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EMBODIED CAMPUS GEOGRAPHIES:  
REHABILITATING “SAFE SPACE” AS A THRESHOLD CONDITION FOR  
TRANSFORMATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION WITH SUBALTERN STUDENTS

Dissertation  
By  
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## **Abstract**

Embodied Campus Geographies:

Rehabilitating “Safe Space” as a Threshold Condition for Transformative Higher Education

with Subaltern Students

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The heightened use of “safe space” in educational settings has been the subject of polarizing contemporary controversy and protested by conservative and progressive camps alike, raising concerns about whether “safe space” remains an educationally viable concept. In response to claims that safety is conflated with “coddling” students, censoring unpopular speech, or reinforcing privilege, this dissertation argues that safe spaces signify enduring pursuits of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education that are too important to be abandoned. Instead, this interdisciplinary, mixed methods project considers how safe spaces can be rehabilitated to best serve subaltern undergraduate students. Informed by the experiences of six of my former students, I investigate how predominantly White institutions (PWI), like Boston College, can be rehabilitated as places where risky, transformative education is possible. By integrating situated educational philosophy and participatory design research (PDR) that features artistic and embodied methods of relationality (self-portraits, walks, and interactive workshops), I offer a spatial turn in the safe space debates that reveals the ideologically laden ‘normative geography’ of university campuses. Attuning to safe space controversies as spatial struggles uncovers who and what is positioned as “in place” or “out of place” on campus, as well as subaltern students’ transgressive acts of place-making—the quotidian tactics of making a hostile place more habitable for themselves. My dissertation

therefore culminates by proposing a risky model of higher education, inspired by Judith Butler's proposal of ethical formation, that insists on a collective responsibility for inclusive campus place-making. In this iterative framework, safety serves not as a barrier to risk, but as a crucial, co-constructed threshold condition that makes educative risk-taking possible for all students.

## Acknowledgements

I have been irrevocably captivated by lines. Not necessarily by the straight and rigid sort, nor the ones that constrain and force a(line)ment, but by the ones traced by meandering paths, following the kinks and crooks of textured threads or rebellious and less-trodden trails. Tim Ingold has attuned me to the wisdom that “to study both people and things is to study the lines they are made of,” and the “paths of growth and movement” that make up a person or a dissertation are rarely tidy.<sup>1</sup> My lines certainly aren’t, but I am proud of my particular entanglement, for they/I “carry the trace” of many:<sup>2</sup>

**Chris Higgins,** traces of your influence on me show up everywhere in this dissertation, which is only one small part of your imprint on me. I am grateful for the ways that you graciously apprenticed me into the discipline of philosophy, offering me a guiding path, even while nurturing the resistant spirit in me to make the line fit the contours of my own questions and sensibilities. You modeled for me the expansive possibility of writing—the satisfaction in finding precisely the right word to capture my thoughts, experimenting with wordplay such that my voice shows up on the page, and drawing on whatever source of inspiration makes the argument sing, whether that is a poem, a bumper sticker, or a walk.<sup>3</sup> You have walked with me: listened intently as I questioned whether philosophy was the right fit for me that first semester in Illinois, taught beside me as a novice teacher still trying to find my way, and dialogued with me through many splutters and starts about “safe space” over nearly six years. They say that you can’t expect your advisor (or anyone) to be everything, all at once; but you come pretty close—my toughest and simultaneously most

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.


<sup>2</sup> Shirin Vossoughi et al., “Embodied Pathways and Ethical Trails: Studying Learning in and through Relational Histories,” *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 29, no. 2 (March 14, 2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1693380>.

<sup>3</sup> Not to mention attuning me to the power and potential of the humble footnote!

praising critic, a generous opportunity-giver, my trusted advisor willing to go to bat for me, my occasional confidant, a mentor teacher extraordinaire, a writing role model, and a lifelong collaborator. Thank you.

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some of my fiercest champions and have helped me to mold my commitments to social justice. Stephanie, Seamus, and Kelly, thank you for nurturing in me an enduring love of philosophy and serving as some of my first models for what a life in academia might look like.

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## INTRO-LUDE ONE

### My way in

My way into this debate was as an earnest and naive safe space practitioner, proudly displaying my stance like a sticker on the door:

Welcome!

*In this safe space:*

*you can count on me to take responsibility for building inclusive norms (but I still need your help)*

*you are free to take risks and be vulnerable*

*you can express all of the different sides of yourself here*

*we try and resist/rupture the precarious and oppressive conditions foisted upon us*

I stumbled into the controversy, unaware that “safe space” was open for debate. Yet I quickly learned that my sticker was not the only characterization.

Warning!

*In safe spaces:*

*“college students run crying to Daddy administrator”<sup>4</sup>*

*democratic dialogue, deliberation, and free speech are suppressed<sup>5</sup>*

*“students behave like bullies even as they see themselves as victims”<sup>6</sup>*

*students are “coddled,” by “demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t like”<sup>7</sup>*

Wait, *were* my actions anti-democratic? Was I inadvertently constraining crucial dialogue about difference, if I did not tolerate hateful or ignorant contributions?

Caution!

*In safe spaces:*

*educators “cannot offer less privileged students safety...nor should [they] try. It is a function of [their] privilege that [they] thought they ever could.”<sup>8</sup>*

*“the language of safety may actually encourage entrenchment in privilege” for dominant groups<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Rampell, “College Students Run Crying to Daddy Administrator,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2016, sec. Opinions, [https://www.washingtonpost-com.proxy.bc.edu/opinions/college-students-run-crying-to-daddy-administrator/2016/05/19/61b53f54-1deb-11e6-9c81-4be1c14fb8c8\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d55860b2bd58](https://www.washingtonpost-com.proxy.bc.edu/opinions/college-students-run-crying-to-daddy-administrator/2016/05/19/61b53f54-1deb-11e6-9c81-4be1c14fb8c8_story.html?utm_term=.d55860b2bd58).

<sup>5</sup> Committee on Freedom of Expression, “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression” (University of Chicago, 2014); Jonathan Zimmerman, “College Campuses Should Not Be Safe Spaces,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 2019, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/College-Campuses-Should-Not-Be/245505>.

<sup>6</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “The New Intolerance of Student Activism,” *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/the-new-intolerance-of-student-activism-at-yale/414810/>.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeannie Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 15, no. 1 (2004): 45.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 140.

*the “metaphor drains from classroom life every impulse toward critical reflection”<sup>10</sup>  
absolute safety is impossible<sup>11</sup>*

Was my stance not ameliorating exclusion but instead, reinforcing privilege?  
Was it my own privilege and arrogance at work in promising safety for students when it was  
not at all possible to achieve?

I peeled off my declaration of “safe space”  
while in pursuit of the personal questions that have been raised in this encounter.

*What sense can I make out of this minefield of conflicting viewpoints?  
Whose help do I need?  
What do I believe?  
What do I do (now)?*

This dissertation traces one path that resulted from facing these live, pressing questions with  
my students.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Boostrom, “‘Safe Spaces’: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30, no. 4 (July 1998): 406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/002202798183549>.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, New edition (New York: Routledge, 1989).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*"This is a safe space."* You can find this phrase emboldened on a rainbow background and fixed on the doors of faculty and staff offices. Workshop facilitators use "safe space norms" to establish ground rules for their sessions. Various campus departments, like cultural centers or affinity spaces, embed the language of "safe space" into their mission statement, declaring safety of minoritized students a priority. I, myself, have used the term "safe space" to signal to my students that I take responsibility for fostering an inclusive learning environment. However, the ubiquity of the phrase does not signal its widespread acceptance. Far from it, safe space shares notoriety with other policies like trigger warnings, which occupy a kind of warzone within higher education. These policies have been subject to accusations of coddling "hypersensitive" students and reinforcing a democracy-threatening "politically correct" culture in the past decade. Most notably, safe space has become a target for free speech defenders, lambasting the notion of inclusivity as a smokescreen for stifling academic freedom and democratic dialogue.<sup>12</sup> According to its critics, the norms and expectations of safe space hamstring the potential for reasoned disagreement, marginalizing unpopular opinions or controversial ideas.

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<sup>12</sup> Examples illustrating the controversy over safe space are prolific in the popular media. Here are a sample of texts that can give some context, but note that the literature review will cover many more in greater detail: Robert Boyers. "How 'Safe Spaces' Stifle Ideas." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 62, no. 27 (2016), <http://www.chronicle.com/article/how-safe-spaces-stifle-ideas/>; Sophie Downes. "Opinion | Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces and Free Speech, Too." *The New York Times* (2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/opinion/trigger-warnings-safe-spaces-and-free-speech-too.html>; Conor Friedersdorf. "How Political Correctness Chills Speech on Campus." *The Atlantic* (2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/what-it-looks-like-when-political-correctness-chills-speech-on-campus/497387/>.

The widespread media coverage and polarizing stances about safe space clearly gestures toward a contemporary controversy in education. However, it would be a mischaracterization to reduce the debate about safe space to a hot button issue, destined to lose its limelight over time, or to mere quibbles over trivial language or politically correct speech. Instead, I echo critical curriculum theorist Michael Apple, who reminds us to take seriously the significance of conflicts about educational issues. “Discussions about what does, can, and should go on in classrooms are not the logical equivalent of conversations about the weather,” Apple contends, “they are fundamentally about the hopes, dreams, fears, and realities—the very lives—of children, parents, and teachers. If this isn’t worth our best efforts—intellectual and practical—then nothing is.”<sup>13</sup> This dissertation is an attempt to explicate the values, ideologies, and consequences undergirding the safe space debate by anchoring it as part of the larger movement prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education.

The university, as a colonizer site that has historically excluded women, low-income students, people of Color, and non-Christians, there is much DEI work that needs to be done to address this pernicious legacy of exclusion.<sup>14</sup> Despite its trivialization by the media and critics, calls for safe spaces in higher education are not just complaints from “sanctimonious, sensitive, supercilious snowflakes,” as former Attorney General Jeff

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<sup>13</sup> Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, Third (New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), xix.

<sup>14</sup> *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges* and *A History of American Higher Education* chronicle a comprehensive overview of the history of American higher education, in which the student population was limited to males being trained for ministry and later, “aspiring gentlemen.” Postcolonial theory also explicates the ways in which universities fit into the larger geography of colonial domination. Given the ways indigenous peoples have been misrecognized as “savage,” their lands have often been deemed ‘blank spaces’ for colonial rule, including the mass production of universities. Michael N. Bastedo, Philip G. Altbach, and Patricia J. Gumpert, eds., *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social Political, and Economic Challenges*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Joanne P. Sharp, *Geographies of Postcolonialism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009). John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

Sessions has notoriously claimed.<sup>15</sup> This is a strategic, false caricature of safe space proponents, intended to suppress student-led organizing efforts from the margins. Instead, this dissertation deliberately resists these distortions and reclaims the underlying mission motivating safe space demands as a recognition of the matrix of domination that ensnares all social institutions, including colleges and universities, and how oppression manifests in contemporary higher education for subaltern students and communities. Therefore, demands for safe space can be understood as a justified call for intentional repair given the ways that subaltern students and communities have historically suffered from systemic marginalization and accountability when campus leaders and educators fail to acknowledge or intervene related to these concerns. When we re-orient toward the debate in this way, it becomes clear that the term, “safe space,” indexes enduring educational deliberations about how to substantively create more just educational futures with and for subaltern students.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeff Sessions, “Remarks,” July 24, 2018, Turning Point USA’s High School Leadership Summit, Washington, D.C., Transcript.

<sup>16</sup> My use of the term “subaltern” draws from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, signifying a group who suffers under hegemonic domination of a ruling class. In Gramsci’s context, subalternity was largely determined by socioeconomic class and labor, but in contemporary contexts, “subaltern” is akin to other terms like “minoritized” or “oppressed,” which can denote marginality along multiple axes of difference including race, gender, class, and sexuality. This stance reflects CRT scholar Kimberle Crenshaw’s call to orient research and intervention “toward the margins,” recognizing the complex and intersectional ways that subalternity operates today. However, I know that there are limits to this usage, as post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak critiques: it risks obscuring subaltern voices by intellectual representatives and collapsing intragroup diversity. I know that the imprint of my position as an “intellectual representative” is certainly felt in this dissertation. Yet in this tension, I find that “marginality” or “subalternity” is one admittedly imperfect manner to recognize a commonality that participants in this study share and an overarching commitment to structural analyses of power. Whenever I refer not to a larger, diverse group subject to disenfranchisement but to an individual, such as one of my participants, I try my best to emphasize that student’s unique voice and constellation of identities not subsumed under an umbrella term. Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); El Habib Louai, “Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical Developments and New Applications,” *African Journal of History and Culture* 4, no. 1 (January 2012), <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJHC11.020>; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 24.

### Thesis

In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary controversies about safe space bracket the term as the target for critique and attention. This isolation in focus allows educational stakeholders like campus administrators, faculty and staff, and students to get stalled in the polemic, endlessly debating terms and motivations. However, this narrow debate about safe space is problematic because it stops short of subaltern student flourishing and ignores the role of spatiality in this endeavor.

