

THE STRUGGLE OF WOMEN
OF COLOR AT
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
INSTITUTIONS

CAMERON W.

THE OXBOW SCHOOL



This series captures the struggle of being a woman of color in a predominately white institution.

The first painting (painted in the colors of the Dominican flag) features a Dominican adolescent named Marianelys who attends a diverse public school in Boston, Massachusetts. She was nervous about coming to Oxbow, because she knew that it was a predominately white institution and wasn't sure if she would feel comfortable in this kind of environment. During her time at Oxbow she has realized that she can thrive in a predominately white environment; however, she often feels like she cannot share her Dominican culture with members of the community, because when she has tried to do this people often reject or mock parts of her culture, such as music and the Spanish language. Although she admits that this is frustrating, she also realizes that women of color often face these issues when in predominantly white environments.

The second painting features a Afro-Latina named Isabella Ali who attends Fieldston, a predominately white school located in Riverdale, Bronx. Riverdale is an affluent section of the Bronx, which has a predominantly white and Jewish population; Isabella is sitting on a school bus on the way to school, it takes her two hours on public transportation to get to school. She lives in a predominantly black neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, which is very different from Riverdale. Isabella has been attending Fieldston since kindergarten and has not always felt comfortable in this environment. Like many women of color at Fieldston, she often feels like her presence as a woman of color is not valued. However, she continues to stay at Fieldston because of the great opportunities it has to offer.

The third painting displays a ten year old black girl still struggling to find her true identity; this girl is me. I also attend Fieldston and have been since I was four years old. For the majority of my academic career I felt uncomfortable with my identity as a black girl. I often tried to be like my white classmates by dressing like they did and by straightening my hair, rarely wearing it in its natural state. Being around an overwhelming amount of white privilege and socioeconomic privilege often caused me to shut down emotionally and to feel very out of place. I only started to feel comfortable with my identity at the end of middle school and, to this day, I still don't feel completely comfortable at Fieldston. Like Isabella, I stayed at Fieldston, because of the opportunities it opens up for me.

Cameron W.

New Rochelle, New York

This is a summary of my personal experience at a predominately white institution (PWI). The point of this narrative is to give myself a chance to tell my experience at a PWI. Many students of color experience similar upsetting realities that we have to live with. It will also give white people insight on what it is like to go to a PWI as a woman of color. This narrative does not sugarcoat how difficult it can be for women of color at PWIs, especially since we are often targeted for our gender and race. These are personal experiences and I realize that they may differ from other women of color's experiences.

My experience at a Predominantly White Institution:

For the first seven years of my life I lived in Mount Vernon, New York which is a predominantly black and middle-class neighborhood in West Chester County. Although the neighborhood was great socially, the public schools were not very good academically. My parents felt like private school would be a better option. My mother went to public school in New York City and my father went to private school in Boston. My mom at the time agreed that the Mount Vernon public schools were not a good fit, but was hesitant to send me to private school especially, because of how expensive they can be in New York. My parents looked at a few schools such as Rye Country Day and the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. When I was four years old I was accepted to Fieldston and Rye Country Day. Fieldston is located in Riverdale, New York. Riverdale is an affluent section of the Bronx, which has a predominantly white and Jewish population. “As of the 2000 census, there were 47,850 people residing in Riverdale. The population density was 19,997 per square mile (7,724/km²). The racial makeup of the neighborhood was 78.74% White (71.89% White Non-Hispanic), 5.36% Asian, 0.05% Pacific Islander, 7.66% Black, 0.16% Native American, 4.85% from other races, and 3.18% from two or more races.”¹ Fieldston is also a predominantly white and is an elite institution that attracts a similar demographic. Fieldston prides itself on being a diverse and inclusive private school. The core values of the school are Ethical learning, Academic Intelligence, and Progressive Education. Part of the mission statement states “We value inclusion as well as economic and racial diversity. We honor all of our students for their unique contributions, cultural background, and beliefs.”² This mission statement and the values of my school were very attractive to my parents when looking at private schools, because even though they wanted me to get a good education, they also wanted me to feel included socially.

