in this field, well-meaning white people acknowledge racism and the harm it causes, but they cannot quite see how they perpetuate these same systems of oppression (Caplan-Bricker, 2017).

In *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), Chris is on the phone with his friend Rod, who is a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agent. During their conversation, Rod is explaining to Chris how he was just reprimanded for patting down an elderly white woman, which is standard procedure and part of his job.

He alludes to the idea of white women not being viewed as a threat in society. This scene is a reminder that white people hold dominance in society and are rarely considered threatening. In a field that values advancement, I continually think about what opportunities are being offered and to whom. Due to white women not being perceived as threatening they have easier access to promotion while WOC get left behind. As a Woman of Color, I have had to ask for and validate the reasons for wanting specific professional development opportunities while other white colleagues have been encouraged to participate in various opportunities.

Dear white women in student affairs, you too are racist. Although you may be proud of the Black Lives Matter poster in your office, I urge you to think about how you could be hurting your WOC colleagues. Please stop touching my hair, thinking I represent my entire race, confusing me for the other Woman of Color in our department, and asking me to assume best intentions if I challenge your words or actions. When you think about who should be attending professional development opportunities, like conferences, think about who is doing the work that is closely related and not who you think should go because of your own internal bias. Just because someone is not an extrovert does not mean they do not want to engage with you. Advocacy is crucial to making POC feel seen and validated, so use the power that was bestowed upon you by the color of your skin to help WOC progress.

Sit in the discomfort and realize that one uncomfortable situation or interaction does not compare to a lifetime of it. Listen and believe when someone says you have hurt them and do not ignore it, address the issue. Not being viewed as threatening is a privilege that you as a white woman have in this world. Acknowledge it and realize that this privilege brings with it opportunities and networks that are not afforded to others (Piazza, 2016). White women are often able to navigate the world with privilege that has been afforded to them such as networking opportunities. POC, however, often miss that opportunity due to centuries of systematic oppression and exclusion.

Silenced Student Affairs Servants

Although white women are often awarded the privilege of not being easily viewed as a threat, POC experience the opposite and speaking up may lead to more harm than good. As an example I focus on the Armitages' Black servants, connecting them to staff and faculty of Color in higher education. *Get Out* centers Chris' experience as he visits Rose's family and how isolated he feels as their "only" Black guest. He attempts to find community with the other Black folks, but when he asks about their experiences with the Armitages, he receives stifled responses. As a POC who had attended more than one PWI, I also longed for some levels of affinity

with folks who hold similar identities to help me as navigate these white spaces. ‘All skinfolk ain’t kinfolk’ was a lesson I learned very early in life and understood to mean that not everyone who shared my identities had my best interest at heart

Being the only POC in a predominately white space can feel isolating and add a layer of anxiety or discomfort to one’s already stressful experience. The racial tensions Chris experiences as the only Black guest at the Armitages’ social event corresponds with students of Color in hostile campus climates. Once he finds Logan, another black guest, he immediately feels a sense of relief, until it backfires when Logan mentions to his white wife, “Chris was just telling me how he felt much more comfortable with my being here,” and walks off. The Armitages’ event has a rich history tied to their guests making POC feel uncomfortable in spaces not created for or adapted to fit their needs, similar to institutions with traditions rooted in racism. This is why mentorship is essential in supporting students with marginalized identities.

Mentorship is a process, and so open and honest communication with students on issues that affect them helps alleviate much of this anxiety. When high-level practitioners of Color are silenced, that act reinforces the idea of tokenism and that POC are to be seen and not heard. Although there are privacy policies that prevent practitioners and faculty from sharing information, when students of Color ask about specific issues, they are met with a half-baked response. Discretion is key for safety, but at certain institutions, reputation is more important than being honest and transparent with students and colleagues, especially with issues that negatively impact them. In the movie, Georgina and Chris speak briefly about how she misplaced his phone, in their conversation most of what she says feels rehearsed as if she knows someone is watching. In another interaction, Chris asks Georgina if she ever feels uncomfortable being the housekeeper for Rose’s family, and while her mouth says no, tears immediately fall down her face. Tying this back to higher education, practitioners may feel obligated not to share their own negative experiences, but a student can see when their mentor or someone they look up to is hurting. As students look to us to support them, [we] must also lean on them for support when [we] need it, especially in spaces where [we] feel exhausted and are lacking affinity.