First, in the quest toward dismantling the oppressive structures subaltern students must face, the demand for safe space does not go far enough. Safe space advocates become so preoccupied with justifying and pursuing the elusive goal of safety such that it crowds out other important educational aims. Consider some of the campus flashpoints over the past decade, such as movements to de-platform bigoted speakers, remove confederate statues, change building names, or replace campus art honoring slave owners or colonizers. Each of these demands operationalizes safety as an important negative freedom, what Jessica Harless deems “safety *from*” painful reminders of systemic oppression and its consequences: discrimination, threats of dignity, and reinforced exclusion.<sup>17</sup> To be clear, I cannot underline how important mobilizing around negative freedom is and how elusive its achievement can be. In fact, critics have made it abundantly clear that attaining absolute negative safety is not even possible. In a precarious and dangerous world, no teacher can promise that their classrooms will be fully devoid of harm or threat for subaltern students. To do so would be at best, naïve, and at worst, arrogant. However, despite its absolute unattainability, I take

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<sup>17</sup> Jessica Harless, “Safe Space in the College Classroom: Contact, Dignity, and a Kind of Publicness.” *Ethics and Education* 13, no. 3 (2018): 335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1490116>.



inspiration from Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars like Derrick Bell, who claim that racial realism—the acknowledgement that racism is an entrenched and unavoidable force that shapes our institutions, interactions, and society—cannot undercut the enduring pursuit of racial justice.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the pragmatic recognition that absolute safety cannot be achieved is not a reason to abandon it as worthy goal. Pursuing “safety” requires the dogged pursuit of reducing certain barriers and threats, like dehumanizing language and racist remarks.

However, I think that it would be a mistake to be satisfied with ‘safety from’ as the bar for a good life or a good education for subaltern students. That sets the standards too low. It would be a disservice to students to recognize their claims for safe space as *only* a demand for reprieve from microaggressions, disparaging talk, or threats of harm. That would be the equivalent of diversity and inclusion efforts that only clear the way for students to have a seat at the table, without adequate concern about what the conversation at the table is actually about. Are the goods that are protected by staunch gatekeeping, that communities scramble to access, worth having? Once we remove obstructions toward safety, what are subaltern students actually “safe *to*”<sup>19</sup> do? I join Harless in arguing that deliberation about the positive educational goods that safety affords needs to be at least of equal concern in these debates about safe space. Without adequate concern and vigilant nourishment of the educational goods, subaltern students continue to suffer. Substantive efforts to DEI must place equal priority on pursuing a visionary and worthwhile educational telos as on access to higher education, lest the pursuit of safety undermine its intent.

Therefore, this dissertation also considers one possible educational ideal, what I deem ‘critical, transformative education,’ that might be a worthy candidate for deliberations

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<sup>18</sup> Derrick Bell. “Racial Realism.” *Connecticut Law Review* 24, no. 2 (1992): 363–79.

<sup>19</sup> Harless, “Safe Space in the College Classroom,” 335.

about safety and risk in university settings. This proposed aim of higher education is inspired by feminist philosopher Judith Butler's framework for ethics and responsibility, whose model for learning prioritizes self-interrogation, relational politics, and social critique. Though qualifying a robust and thorough purpose of higher education is a monumental task that others cover in much greater detail elsewhere, I cannot theorize positive safety without offering some conceptualization of a worthy educational telos, however brief. Critical, transformative education as an ideal is inspired by the intuition that though so much of the safe space discourse positions safety as *antithetical* to risk, safety is a necessary *condition* to engage in the risky business of a transformative education. Consider an education that provides students with the room to develop critical consciousness of their own experiences and challenge oppressive institutions;<sup>20</sup> one that asks students to introspect and collaboratively delve into ethical questions about who they want to be, what kind of life to lead, and what vision of world they want to create;<sup>21</sup> or an environment that facilitates sustained, prolonged contact with ideas and peoples in contrast to their own<sup>22</sup>—all of these rich educative experiences require vulnerability, exposure, and tremendous risk-taking. This risky endeavor is only possible when a baseline of negative safety is met, when subaltern students' worth, dignity, and existence are not up for debate.

Second, the hyperfocus on safe space also narrows the conversation to safety at the expense of space and place. A nuanced conceptualization of safety as a threshold condition cannot be satisfied by a "safe space" sticker on an office door or the declaration of safety offered on the first day of class. Despite the best of intentions, as is the case with

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<sup>20</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Penguin Books, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition," in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 204–25.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession 1991* (1991): 33–40.

Northwestern University President Schapiro's endorsement of The Black House, a resource and community hub for African American students on campus, even material allocations of campus space are not sufficient.<sup>23</sup> Living up to the underlying DEI mission of safe space warrants not only grappling with the concept of *safety*, but also attuning to the *spatial* dimensions of safe space. This attunement involves a thicker understanding of space and place as negotiated, rather than fixed, which helps advocates to frame safe space controversies as power-laden spatial struggles, as opposed to overreactions by fragile "snowflakes" or only clashes over speech rights. A focus on the co-constructed dimensions of a college campus offers the possibility of enhanced spatial imagination—the capacity to see that a campus place can be otherwise—and charges all campus inhabitants with the responsibility of ethical place-making. In this dissertation, I center on subaltern students as key architects of space, who often employ resistant place-making to survive in hostile contexts.

Given the central role that subaltern students play in safe space controversies, this investigation must include an empirical component that prioritizes their narratives and experience. In the spirit of "nothing about us without us," I cannot embark on a journey about safe spaces in higher education for subaltern students without their partnership.<sup>24</sup> As such, I understand myself and my research to be in conversation with them and the results of this investigation to be accountable to them. Given these ethical stakes, my dissertation

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<sup>23</sup> Morton Schapiro, "I'm Northwestern's President. Here's Why Safe Spaces for Students Are Important," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, sec. Opinions, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-to-create-inclusive-campus-communities-first-create-safe-places/2016/01/15/069f3a66-bb94-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-to-create-inclusive-campus-communities-first-create-safe-places/2016/01/15/069f3a66-bb94-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d_story.html).

<sup>24</sup> The phrase can be traced to disability activist James Charlton's book, but has long expanded to reference a spirit of ethical participation more broadly in policy and research about marginalized communities. James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (San Francisco, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

draws upon a study modeled after participatory design research (PDR) with six subaltern students who share a common PWI campus place. An explicit focus of the empirical dimensions of this dissertation is on these students' quotidian practices of place-making.

### Research Questions

In this dissertation, I focus my attention on one group of hostile campus contexts, predominantly White institutions (PWIs), given the central role racism has played in the controversies about safe space. Using the safe space debates in higher education as a point of entry, I ask: **Informed by the experiences of six minoritized undergraduate students, how can PWIs, like Boston College, be rehabilitated as places where risky, transformative education is possible?**

### Overview of the Dissertation

At the broadest level, this dissertation is a story about how relationships emerged between a teacher and her students over time. In “walking with” six of my former students and accompanying them on their journey of navigating a shared hostile campus context, I carry their wisdom into ongoing and contentious dialogue about diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education.<sup>25</sup> In a contemporary period characterized by anti-DEI, anti-CRT, and anti-affirmative action legislation and public sentiments, universities cannot afford to abandon each of these initiatives, simply because they are being weaponized by conservative

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<sup>25</sup> Jo Lee and Tim Ingold, “Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing,” in *Perceiving the World: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, ed. Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Routledge, 2006), 67.

stakeholders.<sup>26</sup> We are far from a post-racial or post-oppression world. In a similar vein, I also insist on the necessity of rehabilitating, not forsaking, “safe space.”

This interdisciplinary, mixed-methods dissertation offers one promising model for what attuning to safety, risk, and place-making in higher education might yield. This inquiry takes up this task of rehabilitation by problematizing each pillar of the “safe space” concept—safety and spatiality—and offering distinctive interventions to rehabilitate “safe space” as a crucial condition for transformative teaching and learning informed by a thick empirical case with subaltern students at one PWI. On the side of spatiality, I draw upon critical, feminist geography and phenomenology of space and place to propose that any effort of university inclusion must account for the uneven ideological terrain and encourage inhabitants’ place-making powers. On the side of safety, I seek to recover the foundational purpose of the movement as a longstanding commitment to minoritized students and propose place-informed safety conditions, which make educative risk-taking possible vis-à-vis a Buterlian model of transformative education. It is the hope that as a result, students, educators, and administrators will be able to apply these thick guidelines about place-making toward safety in their efforts to redesign risky, critical learning environments.

The dissertation is punctuated by interludes: creative compositions that come between chapters, in which I invite you to take a walk with me as well. Interlude one, which I deem an intro-lude, began with “my way in” to this conversation about safe space, offering

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<sup>26</sup> Examples of this kind of legislation are unfortunately plentiful. One place to start is with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s DEI tracker, which regularly updates the number of bills introduced, approved, or denied related to diversity and inclusion efforts. These bills target the instantiation of DEI centers or staff, mandatory diversity training, requests for diversity statements, and identity-conscious hiring/admissions policies. The Chronicle of Higher Education, “DEI Legislation Tracker,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 16, 2024, [https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts?utm\\_source=Iterable&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=campaign\\_8939432\\_nl\\_Academe-Today\\_date\\_20240205&cid=at&sra=true](https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_8939432_nl_Academe-Today_date_20240205&cid=at&sra=true).

a window into my prior assumptions and motivations for this work. The second interlude serves the purpose of locating myself “in jointly produced storylines” with my students and other interlocutors in this project.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it is my attempt to reckon with the cyclical, ongoing process of *positioning*, accounting for the role that my own biography, educational history and situatedness within hierarchies of power play in my relationships with students and orientation toward this project.<sup>28</sup> In interludes three through five, I draw on my artistic sensibilities to illustrate the ways that accompanying these diverse thinkers have shaped my own identity and attuned me to a new scope of vision for place. Reflecting trans\* scholar and college educator Z Nicolazzo’s use of interludes in her book, these momentary suspensions give me the opportunity to recognize more expansively what gets codified as “research” beyond the scope of traditional data collection.<sup>29</sup> It also allows me to bring myself closer to the research process and the writing of this dissertation through reflection and artistic expression.

### Literature Review

In this section, I cover the extant literature on the safe space debate, which includes local media coverage and primary sources from campus sites of controversy, including an in-depth look at two illustrative examples at Yale University and Brown University; journalism and opinion-editorials penned by concerned stakeholders; and scholarly literature about or

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<sup>27</sup> Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20, no. 1 (March 1990): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x>.

<sup>28</sup> Mildred Boveda and Subini Ancy Annamma, “Beyond Making a Statement: An Intersectional Framing of the Power and Possibilities of Positioning,” *Educational Researcher*, April 17, 2023, 0013189X2311671, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231167149>.

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Andres Castro-Samayoa for connecting me with Z Nicolazzo’s work, which felt like finding a kindred spirit—both in content and in form. Z. Nicolazzo, *Trans\* in College: Transgender Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion*, First edition (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2017).

responding to controversies about safe space in higher education. This literature review provides concrete case studies and context that I will draw upon throughout the dissertation to evaluate competing definitions of safety and space. Furthermore, this section contextualizes the “controversy” and “backlash” about safe space, into which this dissertation comes into dialogue with. Much of the educational research on the issue of safe space—extrapolated to include frameworks of safety, free speech, and academic freedom—offers varying conceptual accounts that are of particular interest in this dissertation, which grapples with viable theoretical frameworks to rehabilitate safe space.

### **Safe space origins**

Though the contemporary controversy about safe space is most prominent in the university context, the concept of safe space has a long history preceding the college campus. Commentators including Wesleyan University President Michael Roth and educational philosopher Jessica Harless attribute the origin of safe space to the group dynamics work of Kurt Lewin, social psychologist and founder of management theory, in the post-WWII era.<sup>30</sup> Tasked with corporate leadership training, Lewin and colleagues developed sensitivity training and T-group facilitation, the latter of which is a workshop format in which the agenda is built on the disclosures and concerns of those present. Both of these methods served as historical precursors to contemporary iterations of safe space. Lewin’s characteristic group training hinged upon creating a safe environment for employees to provide honest feedback without fear of retribution from executive leaders, which evolved

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<sup>30</sup> Harless, “Safe Space in the College Classroom.” Michael Roth, *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatic’s Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

into a broader group facilitation strategy characterized by honesty, dialectic tension, and open dialogue.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of safe space then shifted from industrial psychology into other fields of work, such as clinical therapy, where psychologists adopted Lewin's concept of "unfreezing" to encourage their patients to re-examine and challenge their deeply held assumptions in a safe environment.<sup>32</sup> Safe space rhetoric was also a cornerstone of queer liberation and feminist movements during the mid-twentieth century. In this political arena, minoritized groups applied the notion of safe space to create inclusive spaces of solidarity, including gay and lesbian bars where queer folx could express their affection without fear of persecution and "consciousness-raising groups" created by women to metaphorically distance themselves from the pervasive influence of mainstream patriarchal thinking.<sup>33</sup> Berenice Malka Fisher traces the origins of the idealized feminist classroom to the swell of political activism accompanying second wave feminism, which envisioned classrooms to be critical sites of organizing for justice, safe from gendered threats including physical harm, verbal abuse, and emotional manipulation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Campus flashpoints over safety**

Today, higher education is the primary site for contemporary contestations about safe space, given the significant number of high-profile events and protests drawing upon "safe space" language. Some scholars argue that this shift into the university context is

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Smith, "Kurt Lewin: Groups, Experiential Learning and Action Research," *Infed.Org: Education, Community-Building, and Change*, Blog, 2001, <https://infed.org/mobi/kurt-lewin-groups-experiential-learning-and-action-research/>.

<sup>32</sup> Roth, *Safe enough spaces*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Roth, *Safe enough spaces*.

<sup>34</sup> Berenice Malka Fisher, *No Angel in the Classroom: Teaching through Feminist Discourse* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).



attributable to the unique positionality of the university as an academic institution, charged with generating and legitimating knowledge, and a democratic institution, tasked with creating conditions for all students to be equitably prepared for democratic participation.<sup>35</sup> Though deliberations about safety in education span a large range of time, there was a significant peak in campus incidents related to safe space in the decade between 2010-2020. To capture the general sentiment of these controversial events, I will contextualize two campus case studies in greater detail, before offering some broader patterns and trends about these safe space incidents.