As a small child my parents made me very aware of the fact that I am black and that I would have a different experience than many of my friends when in predominantly white environments. I often disregarded my black identity and instead I chose to believe that everyone is the same. I first realized this wasn't true at Fieldston in third grade when we started swimming in the Upper School athletic building during gym. Swimming was very exciting for most students including me, but one day the teachers announced that we would be swimming the next gym class. Everyone immediately started talking about what bathing suits they were going to wear and how they were so excited to bring their favorite towels. Meanwhile, all I could think about was how I had just gotten my hair straightened and how annoyed my mom was going to be when she found out. That evening when I told my mom all she could do was shake her head and say, “Of course they had to wait until the last minute.” Then she looked at me with pity and said, “I'm sorry Cameron you can't get you hair braided until the weekend. You'll have to wait until next week to swim, I can write you a note if you need it.” The next day everyone changed into their bathing suits and I noticed only a few people were sitting out of gym. I looked and realized all three of them were black; two also had their hair straightened and one had braids with colorful beads. The girl with beads looked at me and said, “I hate how we have to miss out on fun things just because we're different.” At first I looked at her and was shocked, but then I nodded my head in agreement and tried to look away so she wouldn't see the tears running down

¹ <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Riverdale-Bronx-NY.html>

² <https://www.ecfs.org/about-ecfs/mission>

my face. Later that day my friends asked me why I didn't swim. I didn't respond. I just looked at them and said, "You wouldn't understand, I'm different."³ This story is a great representation of how Fieldston wasn't always aware of cultural differences which would, in turn, just make me hyper aware of the black identity that I was still growing into.

As I kid, I hyper-analyzed everything and these sort of events made me question why I *had* to be different. "Why do can't I just be like all the other kids?" "Why can't I just blend in with everyone else." I often wondered. This caused me to see "...white people as normal and I even wanted to be white for a while, because I thought it would be easier. At the beginning of my middle school career I would often try to fit in with the white girls by similar wearing clothes as them."⁴ I started only shopping at stores like Brandy Melville, Lululemon and Lester's. Brandy Melville is a store that has a demographic of young white girls who can afford to spend \$20 on a t-shirt. Lululemon is an upscale athletic store that sells leggings for \$100 and headbands for workout shirts for \$60. Lesters is a children's designer store that sells brands such as Splendid, Canada Goose, and Hunter. When I started at these stores started getting complimented on my outfits by these same white girls. This made me more inclined to buy most of my clothes from these stores. For almost all of sixth grade I wore a Brandy Melville shirt and Lululemon leggings: "Yes, I'm black but look at how much we have in common. It's OK to be friends with me!"⁵ At first it worked, I started to get many compliments from the white girls in my grade which would often help start a conversation. I tried to use clothes and straightening my hair all the time, never wearing it in its natural as a way to distract from my race, but it was always a factor. Many of the white girls would ask me stuff like, "Can you twerk?" or, "Wow your hair is really cool! Can I touch it?!" Aside from talking about clothes and having to answer frustrating and obnoxious questions about my blackness, I realized I didn't have much in common with them or anything else to talk about. I started talking to other people about my actual interests, such as art.

During my later middle school years I started to become friends with more kids of color in school and at my camp. I started finding more common interests with them and started to feel like I fit in somewhere. This helped me accept the fact that I would never be white and that white people are not *normal*; they are just *different*. As I continued to grow comfortable with my black identity I started to learn about how difficult it can be to be black. This was around the same time that police brutality came to light and started being shown in the media. This is also when the Black Lives Matter movement started to form and protests started to occur. At my school a group of students, mostly students of color decided to organize our own Black Lives Matter protest. The first we did was make posters and put them on everyone's locker. The next day when everyone saw the posters the locker we received a lot of positive feedback from teachers and students. A few students took the posters off of their own lockers, which was disappointing, but they have the right to their opinion. However, two girls decided to cross out black on all of the posters and write all so that the poster now read "all lives matter." Many people including were upset by this, because we felt it was disrespectful. The who vandalized the poster said that all lives should matter and that the black men "getting shot by police were breaking the law." She believed she had done nothing wrong and didn't seem to care that people were hurt by her actions. During the actual protest this same student watched the protest, but did not participate

³ Whiteness Reflection #2 by Cameron Williams

⁴ Whiteness Reflection #1 by Cameron Williams

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/codeswitching-while-black-at-work_us_5aa2b7dce4b07047bec60c5c

and instead was laughing and playing loud music during it. This girl was someone who I would have wished I could be like a year ago. She had great style, had pretty green eyes, and was white. When I realized how shallow and desperate I was to fit in with white people it made me sad and angry. I hated that white people had ever had this kind of power over me. I had noticed how they treated a black girl who was proud of being black, this made me uneasy and made it even harder for me to be comfortable with myself. Towards the end of middle school I realized that white people do have privileges and sometimes think they are better than people of color. I started to believe that most white people are active racists. This made me feel very unsafe when in Fieldston environments and hyper aware of my blackness. This caused me to actively shut down when interacting with my white peers during the beginning of Freshman year. Although detaching myself from many of my peers helped me spend more time to focus on my academics, I often felt very isolated and couldn't wait to leave school. I started to notice more signs of people being racist, even in my classes.