The Sunken Place

The sunken place is a space of complete incapacitation. The individual becomes a passenger within their own body, unable to speak or move. They are at the complete and total control of those who have sent them there. As I begin my pathway into SA, I often question, am I walking into education’s metaphorical sunken place? Even as a first semester graduate student, there were numerous instances where I was asked to be silent and idle as I watched instances of inequity occur around

me. Whether it is because of campus politics, standards of professionalism, or the fact that people do not care what a first-year graduate student has to say, many times this semester I begrudgingly stepped foot into the sunken place.

Within education, it is often stated that institutions slowly change, referring to the inertia of traditions, cultures, and policies, which often inhibits the progress of an institution. However, it is not institutions that change slowly, it is the people who inhabit positions within higher education who either refuse to change or sit idle in complacency. This idleness is akin to the sunken place. Within it, professionals stand idly by as they watch: Students of Color protest against racist policies; non-binary and trans* students fight for inclusive restrooms and housing options, and undocumented students fight for their right to education; to name a few. Within higher education, we espouse values of being student-centered, but when those students speak their needs, we, as student affairs professionals, drag our feet to respond, make a decision, and take action [2].

An example of this was the 2015-16 protest at the University of Missouri Columbia (Mizzou). Students of Color at Mizzou underwent years of racial bias, discrimination, and injustice. For instance, in 2010 two white students scattered cotton balls outside of the the Black cultural center (CNN, n.d). In 2014, individuals shouted racial slurs from the back of a pickup truck at the student government president, Payton Head. In that same year, a white student disrupted an African American student organization and used various racial slurs when asked to leave. Incident after incident occurred on Mizzou's campus and the institution was either stuck in inaction or too deep within their sunken place to make meaningful change. The aftermath of this incident was the resignation of the University of Missouri System President, Tim Wolfe, and Mizzou, to this day, struggles to keep residence halls open as the enrollment numbers drastically declined (CNN, n.d).

The cost of residing within one's sunken place is high. With student activism and protest on an uptick, it is becoming increasingly more important for student affairs professionals to meet the needs of their student populations. In order to accomplish that goal, student affairs professionals need to wake up from the sunken place and take action. In order to facilitate that process, student affairs professionals must begin to work against what Bowen and Blackman (2003) refer to as the spiral of silence. The spiral of silence argues that as interpersonal support for an opinion drops, fewer people are willing to express said opinion and the inverse is also true. Student affairs professionals must recognize the necessity of creating positive spirals of discourse. Opening up the opportunity and the space by which

[2] *HigherEd Today found that in response to student demanded action steps for racial climate improvement most institutions had no forthcoming plans in place to meet these demands. (Espinosa, Chessman, & Wrayt, 2016; Chessman & Wrayt, 2016)*

individuals feel supported and validated in their opinion to offer deviant opinions and thoughts. This can be accomplished by a variety of measures such as:

- Regular series of division-wide diversity training
- Beginning staff meetings by discussing current issues of inequity affecting your students
- Promoting a culture of inclusive and equitable practices
- Starting a departmental readings list of scholars speaking on topics of equity and inclusion
- Integrating inclusion and equity as core tenets of the department

By engaging with these actions and more, student affairs professionals work to create the environment by which individuals can feel empowered to step out of the sunken place as bystanders to various instances of injustice and inequity and take action to make meaningful change to improve the lives of marginalized student populations.

Conclusion

As writers, we chose to use different pieces in the film *Get Out* as metaphors to name some of the issues [we] face in student affairs as young professionals of Color. Additionally, there are times when our intersecting identities also provide another layer to how [we] experience systematic oppression and microaggressions. We are hopeful that these counter-narratives about resisting dominant norms of whiteness within higher education will empower current and future practitioners of Color to name their experiences with folks who caused them harm in some way or another. Healing is not a linear process, and this was one way [we], as young professionals of Color, found solace in telling our stories. Looking forward, [we] will continue to disrupt the spaces in student affairs that repeatedly reinforce the notions that higher education was never created for us. [We] will continue to find ways to hold space for one another as marginalized folks and seek transformation in the field collectively. We hope that these narratives can serve as the underpinnings of a call to action. Action will look different for everyone, but SA professionals owe it to the field, its students, and its practitioners to face the injustices that occur in conjunction to our ode of challenging oppressive norms.

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