In 2015, controversy erupted at Yale University during preparations for Halloween, sparked by an exchange between Erika Christakis, a Yale professor and residential director, and an email from the campus Intercultural Committee which warned students against culturally inappropriate Halloween costumes. The latter email issued a plea for students to consider the unintended consequences of their dress up by asking themselves questions like,

Wearing a funny costume? Is the humor based on ‘making fun’ of real people, human traits or cultures? Wearing a historical costume? If this costume is meant to be historical, does it further misinformation or historical and cultural inaccuracies? ... Could someone take offense with your costume and why?<sup>36</sup>

In response, Christakis penned her own letter, addressed to students in her residential college, which picked up on that last provocation to ask,

I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ulrich Baer, *What Snowflakes Get Right: Free Speech, Truth, and Equality on Campus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019); Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> The Intercultural Affairs Committee, Email, October 28, 2015, [https://d28htnjz2elwuj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/06103238/Email\\_From\\_Intercultural\\_Affairs.pdf](https://d28htnjz2elwuj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/06103238/Email_From_Intercultural_Affairs.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Erika Christakis, “Dressing Yourself,” Email, October 30, 2015, [https://d28htnjz2elwuj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/09070305/Email\\_From\\_Erika.pdf](https://d28htnjz2elwuj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/09070305/Email_From_Erika.pdf).

In a series of racially charged campus protests to Christakis' email, student organizers demanded the resignation of both Erika and her husband and fellow residential director, Nicholas Christakis, for infringing upon their right to a sense of home and perpetuating a racially inhospitable campus climate for Yale students of Color.<sup>38</sup> Though this controversy is notorious for a viral video of one student's impassioned, expletive-laden retort, the open letter addressed to Erika spoke to student concerns with greater nuance. Signed by over a thousand Yale students and alumni, the letter rejected Christakis' request for greater tolerance of individual choices: "giving 'room' for students to be 'obnoxious' or 'offensive,' as you suggest, is only inviting ridicule and violence onto ourselves and our communities, and ultimately comes at the expense of room in which marginalized students can feel safe."<sup>39</sup> Both Christakis resigned from their residential posts. Erika also resigned from the university, though Nicholas, a tenured professor, remained and still teaches there today.

At Brown University in 2014, the Janus Forum Lecture Series, a signature event of the Center for Philosophy, Politics, and Economics which features two guests with opposing viewpoints, hosted a debate about sexual assault on college campuses.<sup>40</sup> The Janus Forum invited two female scholars, Jessica Valenti, whose research focuses on the cultural factors that lead to delegitimizing sexual assault survivors, and Wendy McElroy, whose work attempts to debunk the myth of "rape culture." McElroy's stance and participation evoked

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<sup>38</sup> FIRE, "Yale University Students Protest Halloween Costume Email," November 6, 2015, video, 1:20, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD\\_JVYd0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD_JVYd0).

<sup>39</sup> Yale Students, Alumni, Family, Faculty, and Staff, "Sign the Open Letter to Associate Master Christakis," 2015, Google Form, [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSexdyJZ2UBCB9Isl7vP2rTfLXuO2F22yn5Sj9ZRizsxxKisJw/viewform?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSexdyJZ2UBCB9Isl7vP2rTfLXuO2F22yn5Sj9ZRizsxxKisJw/viewform?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>40</sup> Camilla Brandfield-Harvey and Caroline Kelly, "Janus Forum Sexual Assault Event Sparks Controversy," *The Brown Daily Herald*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2014/11/17/janus-forum-sexual-assault-event-sparks-controversy/>.

significant student protest, with several female students expressing concerns about the triggering consequences of the event on sexual assault survivors and the lingering impact on campus climate. In collaboration with campus administrators, health personnel, and faculty, the Task Force on Sexual Assault organized two simultaneous offerings to the Janus Forum debate: a presentation entitled “Research on Rape Culture” hosted by Psychiatry and Human Behavior Professor Lindsay Orchowski and a “BWell Safe Space,” equipped with “sexual assault peer educators, women peer counselors, and staff from BWell [Brown’s Office of Health Promotion] to provide support.”<sup>41</sup> The student uproar elicited a response from Brown University President Christina Paxson preceding the Janus Forum debate, who explicitly recognized that “sexual violence is a real and present threat at Brown, as it is across the country and the world,” and offered strong disagreement with McElroy’s position:

Some people—including writer Wendy McElroy, who will speak with Jessica Valenti at a Janus Forum event next week—have argued that sexual assault is the work of small numbers of predatory individuals whose behaviors are impervious to the culture and values of their communities. I disagree. Although evidence suggests that a relatively small number of individuals perpetrate sexual assault, extensive research shows that culture and values *do* matter.<sup>42</sup>

This sentiment was followed by Paxson’s reference to the alternative lecture by Orchowski and a request: regardless of which talk participants attended or neither, she reminded Brown constituents that reducing the threat of sexual assault is a “collective responsibility.” All events proceeded as planned. The public critique of Brown’s handling of the event, however, was searing. In one New York Times article, Judith Shulevitz trivialized the BWell Safe Space to foremost provide “cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies” and referred to student protesters using

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<sup>41</sup> Brandfield-Harvey and Kelly, “Janus Forum Sexual Assault Event Sparks Controversy.”

<sup>42</sup> Christina Paxson, “Letter to the Brown Community,” Email, November 14, 2014, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/email-president-christina-paxson-brown-community>.

descriptors such as “self-infantilizing,” “hypersensitive,” “puerile,” and “deep inside their cocoons.”<sup>43</sup> This event, in Shulevitz’s opinion, served as one illustration of the perils of safe space, as it stunts students’ ability to navigate “Real World Inc.” and prepares a generation of less hardy adults.<sup>44</sup>

### *From the margins*

These two case studies help to illustrate several patterns within the safe space debates in university contexts. First, the term “safe space” is most often vocalized from a minoritized group, in response to an occurrence that questions their lived marginalization. In the Yale example, the protests were mobilized by undergraduate students of Color indignant about being asked to simply “look away” from costumes that ridicule their cultural heritage, religion, or history. They rejected Erika Christakis’ request to excuse microaggressions by insensitive students at the expense of subaltern students’ felt sense of belonging and safety. Similarly, at Brown, sexual assault survivors and allies organized a vehement objection against views that reinforce a culture of denial, rather than accountability for rape. Entertaining the possibility that sexual assault is an isolated phenomenon perpetuated solely by predators devalues the experiences of survivors who already face rampant gaslighting and delegitimization. There are many other campus controversies that follow this pattern: Wesleyan students of Color responding to a critique of Black Lives Matter in their campus newspaper, women and queer students protesting the explicit homophobic and misogynistic

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<sup>43</sup> Judith Shulevitz, “In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html?_r=0).

<sup>44</sup> This is a reference to Gary Varvel’s cartoon about the dangers of safe space, one of many, which depicts the harsh reality college students will face as a corporation devoid of safe spaces entitled, “Real World Inc.” Gary Varvel, “Safe spaces in the real world,” *Indy Star*, Cartoon, November 3, 2015, <https://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/varvel/2015/11/13/cartoonist-gary-varvel-safe-spaces-real-world/75699990/>.

views lambasted by alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos at UC Berkeley, or Middlebury students turning their backs to Charles Murray, the author of *The Bell Curve*. Though there are important nuances between each of these cases and what the appropriate campus response should be, I think it is important to recognize the shared motivation undergirding each of these controversies. They are demands *from the margins* that ask campus administrators, faculty, staff, and the broader community to address the consequences of structural oppressions, whether it is racism, sexism, homophobia, or classism. A call for safe space is an insistence on collective responsibility to reduce and dismantle these structures of domination.

However, this is not to say that safe space demands have always strengthened diversity and equity prerogatives. In a subsequent section below, “safe space remixes,” I explicate a handful of cases where safety denotes an unwillingness to tolerate exposure to otherness and one’s own privilege. I have argued elsewhere that this uptake of safety by dominant groups co-opts the discourse of safe spaces to resist institutional changes that threaten their privileged status.<sup>45</sup> These cries of discontent from the center (e.g. “the war on lads and frats”<sup>46</sup> or “how can I be safe when you’re talking about homosexuals and their rights?”<sup>47</sup>) are analogous to complaints of “reverse discrimination” that arise in affirmation action cases.<sup>48</sup> What has been normalized in college admissions is a historical privileging to the same dominant groups over time, namely wealthy, White, cis-gender men. For those who

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<sup>45</sup> Samantha Ha DiMuzio, “Safe Space vs. Free Speech: Unpacking a Higher Education Curriculum Controversy,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, April 4, 2022, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2022.2052772>.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Slater, “Re-Educating Men: The War on Lads and Frats,” in *Unsafe Space*, ed. Tom Slater (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 34–46, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-58786-2\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-58786-2_5).

<sup>47</sup> Jeannie Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 15, no. 1 (2004): 41.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Omi and Dana Y. Takagi, “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action,” *Representations* 55, no. 55 (1996): 155–162.

benefit from the existing structure, their privilege is normalized such that the inequity is rendered invisible and any change to this seemingly fair and meritocratic system, like the use of race in college selection, is felt as discrimination. However, in reality, affirmative action policies, like demands for safe spaces in higher education, target legacies of exclusion and act as necessary corrections to right historical wrongs. Therefore, to defend the status quo is to reify existing structures that prop up white supremacy. To privileged groups, those interventions can spark indignation if judged merely from an individual perspective or from a circumstantial standpoint. Certainly, a White male student can be the numerical minority in a room of women of Color. They can feel singled out as unwelcome if they hold an opinion different than the majority in the room. However, I take up the call for safe space in this dissertation not as a demand to account for *circumstantial* minoritization, but as a deliberate focus on longstanding, structural inequities and its consequences for students pushed to the margins today on college campuses. Therefore, this dissertation is not swayed by subversions of safe space led by privileged students or groups nor willing to concede to these veiled attempts to reinforce oppression. Instead, the stance I take up is a stronger need to distinguish safe space as a systemic intervention intended to ameliorate historical inequities in higher education, rather than a circumstantial claim made by numerical minorities.

A second insight that arises from the campus flashpoints comes when we consider at least two camps that emerge in contestation to safe space: the backlash from the political right, as enshrined in protections of free speech or academic freedom, and the interventionist responses from the left, who claim that safety is a problematic educational construct.

***The backlash from the right: Free speech defenders***

In this camp, critics frame efforts toward safety as a misguided and dangerous attempt to curtail free speech. One of the most circulated articles airing anti-safe space sentiments is entitled “The Coddling of the American Mind,” which was eventually expanded into a book of the same name in 2018. This piece is worth contextualizing with some detail, given its discursive reach in the war against safe space in higher education. I offer a brief overview of the article here in the introduction and a more detailed explication of insights from the book in chapter four. The Atlantic article was co-authored by Greg Lukianoff, a constitutional lawyer and the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and professor at New York University’s School of Business. Together, the two mount an argument, grounded in the psychology of exposure therapy, about the dangers of appeasing college students’ requests for safe spaces—simply one facet of the larger movement “to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”<sup>49</sup> They claim that the demand for safe space, alongside an overemphasis on microaggressions or trigger warnings, represents a shift into a culture of “vindictive protectiveness,” where participants are bullied into silence or compliance with whatever is deemed politically correct. This fear of offense, they argue, chills the possibility of free speech and genuine discussions about topics that can be controversial or unpopular. As a result, a “safe” campus environment stunts the maturity and growth of its students and inhibits their ability to participate in the “real world” upon graduation. In this vein, Lukianoff and Haidt ask,

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the

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<sup>49</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.

workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt?<sup>50</sup>

Inherent in this provocation are several assumptions. First, those who ask for safe spaces are misguided, hypersensitive students who default to self-victimization. They prefer to be coddled in a “cocoon of adult protection” rather than engage in the hard conversations that run the risk of offense and of encountering microaggressions. Second, the solution is to “give people the benefit of the doubt” by allowing speech, however wrongheaded or harmful, to go unfettered, while students advocating for safe space ought to self-pathologize, to see if they might be “catastrophizing” and overreacting to the issue at hand.

Others who support Lukianoff and Haidt’s overarching claims include campus faculty and administrators. University of Chicago Dean of Students, John Ellison, is notorious for his welcome email to the undergraduate class of 2020, which stated,

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Ellison draws a similar conclusion about the students possibly interested in safe spaces. He does not explicitly label them as “hypersensitive,” but his near-absolute stance against safety makes it clear to incoming students that requests for safe spaces or trigger warnings will not be tolerated at this university. Though Ellison does mark “*intellectual* safety” as the unwelcome disposition, there is very little to distinguish what counts as retreat from “perspectives at odds with their own” as juxtaposed with harassment or threatening speech, which is not welcome. Taking this strong of a stand against safety, without any reference to

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<sup>50</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind.”

<sup>51</sup> John (Jay) Ellison, “Welcome Letter to Class of 2020,” Email, 2016.