During Freshman year we watched a video about race and, more specifically, whiteness. The definition of whiteness continues to change “over time, shifting to accommodate the demands of social change. Before the mid-19th century, the existence of more than one white race was commonly accepted, in popular culture and scholarship. Indeed, there were several. [For example] many people in the United States were seen as white — and could vote (if they were adult white men) — but were nonetheless classified as inferior (or superior) white races. Irish-Americans present one example.”⁶ Although the definition of whiteness continues to evolve one part of its definition does not, this is privilege. I believe that white people should acknowledge their privilege so that as a society we can work towards “The “abolition” of white privilege can be an additional component of identity (not a replacement for it), one that embeds social justice in its meaning”⁷

When discussing this video as a class, one of the white students explained how “eloquent” Toni Morrison was when she spoke. The student was displaying forms of whiteness, because he was surprised that a black woman could be so educated and spoke so articulately. This student was also displaying signs of whiteness and male privilege, because he was a 14 year old male believing that he could decide whether or not a 80 year old black woman was intelligent or not. It was also just an ignorant comment considering she is a well known writer. These kind of comments really bothered me at the time, because as a black woman I often feel like I am not taken seriously in class unless I am very articulate and provide neutral commentary. This is because I know that as a black woman I am seen as aggressive and outspoken which is why in these situations I often felt as if I couldn't speak out; especially when racism and signs of whiteness were coming from teachers.

In my sophomore English class we watched the movie, *12 Years a Slave*. I was somewhat excited to see the movie in class, because I had seen it before, but wanted a chance to discuss it. I was also very worried, because I was the only black person in the class and the end of the movie can give a somewhat distorted view of slavery if it is not talked about, because the movie has a happy ending which can cause people to believe that slavery wasn't *that* bad. Also at the end of the movie Solomon (the main character) is rescued by his white friend from the north. This helps perpetuate the white savior aspect. Before we started watching the movie, my white English teacher explained how the movie had some “graphic scenes,” but that we would talk about them.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/what-is-whiteness.html>

⁷ *ibid*

As soon as we started watching the movie, many of my white peers started to gasp and shake their heads, this was a little annoying to me, but I can now recognize this as whiteness because they were able to be so sheltered from brutal slavery. As we continued to watch and the “graphic scenes” were displayed students started to cover their eyes, this made me uncomfortable, but once again it was a form of whiteness, because they were choosing to “leave” the conversation. At the end of the movie many students walked out of the classroom saying how it was such a sad movie. The next day in class we did not discuss the movie, I asked my teacher at the end of class when we would. He said that we would talk about it after we finished an essay he was about to assign. We ended up never discussing the movie, which wasn’t too surprising to me, but was upsetting. This was a sign of whiteness but my teacher was able to put this heavy conversation on the back burner knowing that not many students would care. These kind of events happen all of the time and nothing gets done, because they are not seen as one of the school’s priorities.

I expressed my frustration with the administration at a school walkout rally that was organized after a few seniors “brought seven watermelons to campus, leaving three in the office of Marie R. Johnson, a Dean and History Teacher at the school, as well as one in a white teacher’s office and three others elsewhere at the school, the spokesman said. An uproar ensued.”⁸ The seniors claimed that they didn’t know about the negative racial implications of watermelons. This was disturbing to hear, because either the students were lying or they really were ignorant when it came to basic stereotypes. At the rally many students spoke out about the racism they face on campus everyday. The common themes were feeling like you have to prove that you belong at an institution like Fieldston and feeling like you never learn about your own history. The women of color who spoke mostly talked about feeling out of place, feeling disregarded and like they are not seen as individual beings. When I spoke at the rally I talked about how many white students chose to back away from conversations about race whereas students of color, like myself, have been forced to talk about race in order to survive in the Fieldston environment. Many students of color came up to me afterward, thanking me for speaking up. Many white students came up to me trying to be understanding, but instead started to just display signs of white guilt. They did this by saying things like, “I’m so sorry you don’t feel safe at Fieldston, I couldn’t even imagine how that would feel.” After the rally, Students Demanding Intersectional Equality (SIDE) formed and started to serve as a platform for students of color to be heard by the administrators at Fieldston. I attended the meetings and decided to become a co-leader of a club, Students United for Multicultural Education (SUME). SUME is a club where we discuss and strive to interrupt whiteness at Fieldston and help students get a diverse education.