[https://news.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/Dear\\_Class\\_of\\_2020\\_Students.pdf](https://news.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/Dear_Class_of_2020_Students.pdf).



the gray area between controversial *and* harmful ideas, offers a subliminal message that signals, “If you are interested in safety of any sort, this is not the place for you.” Jonathan Zimmerman, a historian of education, also critiques the “fear-mongering culture” created by a doctrine of safe space in education. His article in *The Chronicle* was a response to series of campus incidents, each which featured a group demanding removal of symbolic commemorations to historical harms, such as the statue of Confederate soldier, Silent Sam, at UNC Chapel Hill and the American flag marking a 9/11 memorial at Occidental College.<sup>52</sup> He relies on a slippery slope argument to expose the dangers of labeling any symbol or monument a form of violence. If we allow students to decry that the American flag can make them feel unsafe, he claims, then anything that plausibly causes subjective discomfort is liable to be censored. Zimmerman continues, “They’re entitled to their views of the flag, and they have every right to protest it. But they have no right to be insulated from it, simply because it hurts their feelings.”<sup>53</sup> Again, this characterization of student protestors as acting from “hurt feelings” reinforces a caricature of safe space advocates as hypersensitive young people, not yet able to temper their over-reactions.

In this free speech camp, there are few commentators who take this view to extremes, like those in Tom Slater’s 2016 anthology *Unsafe space: The crisis of free speech on campus* and former Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ aforementioned “snowflakes” comment. I give more airtime to these positions in a previous discourse analysis of the debate,<sup>54</sup> but here, I simply hope to flag the concluding evaluation that these positions largely draw upon free

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<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Zimmerman, “College Campuses Should Not Be Safe Spaces,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 2019, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/College-Campuses-Should-Not-Be/245505>.

<sup>53</sup> Zimmerman, “College campuses should not be safe spaces.”

<sup>54</sup> Samantha Ha DiMuzio, “Safe Space vs. Free Speech: Unpacking a Higher Education Curriculum Controversy,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, April 4, 2022, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2022.2052772>.

speech discourse to advance alt-Right conservative positions and often to protect the right of “bad boys” like Donald Trump or Richard Spencer to “say anything they want, however vile and hateful.”<sup>55</sup> For this reason, I opt to engage in this dissertation with the free speech defenders who attempt to mount a more substantive argument about the educational dangers of safety, rather than these positions who veil their political agenda or discriminatory attitudes with free speech discourse.

Most who fall into the free speech camp do offer valid considerations, particularly about the necessity of working through disagreement and controversy as educational practice for our roles as participants in a functioning democratic public. Many also rightly point out that it would be impossible to achieve safety, particularly at the scale of an entire university campus, if safety is defined as the right to not be offended or ever made to feel uncomfortable. Whether we conceive of learning as nurturing the intellectual, socioemotional, and moral growth of the student; as facilitating contact zones, where students are challenged to encounter other people, practices, beliefs, and worldviews different than their own; or preparation for civic participation in a diverse and pluralistic society, all of these variations of education necessitate some degree of discomfort. Indeed, I delineate the compatible relationship between safety and educational risk in chapter four. However, for now, I return to the false conflation between safety and comfort that these accounts assume. When students mobilize to reject being deemed intellectually inferior by nature (as in the case of Charles Murray’s talk), to decry the solution of “turning away” when their culture or heritage trivialized (as in the case of the Yale Halloween controversy), or to resist reifying popular beliefs and attitudes that make women more vulnerable to sexual

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<sup>55</sup> Joan W. Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom.” *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 8, (2017): 5.

violence (as in the case of protests at Brown University), it is a mischaracterization to dismiss these demands as mere requests for comfort. These are requests for respect, dignity, and equality from communities that have historically marginalized and othered. Even if not all demands are possible to be met, to take a doubt-first stance in trivializing these claims risks reifying existing patterns of domination.

### *The interventions from the left: Safe space remixes*

Free speech defenders have not been the only group to criticize safe space. Others, who might be characterized as in alignment with the political left, have argued convincing cases for a rejection of safety altogether. Instead of drawing on free speech or academic freedom, those in this camp take an alternative approach of offering more nuanced alternatives to safe space. Most common is the “brave space” rendition, popularized by social justice educators like Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens and legal scholar, John Palfrey. Arao and Clemens, along with feminist scholars like Jeannie Ludlow, argue that safety is not a useful educational goal because it too often gets conflated with comfort, particularly for privileged students. In Arao and Clemens’ case, White students co-opt the safe space term to reference their own discomfort in discussions of systemic racism.<sup>56</sup> In these students’ interpretation, reckoning with their white privilege and the resulting feelings of guilt, despair, and indignation violated the safe space norms of the class. In Ludlow’s critique, she reflects on the problematic uptake of safety she encountered in her large cultural diversity course. After soliciting students’ anonymous submissions of questions and concerns about the class, she was taken aback by one comment which read, “You said you wanted this class to be a

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<sup>56</sup> Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 135–50.

safe space. Well, I don't feel safe here. You are always talking about homosexuals and their rights, and I hate homosexuals, so how can I be safe here?"<sup>57</sup> In these cases, language about creating safe conditions for engagement further marginalizes the students it intends to support; it provides privileged students with a seemingly justifiable avenue to resist critical discussions of the systems from which they benefit. Therefore, if safety is falsely conflated with uncritical comfort, even advocates of safe space question the merits of safety as an educational concept. Their stance is that safe space must be abandoned lest it reify the very structures that make subaltern students feel alienated.

Furthermore, these critics also argue that absolute safety is not possible to guarantee, "for history and experience has demonstrated clearly to [marginalized folx] that to name their oppression, and the perpetrators thereof, is a profoundly unsafe activity, particularly if they are impassioned."<sup>58</sup> If we are to take seriously the precarious conditions that students of Color, queer students, low-income students, and trans\* students face, then it could even be a presumptuous stance for an educator to declare any given space "safe."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Arao and Clements propose the framework of "brave space" instead, inspired by the need for participants to draw on courage and bravery in conversations about social justice, rather than "the illusion of safety."<sup>60</sup> Palfrey also draws upon the necessity of "brave space" but offers a spatial campus reconfiguration, rather than a change in facilitation frameworks.<sup>61</sup> Palfrey

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<sup>57</sup> Ludlow, "From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom," 41.

<sup>58</sup> Arao and Clements, "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces," 140.

<sup>59</sup> Z Nicolazzo, a trans\* scholar and college educator, uses the asterisk following trans as a nod toward search conventions, where an asterisk is a truncation wildcard to include other words starting with the same prefix. Trans\*, therefore, is an intentional, inclusive widening that indicates Nicolazzo's commitment to the "multitude of identities and identity categories used to refer to those of us who are trans\*." I follow their lead throughout this dissertation. Nicolazzo, *Trans\* in College*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Arao and Clements, 141.

<sup>61</sup> John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), <https://bravespaces.org/>.

acknowledges the need for safety, understood as comfort and belonging, and delegates some campus domains with this important purpose, such as affinity spaces or residential dorms. However, he argues that other more public spaces, like the campus quad or classroom, must not prioritize safety but courage and risk. These spaces would align with the way that Arao and Clemens operationalize “brave space.”

Nonetheless, “brave space” is only one of many safe space remodels, albeit the one that is most common in contemporary discourse. Jeannie Ludlow’s response to the perils of safe space is yet another rendition, “contested space,” which is etymologically derived: “‘Contest’ comes from the Latin *contestari*, which is comprised of *con*, which means together, and *testari*, which means to bear witness or to testify. This term, often used to denote ‘dispute’ or ‘compete,’ also means to affirm another’s witnessing, to testify together.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the classroom as a contested space opens it up for multilayered commitments: to bear witness to others’ worldviews and experiences, knowing that it can cause internal or external conflict; to be willing to share your own testimony, with the assurance that others are willing to hear you out; and to strengthen a communal spirit of coalition building as a result of these tensions and testimonies. To Ludlow, detaching the classroom from associations with safe space allows her to reject mischaracterizations of the feminist classroom as merely therapeutic, soothing and affirming students rather than challenging them to grow through discomfort. Contested space allows for the possibility of both actions and more, drawing on a definition of the classroom that is contradictory and laced with tensions.

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<sup>62</sup> Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” 47

Feminist Zoe Brigley Thompson also seeks to move beyond safe space, resonating with the reasons that Arao and Clemens and Ludlow raise about safety as a false and unachievable promise to students. Instead of safety, Brigley Thompson encourages educators to prepare students to face unpredictable “precarious moments,” necessitating “a sense of readiness, which might mean making space to consider the demands of contentious questions, and learning how to quell the intense emotions that arise when dealing with emotive subjects.”<sup>63</sup> What is intriguing about this view is that despite significant divergences in why affective subduing might be necessary—Brigley Thompson is concerned with overcoming the emotive barriers to discussing sexuality and gender-based violence while free speech defenders like Lukianoff and Haidt are concerned with how college students’ overreactions to seemingly trivial offenses stunts their ability to navigate the post-graduate workforce—both conclude that students must check their emotions in order to proceed with the important educational tasks. Given this overlap, Brigley Thompson’s account could be strengthened by wrestling with how this stance might be co-opted to reinforce gaslighting practices. Nonetheless, her account rightly addresses the intensity of emotion that is associated with risk-taking, an inevitable feature in a precarious space of diverse student cohabitation. I will return to Brigley Thompson’s account in chapter four of my dissertation, as I build a case for safety as an educative condition for transformative risk-taking.

From the context of religious education, theologian Lars Iverson contends that safe space is too ambiguous and polarized to be useful in a classroom. He offers a vision of the classroom as a “community of disagreement.”<sup>64</sup> Drawing on the intercultural framework

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<sup>63</sup> Zoë Brigley Thompson, “From Safe Spaces to Precarious Moments: Teaching Sexuality and Violence in the American Higher Education Classroom.” *Gender and Education* 32, no. 3 (April 2, 2020): 408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1458077>.

<sup>64</sup> Lars Laird Iverson, “From Safe Spaces to Communities of Disagreement.” *British Journal of Religious Education* 41, no. 3 (2019): 315–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1445617>.

established by the Council of Europe, Iversen proposes that members of a classroom community are most likely to practice “the mundane, but ultimately democratic ideal of getting along together” when they recognize that community and disagreement can coexist.<sup>65</sup> He advocates for the classroom to be characterized by “a mix of social courage and trust... [and] a willingness to contribute different opinions and to disagree”—essential elements of a religious education that seeks to maintain pluralistic commitments.<sup>66</sup>

As compared to other renditions of safe spaces that attempt to move beyond safety, “safe enough” space is a term coined by Michael Roth to provide a pragmatic compromise between safe space and free speech.<sup>67</sup> In this way, his approach is very much like political philosopher, Sigal Ben-Porath’s stance on the issue in *Free speech on campus*, where she offers the concept of “inclusive freedom” as a middle path to both achieve inclusion and sustain commitments to academic freedom and free speech.<sup>68</sup> In response to a safe space controversy at his own institution in 2015, Roth applies psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s concept of “good enough” parenting to offer the goal of nurturing “safe enough” college campuses. When parents attempt to “orchestrate an ideal childhood” for their children, Roth paraphrases, their child does not encounter the necessary hardships to promote healthy development and maturity.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, when college educators and administrators attempt to establish a perfectly inclusive environment, students will not encounter the challenges and disagreements that will allow them to flourish. Therefore, rather than curtailing all possibility of offense by prioritizing safety (what we can call option A) or emphasizing free speech by allowing for strong disagreement and vigorous debate (option B), Roth takes a

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<sup>65</sup> Iversen, “From Safe Spaces to Communities of Disagreement,” 324.

<sup>66</sup> Iversen, 324.

<sup>67</sup> Roth, *Safe Enough Spaces*.

<sup>68</sup> Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Roth, *Safe Enough Spaces*, xi.

compromising approach by proposing the basic sense of “safe enough” as a developmental model utilizing the Goldilocks method: just enough of A and B, safety and risk (that arises from disagreement, conflict, offense).

My qualm with this solution is first, a mischaracterization of safe space as a kind of campus utopia, free of any harm or insult. Perhaps this extreme definition of safe space is specific to the Wesleyan context, where a controversy was sparked by a White student’s op-ed in the student newspaper, criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement. Roth, in a letter to the student newspaper, admonished the ways in which dissenting students of Color “demanded apologies, a retraction and have even harassed the author and the newspaper’s editors. Some are claiming that the op-ed was less speech than action: it caused harm and made people of color feel unsafe.”<sup>70</sup> In this context, it seems reasonable to extrapolate that Roth’s definition of safe space is informed by what he considers students’ demands for “ideological conformity” on campus. In this case, though I do not think that students are justified in censoring critiques to BLM as a social movement in the press, I also think it is an injustice to diminish these students’ claims as exclusive to the op-ed. Even if the uproar was sparked by the article, students made it clear that their issue is broader in focus: “The debate has become whether members of our community even deserve, not only to exist on this campus, but simply to live. By focusing on the freedom of speech instead of students’ lives and ability to safely exist on this campus, you are practicing censorship and you are partaking in racism.”<sup>71</sup> In a precarious world where Black lives are threatened regularly, I do not think that safe space advocates seek out a perfect or ideal environment, as Roth suggests.

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<sup>70</sup> Michael S. Roth, “Black Lives Matter and So Does Free Speech.” *Roth on Wesleyan*, Blog, September 19, 2015. <http://roth.blogs.wesleyan.edu/2015/09/19/black-lives-matter-and-so-does-free-speech/>.

<sup>71</sup> Wesleying. “An Open Letter to the Wesleyan Community from Students of Color.” *Wesleying*, Blog, September 25, 2015. <http://wesleying.org/2015/09/25/an-open-letter-to-the-wesleyan-community-from-students-of-color/>.