Fieldston has a club fair every year. At the beginning of Junior year while standing at the SUME table I noticed many white upperclassman looked at our table, but quickly after reading our sign hurried away. This was not surprising to me, but sad to see. “Even one of my white friends asked me about what SUME meant, after I explained it to her she gave me a nervous smile and tried to change the subject. I immediately stopped her and said “SUME isn’t just for people of color, we want white people to join too.” She smiled nervously again, but this time started filling out the sign up sheet. Although I was happy she signed up, I was still disappointed with her initial reaction. She and I have talked about race and particularly white privilege many times; she seems to understand her own white privilege very well. This is what made me so

⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/watermelon-gag-raises-concerns-at-bronx-school-1464391976>

disappointed, because it displayed that even white people who know a lot about race can still show signs of racism, by choosing to opt out of difficult conversations.”⁹ This was an example of the kind of privilege I said occurs at Fieldston during the rally. Since I was now an upperclassmen at Fieldston I didn’t internalize these issues as much as I did in middle school and the beginning of high school. At the club fair I saw a lot of people of color who were underclassmen who reminded me of my younger self. A lot of them did not sign up for SUME. One black freshman looked at her two white friends and pointed at my table. The three of them asked me to explain SUME. After giving them the same definition I had just given my friend, the two white girls looked nervous. The black girl looked very interested, but then nervously looked at her friends for approval; after reading her white friends’ expressions, they all nodded in agreement and hurried away. When I talked to some of the leaders of *Diaspora* (which another club at my school that mostly attracts students of color) they said they noticed the same thing. We all noticed that many of the underclassmen seemed more integrated than the junior and senior grades. “As I explained earlier, many of the white students didn’t feel comfortable joining SUME and many of them just followed each other. So in simple terms the students weren’t signing up for SUME, because their white friends weren’t interested. This made me sad, because I, in some way, could relate to the students of color who are underclassmen, because they just wanted to fit in. In middle school, I struggled with this a lot. This was another sign of whiteness to me, because the white students were intentionally and/or unintentionally preventing their friends of color from learning about race. Of course the students of color have their own ideas and can make their own decisions, but this is very difficult since they are often outnumbered”¹⁰ and feel the need to fit in. Although I was disappointed I realize that I would have done the same thing a few years ago.

Now that I only have one more year at Fieldston I feel like I have discovered all of the tools to thrive at a PWI as a women of color. I also have learned that going to a school like Fieldston is a privilege, but also a sacrifice in many ways. I am getting a great education and I have been exposed to many different opportunities that I otherwise wouldn’t have known about. Unfortunately, growing up at a predominantly white institution caused me to often feel very uncomfortable with my blackness, which would cause me to feel very self-conscious about myself. Being around an overwhelming amount of white privilege and socioeconomic privilege often caused me to shut down emotionally and to feel very out of place. Women of color should not have to choose getting an amazing education over their mental health and social skills. This is not only a reality for Fieldston or New York private school women of color. This happens all over the country in academic spaces especially in predominantly white colleges. I realize that as a black women I will continue to disrupt white spaces throughout life; in a predominantly white college and in a predominately white work environment. Being at Fieldston has helped me learn how to survive in white spaces and learn to love my identity. Some of the lessons that I have learned at Fieldston will be important to remember as I begin to transition into adulthood.

⁹ Whiteness reflection #5 Cameron Williams

¹⁰ Whiteness Reflection #5 Cameron Williams

Bibliography:

“School Name.” *Mission - Ethical Culture Fieldston School*, www.ecfs.org/about-ecfs/mission.

Hollander, Sophia. “Watermelon Gag Raises Concerns at Bronx School.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 27 May 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/watermelon-gag-raises-concerns-at-bronx-school-1464391976.

Shante, D. “I’m Exhausted From Trying To Be The ‘Right’ Kind Of Black Girl At Work.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 Mar. 2018, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/codeswitching-while-black-at-work_us_5aa2b7dce4b07047bec60c5c.

Ignatiev, Noel. “Whiteness and Class Struggle.” *Historical Materialism*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2003, pp. 227–235., doi:10.1163/156920603322889286.

Cameron, Williams. “Whiteness Reflection #1-2 and 5”