In fact, their lived experience often tells them that absolute safety is not possible. Second, I think that Roth's account of "safe enough" spaces does not do enough to recognize the baseline conditions that make strong disagreement and vulnerability in the classroom possible. So to return to the variable math from before: if Roth suggests safe enough spaces as some delicate balance of A (safety) / B (disagreement, risk, free dialogue), I hope to advance an argument in this dissertation that argues  $A \rightarrow B$ .

I want to propose one last rendition of safe space, "counter space," which is distinctive from the others since it does not emerge in response to the contemporary safe space debates. Instead, it originates from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the commitment to counter-stories. Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso describe CRT in education as "a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom."<sup>72</sup> Taking a CRT-approach to education allows researchers, educators, and students to identify the dominant narratives, or "stock stor[ies]," that are circulated in schools and educational institutions which normalize the status quo.<sup>73</sup> Equipped with awareness of hegemonic norms, researchers can in turn prioritize counter-storytelling: narratives that draw upon "racialized, gendered, and classed experiences [of people of Color] as sources of strength"<sup>74</sup> to defy the mainstream theories that affirm White supremacy.<sup>75</sup> Counter-stories serve as the antecedent to counter-spaces. The term was originally coined by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso

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<sup>72</sup> Daniel G Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 25.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (August 1989): 2416, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1289308>.

<sup>74</sup> Solórzano and Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology," 26.

<sup>75</sup> Mari Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 22 (1987): 323–99.

as collectively established places where African American students could share important strategies for collective coping and support in racially hostile environments.<sup>76</sup>

Other researchers have since expanded on the importance of counter-spaces in facilitating positive outcomes for college students of Color. From the field of community psychology, Andrew Case and Carla Hunter propose a conceptual framework which describes counter-spaces as “sites of radical possibility” where marginalized students could engage in *narrative identity work*, which nurtures positive and meaningful identity development; *acts of resistance*, which are opportunities for students to “think, feel, and act in ways that are consonant with their own identities but are typically devalued by the larger society;” and *relationship-building* with a community of others, who can support and help students navigate oppressive environments.<sup>77</sup> Racial equity scholar Micere Keels, in her book *Campus counterspaces*, draws from a study with 500 Black and Latinx college students to contend that counter-spaces are one of many “identity-conscious supports” that are necessary for minoritized students to succeed in PWIs.<sup>78</sup> These resistant sites serve not only the aims delineated by Case and Hunter, but also offer a relational foundation of peers who “do not have to debate the existence of marginalization and oppression,” which frees them to “move on to deeper, more radical discussions.”<sup>79</sup> One interpretation of counter-space, then, might be an adapted version of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where minoritized students’ “radical growth” is challenging to access until their baseline—a shared understanding that systemic

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<sup>76</sup> Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1/2 (2000): 60–73.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew D. Case and Carla D. Hunter, “Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in Marginalized Individuals’ Adaptive Responses to Oppression,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 1–2 (September 2012): 261, 265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9497-7>.

<sup>78</sup> Micere Keels, *Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students’ Search for Community at Historically White Institutions* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 11.

<sup>79</sup> Keels, 19.

oppression exists—is met.<sup>80</sup> As such, counter-spaces need not be exclusive to subaltern students but can invite those from majoritarian groups who share this baseline prerogative and are committed to acting in solidarity. Despite its alternative lineage, I think that counter-space should be considered alongside other safe space remixes because it shares an underlying commitment to cultivating the substantive inclusion of students pushed to the margins, particularly students of Color.

Though there are noteworthy distinctions, what each of these safe space renditions indicate is 1) some dissatisfaction with safety as an educational framework, and 2) some effort to shift toward a different educational goal, whether that is educative disagreement, dialogic democratic deliberations, or a kind of critical consciousness. What I want to contribute to the landscape of safe space remixes is identifying this pattern of discontent with safety and desire to move beyond it and offering the gentle reminder that all of the educational goods worth shifting our attention towards require a *threshold condition* of safety.

This view might best build upon Eamon Callan’s proposal of “dignity safe” spaces, which relies on a “condition of warranted trust.”<sup>81</sup> When this condition is satisfied, all members of a given social environment can be confident in their shared status as equal persons worthy of respect. To strive toward dignity safety is to prioritize an institutional culture where all members can reasonably participate in their shared context without fear of humiliation or being denigrated to an inferior rank. He offers several possible interventions in this quest for dignity safety, including efforts to mitigate stereotype threat, such as representative mentorship or building a “critical mass” of traditionally minoritized groups, and the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as civil candor and interpretive charity in the

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<sup>80</sup> Keels, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Eamonn Callan, “Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24, no. 1 (2016): 68.

classroom. Importantly, satisfying the condition of dignity safety is distinctive from “intellectual safety,” which is a reticence to entertain alternative worldviews and encounter beliefs or values different than one’s own. As compared to the universal right to dignity, Callan asserts that in the educational project of cultivating open-mindedness, no student has a right to intellectual safety. Therefore, a dignity-safe space does not shield participants from speech that might cause offense nor protects them from dialogue that chastens a person’s sense of intellectual superiority. Instead, it is the security that in times of conflict and disagreement, each person’s inherent worth as a contributing member is maintained. I resonate with Callan’s assertion that dignity safety is not the educational *goal* but establishes the *conditions*, however elusive, by which a student is able to fully engage in the risky business of a university education. Dignity offers one helpful term to conceptualize what kind of recognition amongst participants is necessary to take on threats of intellectual unsafety or risk. However, his account could benefit from sharper distinctions between what counts as an offense to dignity safety versus to intellectual safety. He is quick to say that a dignity safe space does not shield a person from getting offended, yet there are certainly some offenses that must be outlawed in his account: the ones that threaten dignity.<sup>82</sup> What should count as a deplorable threat to dignity versus an educative challenge to close-mindedness? I hope to engage with these challenges in greater depth in chapter four, when I advance my own theory of safety inspired by Callan’s provocation. I hope to enliven Callan’s offering of dignity safety by prioritizing the experiential knowledge and expertise of subaltern students in this quest.

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<sup>82</sup> Many thanks to Chris Higgins for his help in nuancing Callan’s argument and how mine might diverge.

## Space and place

Discussions of safe space often villainize or oversimplify safety, resulting in a problematic stall in polemics. Though it is my intent to rehabilitate a certain kind of safety, an exclusive focus on safety comes at the expense of substantive engagement with spatiality. This is a problem, because sidelining the role of space and place in education comes with dire consequences. Therefore, the starting point for this dissertation is the recognition that any learning environment, whether it is the college campus, a classroom, or a dormitory, is not given but made.

Too often, space or place operates as a backdrop to the phenomena of interest. It occurs when the original lands and waters become obscured by “layers of colonial fill,” like the structures of a contemporary city metropolis; or when a given description of a space emphasizes only the static physical dimensions, like the square footage of a classroom, and ignores the other facets of a space that are negotiated and alive.<sup>83</sup> Feminist geographer Doreen Massey cautions against the pitfalls of ignoring space because our default stance envisions space as a neutral surface, *upon which* people, places, and phenomena occur.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, space as a surface is not inherently laced with meaning. It is simply the ‘neutral’ backdrop. This metaphor of space as surface is clearly problematic. In this reading, space is deprived of its history, particularly who has land sovereignty, and renders it available for “crossing and conquering” via voyages of discovery.<sup>85</sup> It depoliticizes space, ignoring the ways in which space is linked up with power. As humanist geographer Tim Cresswell elaborates, “place does not have meanings that are natural and obvious but ones that are

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<sup>83</sup> Megan Bang, Lawrence Curley, Adam Kessel, Ananda Marin, Eli S. Suzukovich, and George Strack. “Muskkrat Theories, Tobacco in the Streets, and Living Chicago as Indigenous Land.” *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2014): 39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.865113>.

<sup>84</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005).

<sup>85</sup> Massey, *For space*, 4.

created by some people with more power than others to define what is and is not appropriate.”<sup>86</sup> This notion of spatial neutrality primes space for continued acts of settler colonialism by rendering invisible the power to define, bound, and name space.

Yet, it seems obvious that space cannot be neutral, since everyone experiences space differently based on their own social and historical particularity. Consider how the experience of any given space—like a neighborhood in Sanford, FL—can be contingent on whether you are a White adolescent or a Black teenager, like Trayvon Martin. Likewise with a campus space; the experience of a marked “safe space” can radically differ based on your own social location, history, traumas, and external perceptions. In the case of Trayvon Martin and displaced indigenous communities, that difference in spatial experience can cost you your life and/or your ways of life. That is why Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie do not reduce differences in one’s experience of space only to ‘diversity;’ instead, they state that these “place-specific differences... exemplify and help establish forms of inequity, colonization, and other forms of oppression.”<sup>87</sup> The norms of a given space are decidedly not neutral but established by some authority. Some communities are positioned as rightfully “in place” and others as “out of place.”

A focus on space primes us to notice certain problematic patterns within the safe space debate that ought to be addressed. One of those issues is a static understanding of “space.” For example, some responses to the safe space debates have relied on the need for cultural houses or physical, designated areas on campus dedicated to fostering community amongst students who share a salient identity. Though I support these spaces as a promise

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<sup>86</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 27.

<sup>87</sup> Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 36.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315764849>.

of some concrete institutional resources for particular groups, I also think this spatial approach can easily backfire. On one hand, when a campus has, say, a physical LGBTQ resource center, the designation might signal the outsourcing of queer community issues or substantive engagement with heteronormativity or homophobia to this center. Rather than recognizing the need to address LGBTQ concerns in all domains of campus life, students, staff, faculty, and administrators in other departments or learning spaces on campus can cash in their “get out of jail free” card to task “experts” from the center with any problems they face. A DEI-specific space can also easily serve the purpose of shallow virtue-signaling by the university, demonstrating their ‘mission of social justice’ or ‘anti-racist’ commitments without accountability regarding substantive changes for the students targeted by those claims. Thus commitments to “safe space” must involve more than the addition of a identity-conscious center or affinity spaces.

The designation of LGBTQ resource center or a cultural house can be a generative step toward DEI, but not when administrators operationalize “safe space” as a bounded container, which inherently come with the desired feelings of community, belonging, and acceptance. It is as if designating these physical locations “safe spaces” makes them so. Yet, as we know, affinity spaces are as diverse as any other. Keels makes this clear when she claims that a “counterspace filled with Black and Latinx college students may have as a common denominator individuals with direct experiences with oppression and marginalization in educational spaces. Beyond this, however, all bets are off with regard to a universal set of experiences, attitudes, or beliefs.”<sup>88</sup> Affinity spaces are still diverse sites where safety cannot be guaranteed simply based on the physical walls or relational gathering

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<sup>88</sup> Keels, *Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students’ Search for Community at Historically White Institutions*, 19.

designated for that purpose. Space is not static but actively negotiated. The safety of a space is emplaced because it shifts based on who is in that space at a given time, what they choose to express, and what memories or histories are raised. “Safe space” is not simply bound up with the physical structure (though that plays a role), but also needs to account for the many other ways in which space is constructed. One such example is the temporal dimension of space.

Descriptions of safe space often reinforce a definition of space that is divorced from time. When folks (including myself) demarcate their office, classroom, or campus as a “safe space,” there is an assumption that the label stands over time. The hidden assumption is that “this is (always) a safe space.” This kind of acknowledgement is usually well-intentioned. From my own perspective, I meant that *whenever* a student chose to step foot into my office or classroom, I was committed to making them feel accepted and respected. However, it is not possible, as an educator, advisor, or mentor, to control all the various aspects that affect how a student experiences a certain space. Space is “always in-process [and] always under construction.”<sup>89</sup> It is spontaneous and unpredictable. Therefore, it requires constant re-negotiation over time. In this sense, space and time are interwoven, as they are in the Maori language, where the word for time and space is the same.<sup>90</sup> It is an unrealistic promise to declare a space “safe” and presume it to stay that way for every student, at all times. Who am I to presume that my singular actions have the power to resist all of the forces that make students feel unsafe? That is not to say that I shed my responsibility for addressing these

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<sup>89</sup> Massey, *For space*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2008), 52.



valid feelings of exclusion and threat, but simply to acknowledge that I can't serve as a balm to such pervasive oppression alone.

So it's clear that when space is assumed to be neutral or static, researchers and educators condone the insidious ways in which oppression operates through spatiality and place-making. We assume that the educational space is experienced similarly to students, or that the place of learning—like a college campus or a neighborhood—does not influence the phenomena that exist 'on its surface.' Importantly, there is also a positive freedom that we forgo when we ignore the role of space and place—the possibility of spatial imagination. Spatial imagination is the ability to “face up to the challenges of space... [and] to take on board its coeval multiplicities.”<sup>91</sup> It is to see space and place as ongoing constructions, constituted by a simultaneous multiplicity of meaning-laden interrelations and interactions. We do not need to accept space or place *as it is*, in all of its oppressions and settler-colonialist tendencies, but instead think about the spatial as a sphere of possibility to see and make space anew. In this sense, space and place can be understood as a “template for practice” or

an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways... Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, though the structure of place shapes and constrains what possibilities are open to subaltern students, seeing place as “performed” nonetheless draws attention to how students also *make* and *negotiate* place. This place-making gestures toward students' own individual endogenous acts of transgressions as well as the possibility of a more collective effort toward social and material change.

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<sup>91</sup> Massey, *For space*, 8.

<sup>92</sup> Cresswell, *Place*, 39.

Therefore, I resist the flattening of “space” in “safe space” and draw attention to the need for a kind of spatial imagination—to attune toward space as a dynamic factor in student learning and flourishing. As such, the first body chapter, chapter two, starts with space and place. In that chapter, I consider what affordances surface for DEI efforts in higher education when attuning to the spatial dimensions of safe space demands. By engaging with these spatial considerations, I hope that this dissertation expands the scope of what place-based structures are needed to support subaltern undergraduate students in hostile environments and recognize the resistant place-making practices that students already enact.

### Summary

Drawing from the existing literature on safe space, I offer a distinctive investigation of safety, risk, and place-making in light of a worthy telos for and with subaltern students. This dissertation offers four unique contributions to this body of literature. First, this dissertation finds common ground between the many safe space renditions in the recognition that any attempt to engage in risky learning—whether it is disagreement, precarity, contention, or transformation—necessitates the prerequisite condition of safety. Safety, therefore, cannot be afforded to be left behind, particularly when it comes to DEI efforts in higher education. Second, I also want to nuance that in the quest for safety as a threshold condition, campus stakeholders must be able to articulate a vision for what subaltern students gain access to. Being imaginative and visionary in our telos is as much of a DEI priority as access to a university education. Though important, we cannot be satisfied only with an instrumental end for our subaltern students. Minoritized students should be safe to participate in critical, transformative education, pursuing unsettling, risky

transformations in identity, beliefs, and values. Third, investigations of safe space cannot ignore the role of space and place. To do so risks defaulting to settler-colonialist definitions of space and occludes us from place-making with spatial imagination. Therefore, this dissertation directs equal attention not only to the “safety” pillar of safe space, but also to its spatial dimensions. Fourth, this spatial turn raises questions as to who serves as the architects of a place of learning, like a university campus, which attunes us to the agentic, quotidian practices of subaltern students to inform our quest for safety from harms and safety toward transformative higher education.

### **Methodology**

In what follows, I provide a justification for this investigation as a methodological hybrid comprising philosophical inquiry, in the spirit of educational philosophy and situated philosophy, and empirical methods, modeled after participatory design research (PDR). Neither method is able to satisfactorily answer the research questions at hand in isolation, but together, I am able to offer a strong conceptual account of place-making toward DEI and transformative liberal learning that is grounded in the lived experience of subaltern students.

### **Philosophical inquiry**

Though my research question could be interpreted as strictly technical question, culminating in a DEI checklist for practitioners at PWIs, I approach this investigation as an inquiry in educational philosophy. That certainly does not sideline the need for practical implications, as the results of my dissertation do offer concrete recommendations for stakeholders in higher education, including strategies I hope to apply to my own teaching

practice (chapter five). However, before offering possible safety and place-based interventions in PWI redesign, I want to slow us down to wrestle with the theoretical foundations and ethical implications of safe space. What about safety or safe space is worth preserving in an educational account? What or who is missing from current conceptualizations, and what are the consequences of those omissions for subaltern students? What are the covert assumptions that undergird existing arguments for or against safe space, and what are the dangers of keeping those presuppositions concealed? This intentional focus on theoretical underpinnings in the quest for pedagogical takeaways makes this dissertation well suited to the tradition of educational philosophy. My understanding of the field is inspired in large part by the framing of educational philosophy practiced by philosopher and liberal educator, Chris Higgins. Higgins offers an expansive definition of what counts as an “educational” question, predicated on an underlying foundation of philosophical anthropology and ethics/politics. He arranges these three concerns into an “educational-philosophical triangle,” whose apex suggests, “What facilitates human growth?” as the broad question animating pedagogical investigations.<sup>93</sup> This characterization of educational inquiry forces us to wrestle with the rich normative questions that inform education but are not typically seen as within the purview of educational research. Higgins invites us to expand what counts as an educational concern through an explicit (re)turn toward the perennial questions about the human condition, deliberations about justice and freedom, and dilemmas concerning truth, belief, and values which have long animated the humanities. For example, on the side of ethics in the educational-philosophical triangle, Higgins asserts that

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<sup>93</sup> Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 259.

efforts to provoke and foster growth in human beings always rely on more or less worked-out notions of what constitutes human flourishing. Without a vision of the good life for human beings, one would not be able to make the countless qualitative educational decisions all educators must make. When teachers decide to adopt this tone rather than that, or to include one activity rather than another, they do so because they think that it will be better for their students. But ‘better’ is just a way of saying ‘closer to good’, and about matters of good there are no easy answers.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, when an educator opts to describe their learning environment as a “safe space” (or not), this choice reveals some conceptualization about what is worth striving for—a notion of human flourishing as constituted by a sense of security and a vision of the good life as one where each member of the community sees each other’s safety as essential and worth cultivating. Educational philosophy, thereby, is a resource in making the ethical and political dimensions of teaching and learning explicit. Attuning to educational inquiry as the facilitation of human flourishing also unveils underlying anthropological assumptions, about what or who is being educated, the nature and condition of the person, and what parts of the human are educable. For example, when free speech defenders posit that succumbing to safe space demands will only enable students’ impractical hypersensitivity, they offer a vision of a person whose capacity to encounter the world is mediated through the toughness or tenderness of their skin, and that universities should be held responsible for nurturing that quality.

As I tried to make clear with my application of Higgins’ educational-philosophical triangle to the controversies about safe space in higher education, I envision my investigation to fall squarely within the scope of educational philosophy. The spirit of this endeavor is pedagogical; I seek to explore how PWIs can better facilitate the growth of subaltern

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<sup>94</sup> Higgins, 259.

students, given that I am unsatisfied with the visions of the good and the educated person undergirding existing claims for or against safe space.

### *Situated philosophy*

However, I am also keenly aware of the critiques of philosophy, one of the most prominent being the assessment that philosophy's dealings with abstraction, universal concepts, and theoretical considerations leave it floating above everyday interactions and material realities. Nicholas Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz characterize this view of philosophy using Thomas Nagel's phrase, "the view from nowhere," which insinuates that philosophy has been implemented as a practice of "distanced objectivity," untethered to particular contexts, communities, or time periods, but instead grounded in "timeless" dilemmas of reason, value, and truth.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, there are certainly merits to this critique, as delineated by an evaluation of the ways that philosophy is typically practiced:

By and large, today, philosophy is a highly institutionalized and professionalized discipline, carried out by academics working in universities. To be sure, ordinary people in all sorts of circumstances do thinking that can be considered philosophical—but almost none of what they do is preserved or added to the record of what is counted as 'philosophy.' That record is controlled almost entirely by university programs, journal and book publishers, conferences, and professional organizations that apply the label 'philosophy' to work that they deem of sufficient merit and importance to deserve to be discussed and passed along to future generations.<sup>96</sup>

What Burbules and Abowitz draw attention to is the worrisome tendency for philosophy, though not exclusively, to become an insular practice, isolated in the ivory tower and divorced from the everyday activities and thinking of "ordinary people." In these cases, it is easy to mischaracterize philosophical inquiry as only affordable to the privileged few, who can transcend the quotidian urgencies to contemplate recurring dilemmas that are by

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<sup>95</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "A Situated Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education* 64 (2008): 268–76, <https://doi.org/10.47925/2008.268>.

<sup>96</sup> Burbules and Abowitz, 269.

definition, always provisional and never fully closed. The opposite approach to philosophy, however, also comes with its own misgivings. The “completely historicized” view, according to Burbules and Abowitz, emphasizes the intensely contextual and contingent nature of phenomena, embedded within a matrix of power hierarchies, which renders any plausible theorization always partisan and subjective. This approach deliberately orients toward the particular—accounting for the nuance of a standpoint, the distinctive dynamics of power in a given encounter, or the influence of a unique time and place on a phenomenon. Indeed, this orientation seems to offer more radical ways of grappling with the material conditions of particular groups or communities yet concedes the possibility of making any generalizable claims or attempts at theory that hold across time or context. Out of this tension, Burbules and Abowitz offer the practice of “situated philosophy,” which draws from precursors like pragmatism and Marxism, to strike a virtuous balance between these two vices. Situated philosophy is a self-critical mode of inquiry “always carried out by real, material people in all their imperfections and circumstances,” yet share a common commitment to “addressing important and existentially recurrent human problems and concerns” through resources of logic, argumentation, and reason that are open to revision.<sup>97</sup> It is to see itself as an ever-evolving practice, whose doing is not predetermined but actively renegotiated, given the particular people engaging in the action and the unique contexts in which it is applied. One important possibility that situated philosophy reveals is the promise of methodological hybridity, in which philosophy and empirical study work generatively in concert to answer educational philosophy questions.

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<sup>97</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, “A Situated Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 64 (2008): 269, 270, <https://doi.org/10.47925/2008.268>.

Walter Feinberg offers one version of this mixed method, which he deems “philosophical ethnography.” He envisions his practice honoring a long lineage of other empirically minded philosophers, like John Dewey, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre, who “[sought] to understand and refine everyday practice and local understandings, and...hold that philosophy needs to be grounded in the activities, understandings and problems of everyday life.”<sup>98</sup> For Feinberg, he found that ethnographic observations and interviews served as fertile ground for sourcing rich philosophical questions, including ones about the role that religious education can play in the ethical formation of a liberal democracy. This attuning to the everyday is also captured in Cornel West’s insistence on philosophy as a response to the “funk of life,” the messy predicaments and contradictory dimensions of any lived experience.<sup>99</sup> bell hooks’ reflections on pain also emphasize the liberatory possibilities of theorizing from the margins: “It is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location. I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys.”<sup>100</sup> What each of these examples pave the way for is a kind of philosophy that is enriched by experience and attention to the particularities of everyday life. Therefore, it might be the case, as it was for Rachel Wahl, whose investigation of ethical formation as a resource for political responsibility, was grounded in interviews with 21 secular and evangelical students who participated in a deliberative dialogue with one another about “politics in the age of

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<sup>98</sup> Walter Feinberg. “Philosophical Ethnography: Or, How Philosophy and Ethnography Can Live Together in the World of Educational Research.” *Educational Studies in Japan* 1, no. 0 (2006): 6.  
<https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.1.5>.

<sup>99</sup> Cornel West, “Afterword: Philosophy and the Funk of Life.” In *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, ed. George Yancy (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 346–362.

<sup>100</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.



Trump.”<sup>101</sup> Or, in the case of Terri Wilson, a philosophical mode of inquiry shaped her *approach* to interviewing parents about their school choices, attending to the “morally complex and value-laden dimensions” of their decision-making.<sup>102</sup> She was not attempting to describe and catalogue parents’ preferences, as other social science research on parental choice had done, but instead sought to explore the moral tensions that parents faced and to consider their ethical deliberations in making theoretical claims about how to weigh the limits of parental rights in education. What I conclude from this tradition of situated philosophy, is not that philosophy can tolerate social science methods or is supplemented well by empirical data, but that the philosophy itself is more robust, engaged, and informed when practiced within everyday contexts, in conversation with communities who hold a stake in the issues at hand.

### **Empirical methods**

I take inspiration for my mixed methods dissertation from this body of literature operating at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences. I see this dissertation as an inquiry in philosophy of education that is more ethically grounded and intellectually sound with participation from students so often at the heart of the safe space debates—subaltern students who champion safe space, who are characterized as “snowflakes,” who have the most to lose or gain from the deliberations of safety, risk, and critical, transformative education. Indeed, I cannot investigate the nature of negative and positive

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<sup>101</sup> Rachel Wahl, “Risky Receptivity in the Time of Trump: The Political Significance of Ethical Formation.” *Philosophy of Education* 74 (2018): 651–63. <https://doi.org/10.47925/74.651>.

<sup>102</sup> Terri S. Wilson. “Exploring the Moral Complexity of School Choice: Philosophical Frameworks and Contributions.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (March 2015): 187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-014-9417-4>.

safety *for* subaltern students without partnering *with* them. To do so would be to risk reproducing historical inequalities and hierarchies, where the researcher is able to generate knowledge and accumulate accolades without accountability to the communities in which their research is meant to serve. Therefore, partnering with subaltern students is crucial on ethical grounds, to ensure that my research isn't merely self-serving but addresses the problems that arise from participants' material realities, advances their dreams and desires, and their bears witness to their everyday experience.

A commitment to ethical processes of partnering is also an epistemological stance.<sup>103</sup> Too often, those who are recognized as knowledge producers mimics the existing hierarchies of oppression. In this dissertation, I draw upon academic texts from scholars across the disciplines alongside the voices and narratives of my student participants. I juxtapose contributions by Doreen Massey, Eammon Callan, and Tim Cresswell with excerpts from conversations with Anita, Lucia, Patrick, Tyler, Andromeda, and Mateo—an arrangement that establishes parity between interlocutors as valuable sources of expertise and funds of knowledge. This engagement with student participants is grounded in the particular, textured by the quotidian details of each student's unique navigation of hostile campus environments and their own efforts toward place-making. In this spirit, I am committed to the process of “accompaniment” from liberation psychology: learning how to “walk with those on the

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<sup>103</sup> Indeed, this dual classification is often associated with Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Participatory Design Research (PDR) which informs the empirical study embedded in this dissertation. For inspiration, see Michelle Fine, “Troubling Calls for Evidence: A Critical Race, Class and Gender Analysis of Whose Evidence Counts,” *Feminism & Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2011): 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511435475>; Patricia Krueger, “It's NOT Just a Method! The Epistemic and Political Work of Young People's Lifeworlds at the School-Prison Nexus,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 13, no. 3 (2010): 383–408; and Susan Strega, “The View from the Poststructuralist Margins: Epistemology and Methodology Reconsidered,” in *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Susan Strega and Leslie Brown, Second (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press. Women's Press, 2013), 119–52.

margins, to be with them, to let go.”<sup>104</sup> Literally and symbolically, this study is an attempt “to walk in the company” of my subaltern students, building trust, bearing witness, and taking their lead.<sup>105</sup>

### *Site of study*

Boston College (BC) is situated on the unceded lands of the Massachusett and Pawtucket nations. It was chosen as the purposive site of study, not because it served as an explicit site of safe space and free speech controversy, but because it is an elite PWI that struggles with exceedingly similar claims of a hostile campus climate, particularly in recent years. In terms of demographics, BC is predominantly and historically White (e.g. the class of 2026 is approximately 56% White);<sup>106</sup> socioeconomically elite, with 70% of BC students coming from families with incomes in the top 20% (>\$110,000) and 16% of students from families in the top 1% of the wealth distribution in 2013;<sup>107</sup> and largely heterosexual and gender-normative, as reflected in public testimonies by queer students over the years.<sup>108</sup> BC has served as the site of several race-based and bias-based incidents in the past five years that have made many student groups feel targeted, excluded, and less safe on campus. For example, in October 2017, two “Black Lives Matter” signs in a college dormitory were defaced to read “Black Lives Don’t Matter,” while a derogatory Snapchat sourced from BC students reading “I like my steak and cheese like I like my slaves” circulated on social

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<sup>104</sup> Marie Dennis and Cynthia Mo-Lobeda, *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 21.

<sup>105</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 238.

<sup>106</sup> Boston College, “First-Year Admission Profile,” Boston College, 2022, <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/admission/apply/admission-statistics.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Raj Chetty et al., “Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes: Boston College,” Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility (The Equality of Opportunity Project through Harvard University, July 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/boston-college>.

<sup>108</sup> Scott Baker, “A Message To Prospective Students: Boston College Is Still Homophobic,” *The Heights*, April 11, 2021, <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/04/11/a-message-to-prospective-students-homophobia-at-boston-college/>; Benajmin Burke, “Only As Catholic As You Make It...,” *The Heights*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.bcheights.com/2022/10/02/only-as-catholic-as-you-make-it/>.

media.<sup>109</sup> This incident was followed by subsequent vandalism of campus dormitory property with racial slurs by a BC student in December 2018<sup>110</sup> and targeted defacement of the only multicultural hall on campus and taunting of its residents of Color in 2020 and 2021.<sup>111</sup> This pattern of racial harassment demonstrates blatant examples of racism on campus that have led students of Color at BC to organize protests and demand actions from the college administration to rectify the racially hostile college campus.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, many queer students and alumni have been pressuring BC for gender-inclusive language in university policies, the establishment of an institutionalized LGBTQ+ resource center, and gender-neutral housing to no avail, even as recent as March 2023.<sup>113</sup> It is within this oppressive context for subaltern students that this study is embedded.

### ***Participants***

Each of the six student participants in this study held some constellation of salient marginalized identities in the BC context along axes of race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. Their specific demographic information is included in table 1.1. As the table shows, they also had privileges, which often remained obscured in our conversations and activities together given how much students hued to their marginalization. This differentiated weight was not uncommon, for one of the fundamental qualities of privilege is the extent to which one's unearned advantages can remain invisible if not for vigilant

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<sup>109</sup> Cole Dady, "Black Lives Matter Signs Defaced In Roncalli," *The Heights*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.bcheights.com/2017/10/15/black-lives-matter-sign-defaced-roncalli/>.

<sup>110</sup> Jack Goldman and Jack Miller, "UGBC Passes Resolution in Response to Racist Vandalism," *The Heights*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.bcheights.com/2018/12/11/ugbc-passes-resolution-in-response-to-racist-vandalism/>.

<sup>111</sup> Haley Hockin, Julia Kiersznowski, and Megan Kelly, "MLE Residents Report Pattern of Harassment In Xavier Hall," *The Heights*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/02/05/mle-residents-report-pattern-of-harassment-in-xavier-hall/>.

<sup>112</sup> UGBC Student Assembly, "A Resolution Demanding A Comprehensive Institutional Response to Racism At Boston College" (Chesnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 2018).

<sup>113</sup> "Support LGBTQ+ Students at Boston College," Change.org, n.d., <https://www.change.org/p/father-leahy-support-lgbtq-students-at-boston-college>.

awareness and ongoing reflexivity.<sup>114</sup> Thus, students' dearth of attention to their privilege, such as their able-bodiedness or religious affiliations, did not undermine their lived experiences of marginalization but certainly signaled an area of growth in their consciousness and in my own orientation toward addressing privilege in my research protocols moving forward. Given the intensive and relational nature of this protocol, the participants invited to this project were former students of mine, except for one student recruited via snowball sampling, interested in deepening an established relationship and engaging in rehabilitating her own campus space.<sup>115</sup>

Table 1.1. Participant demographics						
Name (pseudonym)	Racial/ethnic identity	Gender	Socioeconomic status <sup>116</sup>	Sexuality	Religious Affiliation	Ability Status
Andromeda	Asian (Chinese)	Cisgender woman	High-income	Heterosexual	Spiritual/Buddhism	Able-bodied
Anita	Asian (Malaysian)	Transgender woman	Low-middle-income	Queer (as a result of being trans*, because she is heterosexual following her gender transition)	Spiritual/Catholicism	Able-bodied
Lucia	Latinx (Mexican)	Cisgender woman	Low-income	Queer	Catholicism	Able-bodied
Mateo	Latinx (Mexican)	Cisgender man	Low-income	Heterosexual	Catholicism	Able-bodied
Patrick	Biracial, Black (African-American)/White	Cisgender man	Middle-high-income	Heterosexual	Background in Catholicism	Able-bodied
Tyler	White (Irish/Dutch)	Cisgender woman	Low-income	Queer	Spiritual/Quaker, Buddhism, Catholicism	Able-bodied

*Participatory design research*

The qualitative components of this study were modeled after participatory design research (PDR), a specific branch of design-based research (DBR) methods that is distinctive in its collaboration with communities situated within the learning environments in which researchers seek to mediate.<sup>117</sup> Though DBR foregrounds partnership to some extent, I echo Megan Bang and Shirin Vossoughi's criticism that too often, "design decisions in much of design research are typically made by 'experts' who inhabit privileged positions in the world".<sup>118</sup> Without deliberate attunement to "processes of partnering," the interventions that designers offer, however open to iteration, can risk reifying the structural patterns of oppression that community members face or diminishing the quotidian design activities that subaltern groups already enact in combating threats of erasure or violence.<sup>119</sup> In this spirit, the goal of this project was not to implement a pre-determined material intervention, like a new curriculum, tool, or program, but to focus on developing new subject-subject and

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<sup>114</sup> Peggy McIntosh's widely circulated text on the "invisible knapsack" of White privilege is a quintessential example. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack (1989) 1," in *On Privilege, Fraudulence, and Teaching As Learning*, by Peggy McIntosh, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), 29–34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351133791-4>.

<sup>115</sup> Charlie Parker, Sam Scott, and Alistair Geddes, "Snowball sampling," in *SAGE research methods foundations*, ed. Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, and Richard A. Williams (New York: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019).

<sup>116</sup> SES was determined using Pew Research Center's standards, which state that the "middle class" income range is determined by two-thirds of the median weekly earnings on the lower end, with double weekly earnings on the higher end. This column was informed by the 2023 weekly median earnings from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in which a student qualifies as middle class if their familial income was roughly between \$57,000-\$114,000. Jesse Bennett, Richard Fry, and Rakesh Kochhar, "Are You in the American Middle Class? Find out with Our Income Calculator," Pew Research Center, July 23, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/23/are-you-in-the-american-middle-class/>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers; Fourth Quarter 2023," Economic News Release, Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers, January 18, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf>.

<sup>117</sup> Megan Bang and Shirin Vossoughi, "Participatory Design Research and Educational Justice: Studying Learning and Relations Within Social Change Making," *Cognition and Instruction* 34, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 173–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2016.1181879>.

<sup>118</sup> Bang and Vossoughi, "Participatory Design Research and Educational Justice," 174.

<sup>119</sup> Bang and Vossoughi, 175.

subject-object relations as an essential starting point. An orientation toward research as a relational activity prioritizes the development of stronger, non-hierarchical relations between participants and between the participant and researcher. The activities in this project sought to elicit students' own relations to the campus place as a foundation for co-designing a learning environment in which risky projects are possible, drawing on critical historicity and structural critique as essential resources. This approach aligns with Kris Gutiérrez and Shirin Vossoughi's description of design as a remediating activity:

The object of university and community/school/teachers' work is to engage in joint activity to redesign the learning ecology so that ongoing opportunities for all participants to engage in robust learning practices are the norm; where interrogating historical, structural, institutional, and sociocultural contradictions is viewed as generative and as an expansive form of learning.<sup>120</sup>

In this case, the design “intervention”—how PWIs should be redesigned to promote critical, transformative learning—should arise as a result of collective activity. This emphasis on the joint production of remediating a campus place of learning in relationship with community participants made PDR a prime candidate for this dissertation. Furthermore, the Design-Based Research Collective makes clear that “design-based research goes beyond merely designing and testing particular interventions. Interventions embody specific theoretical claims about teaching and learning and reflect a commitment to understanding the relationships among theory, designed artifacts, and practice.”<sup>121</sup> Therefore, DBR and PDR share simultaneous commitments to the design of learning contexts as well as developing related theories of learning ingrained within that design. This emphasis on theory-building resonates well with the existing framework of situated philosophy of education.

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<sup>120</sup> Kris D Gutiérrez and Shirin Vossoughi. “Lifting Off the Ground to Return Anew: Mediated Praxis, Transformative Learning, and Social Design Experiments.” *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 1–2 (January 2010): 102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347877>.

<sup>121</sup> The Design-Based Research Collective, “Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 1 (January 2003): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032001005>.

***Data collection***

Relationality and participation were foundational touchstones in the design and implementation of this research project. First, research participants were invited to collaborate to the extent that they had interest and capacity at each step in the research process (design, collection, analysis, reporting) and within each research activity. For example, during the first interview, participants were prompted to ask their own questions of the researcher, so that the interview built a sense of reciprocal rapport, rather than unidimensional extraction. In the shared walk, participants directed our path, the places we visited, and moments of stillness. Student participants were also invited to provide feedback about each activity, engage in data analysis, report on the data, and make decisions about what actions should follow from the research findings. This participatory aspect of the research was deliberate and central to the PDR design, as it provided ample opportunities for the research design to be iterated upon and shaped by those with the closest experience to the research topic. In the tradition of PDR, the goal of this research was to stimulate creativity and collective work in order to design more just futures, which can only occur when the research design is responsive to the participants and the complexity (or dynamism) of the activity system.

Second, all the participants invited to this project were former students of mine (whether I was their formal instructor or a teaching assistant), except for one student who was recommended by Lucia. Lucia mentioned at the end of her initial interview that her friend, Anita, has a “theory of white space on campus” and was interested after hearing about Lucia’s participation and relationship with me. This prior relationship between a teacher and student, or trust by proxy, was a critical foundation for our research activities because there was already an established rapport and sense of trust. Many of these students



expressed critical perspectives in class about marginalization and some dissatisfaction with the university, and most of these students had engaged in informal conversations with me about the inspiration for my research. These prior interactions indicated a mutual interest and point of convergence that helped to nurture a deeper connection between us prior to the start of the study. Though this existing relationship might be subject to critiques of bias, my approach again reinforces the relational orientation to research which, in Shirin Vossoughi and Miguel Zavala's words, "prioritized collective thinking rather than information extraction."<sup>122</sup> I was not a researcher seeking to simply mine information from my students; my intention was to deepen our relationship, such that they felt able to share their experiences and participate in co-constructing meaning about their relationship to hostile places and their processes of place-making and cultivating safety. In this way, our established relationship served as an important starting point for a more genuine partnership in developing ideas and generating theory.

The relationship between a student and their place of learning was also the explicit focus of the research activities. The PDR study included three scaffolded elements (described in greater detail below, with protocols in the Appendix): a semi-structured initial interview, a walking interview, and a community focus group. Taken together, these three activities produced eight sources of data: audio transcripts, participant self-portraits, GPS maps of shared walks, photographs from the walk, a video recording, written participant reflections, focus group thematic posters, and reflective memos written by the researcher.

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<sup>122</sup> Shirin Vossoughi and Miguel Zavala, "The Interview as Pedagogical Encounter," in *Critical Youth Research in Education*, by H. Samy Alim, ed. Arshad I. Ali and Teresa L. McCarty (New York: Routledge, 2020), 146, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429277863-11>.

Table 1.2 illustrates the artifacts that have been generated from each stage of the data collection process.

Table 1.2. Data collection and artifacts			
Research Activity	1) Introductory Interview	2) Walking Interview	3) Community Focus Group
Modality	1:1 with participant and researcher	1:1 with participant and researcher	All 5 participants convene together *one participant took an unexpected medical leave and could no longer participate*
Artifacts Generated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 audio transcripts</li> <li>• 6 self-portraits depicting how the participant visualizes themselves at BC</li> <li>• Researcher memos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 audio transcripts</li> <li>• 20 photographs taken by the participant or researcher</li> <li>• 6 GPS generated routes of the walk taken with each participant</li> <li>• Researcher memos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 audio transcript</li> <li>• 1 video</li> <li>• 5 written handouts</li> <li>• 6 posters with handwritten post-its from participants to gauge their resonance with researcher-identified themes from the first two activities</li> <li>• Researcher memos</li> </ul>

*Introductory interview.* The first interview featured questions about the participant's identity, background, and how they found their way to this university. Prominent in this interview was a self-portrait activity, which drew inspiration from arts-based inquiry and aesthetics as a fertile avenue for evoking self-expression in multiple modalities.<sup>123</sup> The self-portrait exercise asked students to draw themselves in relation to their campus place, elaborating on what parts of themselves they felt were celebrated and affirmed, which parts seemed irrelevant, and which parts they felt needed to be hidden away in this environment. I

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<sup>123</sup> One example comes from PAR researchers M. Brinton Lykes and Alison Crosby's use of drawing with Mayan women in their study. M. Brinton Lykes and Alison Crosby, "Creative Methodologies as a Resource for Mayan Women's Protagonism," in *Psychosocial Perspectives on Peacebuilding*, ed. Brandon Hamber and Elizabeth Gallagher, Peace Psychology Book Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 147–86, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09937-8\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09937-8_5).

also completed this activity alongside them. Then, students were asked to consider the affective ties they have with their place of learning (i.e. What are some of your strongest emotional responses when you think about your university?) and what people, places, memories were associated with those feelings. This exercise was influenced by Christian Ehret and Ty Hollett's provocation to recognize how affect “texture[s] social relations between coparticipants, place, and the production of learning outcomes that continuously (re)constitute the feeling of being in place together.”<sup>124</sup> Finally, participants were asked to consider transformation—the ways in which they have or have not changed while here at BC and the significance of those transformations. They were also asked to share the changes they witnessed or implemented at BC, as well as articulate some vision or hope for the evolution of their university environment. Overall, this interview sought to elicit participants’ affective responses to place and probe for how their subject-subject and subject-place relations were shaped in turn.

*Walking interview.* The second research activity centered on the action of walking or moving together with others as a crucial resource for deepening relationality. This walking interview was designed in alignment with Marin and colleagues’ Learning on the Move framework, which recognizes mobility as a historical everyday practice, embedded within communities as a means of “human sense-making, learning, and world-making.”<sup>125</sup> A key movement in this framework is the pedestrian activity of walking. I recognize that walking as a methodology draws upon ableist assumptions. However, it is important to note that I do

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<sup>124</sup> Christian Ehret and Ty Hollett, “Affective Dimensions of Participatory Design Research in Informal Learning Environments: Placemaking, Belonging, and Correspondence,” *Cognition and Instruction* 34, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2016.1169815>.

<sup>125</sup> Ananda Marin, Katie Headrick Taylor, Ben Rydal Shapiro, and Rogers Hall. “Why Learning on the Move: Intersecting Research Pathways for Mobility, Learning and Teaching.” *Cognition and Instruction* 38, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2020.1769100>.

not limit “walking” to being upright and bipedal. Instead, the spirit of walking in this activity is inspired by disability activist Sunaura Taylor’s use of the term in a documentary entitled *The Examined Life*, featuring walks with eight philosophers as they contemplate the impact of their ideas.<sup>126</sup> In conversation with Judith Butler, Taylor is intentional about calling her movement in a wheelchair a “stroll” or a “walk,” because it signals a kind of routine, wandering activity that is not and should not be limited to the able-bodied, bipedal persons. Taylor’s use of the term echoes Marin’s sentiments, who describes walking “as a multimodal and locomotive activity in which we use our limbs and perceptual systems to experience the world.”<sup>127</sup> It is a way of moving—whether on your feet, on wheels, with a cane, or with prosthetics—that attunes you to your embodied experience of a space. However, that is not to diminish the realities that social spaces constrain the degree to which this kind of strolling is accessible. Taylor describes accessibility as her primary motivation to move to San Francisco—a place where curb cuts, ramps, and building elevators can be taken for granted. One walk around BC sends a very different message about who is able to walk freely and meander about the space. However, these are exactly the kinds of critical, embodied cues that walking or moving about a place can evoke.

Therefore, I offer that walking enriches relationality in at least two ways. First, the practice of walking alongside another person holds the possibility of nurturing a shared “co-presence,” which Jo Lee and Tim Ingold describe as a distinctive possibility for deep social engagement, “where shared movement is the basis for shared understanding of each other in

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<sup>126</sup> Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor. *Examined Life*, directed by Astra Taylor (2009; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2010), Youtube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0HZaPkF6qE>

<sup>127</sup> Ananda Maria Marin. “Ambulatory Sequences: Ecologies of Learning by Attending and Observing on the Move.” *Cognition and Instruction* 38, no. 3 (2020): 9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2020.1767104>.

a holistic rather than ocularcentric manner.”<sup>128</sup> Lee and Ingold illustrate the potential in “walking with” others, which resonates with the literature on accompaniment as a commitment to going along with another and being present in their journey. The relational possibilities are enriched by synchronous motion and shared orientation, rather than primacy of eye-to-eye contact. As Misha Myers elaborates, rather than focusing only on the other person’s eyes, talking while walking directs the walkers’ attention “at and within the world through which they move.”<sup>129</sup> This change in bodily orientation provides openings for a different level of reflective conversation and level of sociability with others.

Second, the ability to regularly walk or move around a location has been associated with a distinctive attunement to place. bell hooks, for example, emphasizes walking as a crucial criterion in her quest for a place to belong: “I need to live where I can walk. I need to be able to walk to work, to the store, to a place where I can sit and drink tea and fellowship. Walking, I will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place.”<sup>130</sup> In this passage, hooks names walking as a primary mode of developing kinship and thick relations to a place where she can call home. Inspired by hooks, this research activity capitalizes on walking as an avenue toward revealing participants’ ties to place—where do subaltern students feel safe enough to meander, to sit and dwell, or to claim belonging? What can we learn about their relationship to their campus place by tracing their paths of movement and pause, by juxtaposing it with the narratives, memories, or critiques that are provoked at each point along the line?

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<sup>128</sup> Jo Lee and Tim Ingold, “Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing,” in *Perceiving the World: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, ed. Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Routledge, 2006), 82.

<sup>129</sup> Myers, Misha. “Walking Again Lively: Towards an Ambulant and Conversive Methodology of Performance and Research.” *Mobilities* 6, no. 2 (2011): 188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2011.5527>.

<sup>130</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

The affordances of co-present walking apply when it comes to attuning to place as well. Moving with another person through a familiar place can prompt one to see the place anew, spark remembered histories, or forge new relations with the lands and waters that one sees along the way. If the way a place is experienced is tied with one's subjectivity, then the effort to align your vision with another person's vista, adjust your gait to their movements, and to turn away from the same possible threats at your back also offers possibilities of altering your relation to place as a result of another person's standpoint.<sup>131</sup> Applied directly to this study, Jessica Harris speaks to the possibilities associated with using a walking interview as a qualitative tool to gather in situ understandings of campus climate as experienced by students of Color and generating opportunities for empowerment and change as a result.<sup>132</sup>

In this spirit, I harnessed the potential of shared walks and learning on the move in this study to imbue talk with embodied and sensorial experience. This walking interview followed the initial "sit down" interview, beginning at a place on campus decided upon at the conclusion of the last meeting. The walk was audio recorded using HMKCH Wireless Lavalier Microphones, with one microphone clipped to each ambulator's shirt and the transmitter plugged into the researcher's iPhone. The walk was also mapped using the Apple iPhone application Map My Run, using GPS technology. The participant was encouraged to take photographs during the walk, when they felt moved to capture something about their

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<sup>131</sup> In Lee and Ingold's chapter, "Fieldwork on Foot," they begin by recounting an anecdote from Clifford Geertz during his anthropological fieldwork with the Balinese. He and his wife felt alienated from the community until the police raided a local cockfight and Geertz and his wife ended up running alongside the community members, away from the police. It was this side-by-side orientation, retreating from the same threat, that was the breakthrough in gaining entry to this community. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 413-17; Lee and Ingold, "Fieldwork on Foot," 67.

<sup>132</sup> Jessica Harris, "Utilizing the Walking Interview to Explore Campus Climate for Students of Color," *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 53, no. 4 (October 2016): 365-77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2016.1194284>.

environment. This prompt is modeled in the spirit of PhotoVoice, a data collection method which encourages participants to document salient aspects of their experience via photographs.<sup>133</sup> As a fellow walker, I also took photographs during the walk to document meaningful stops or places. These photographs served as artifacts to triangulate data between audio transcripts and GPS-data generated routes of the walk. A full protocol for this interview is available in the Appendix.

*Community focus group.* The third research activity was a community workshop that applied focus group methodology in the sense that it was a social, collaborative experience which sought to “[paint] a portrait of combined local perspectives.”<sup>134</sup> Though the group environment raised some tensions, like peer pressure or different levels of familiarity amongst students, the social gathering also created openings for collective sense-making, knowledge-generating, and solidarity-building amongst participants, which are central goals for this PDR project. I took lead in designing and facilitating the conversation, but the workshop featured opportunities for students to reflect about their experiences and engage with their peers through verbal discussion, written reflections, and interactive exercises.

First, students were provided with their own unique artifact portfolio that included a transcript of their initial interview and accompanying self-portrait, a GPS map of their walking interview tracing our route, and photographs taken on the walking interview. I asked each student to re-familiarize themselves with their artifacts, which served as a resource for them to offer independent written reflections and patterns for the large group to consider. Following large group discussion, students partook in an interactive activity to respond to six

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<sup>133</sup> Wendy Luttrell, *Children Framing Childhoods: Working-Class Kids' Visions of Care*, 1st ed. (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/9781447353324/type/book>.

<sup>134</sup> Nancy Grudens-Schuck, Beverlyn Lundy Allen, and Kathlene Larson, “Methodology Brief: Focus Group Fundamentals,” *Extension Community and Economic Development Publications*, 2004, 3.

different patterns that emerged from the researcher's precursory analysis of the data. These preliminary themes included:

- Navigating the dominant BC student 'culture'
- Extracurricular clubs, organizations, activities (e.g. culture clubs, retreats, immersions, etc)
- BC academic/student services
- Housing/roommates
- Academic school/major associations
- BC administration/leadership.

The purpose of this activity was to offer themes arising from preliminary researcher content analysis as an object of common concern to connect these five students (as one participant, Tyler, took unexpected medical leave and could not participate in this final activity). After some individual reflection about the way each theme resonated or diverged from their BC experience, students drew upon their contributions as leverage to discuss the challenges with BC and to come to some collective insights about how their campus ecology needs to be redesigned to be more conducive to their own learning experiences.

### **Data analysis and “mixing” methods**

I used Otter.ai to transcribe audio data from all three research activities, then Atlas.ti qualitative research software for the coding and analysis of empirical data. Each of the transcripts was analyzed iteratively in three rounds, modeled after the code mapping system delineated by Vincent Anfara, Kathleen Brown, and Terri Mangione.<sup>135</sup> Each transcript was analyzed by me alongside its corresponding artifacts, including the self-portrait in relation to place in interview one, the GPS-map of the walking interview route and photographs taken,

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<sup>135</sup> Vincent A. Anfara, Kathleen M. Brown, and Terri L. Mangione, “Qualitative Analysis on Stage: Making the Research Process More Public,” *Educational Researcher* 31, no. 7 (2002): 32.



and the written worksheets and interactive posters featured in the community focus group. The analysis of artifacts, transcripts, and researcher memos ensured adequate triangulation and that the resulting themes and patterns accurately represent participants' *in situ* experiences.

The first phase of coding involved surface content analysis related to the overarching themes of the dissertation including safety, risk, relationships to place, and transformation. At this point, I paused coding to continue reading and writing chapter two of the dissertation, which centered on spatial theory, resulting in insights about campuses as sites of spatial struggle and place-making power. In dialogue with this chapter, I returned to coding. I grouped initial codes into tentative patterns and themes, resulting in five provisional code groups (BC climate, identity, relational, temporal, and embodied) with several uncategorized codes. At this point, I also analyzed the walks using data from the Map My Run platform, which offered more detailed tracking regarding the pace of our walk and elevation, as well as multiple viewing filters (e.g. satellite imaging, topographical, map view). I took inspiration from walking methods practitioner Ananda's Marin's explicit call to name units of analysis (hers being ambulatory turns) and developed a simple spatial analysis with the GPS-generated data to identify what I have deemed "pauses of significance."<sup>136</sup> Using the "pace" visualization offered by Map My Run (see bottom graph of fig. 1.1), I highlighted sections when the pace nearly leveled out, indicating a period of pause or slowed movement, and cross checked it with the location on the map. If the location was crossed with thick lines, like Anita's walk depicted in figure 1.1, indicating overlapping movement in the same area, I

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<sup>136</sup> Ananda Maria Marin, "Ambulatory Sequences: Ecologies of Learning by Attending and Observing on the Move," *Cognition and Instruction* 38, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 1–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2020.1767104>.

captured the entirety of that pause as a point of significance, even if the pace fluctuated within that period. Other pauses were deemed significant if they corresponded with explicit mention by the student during the interview, resulting from the intersection of walking data



Figure 1.1. A highlighted pause of significance (31:39 minutes) on Anita's walk.

significant units of analysis as “speech objects,” which referred to “places mentioned by the interviewee.”<sup>137</sup>

This protocol was developed in large part because I could not find studies that analyzed data from non-technical interfaces (like Map My Run) that also resonated with the ethnographic spirit of the walk as a relationally rich and meaning-laden activity. On one extreme, there were studies that employed technical geographical algorithms from GPS-data which subsumed the ambulator's talk,<sup>138</sup> while on the other hand, studies that used Map My

and student's  
verbal  
emphasis.  
Other  
geography  
scholars have  
referred to  
this latter  
method of  
determining

<sup>137</sup> James Evans and Phil Jones, “The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place,” *Applied Geography* 31, no. 2 (April 2011): 852, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2010.09.005>.

<sup>138</sup> David Duran, Vera Sacristán, and Rodrigo I. Silveira, “Map Construction Algorithms: An Evaluation through Hiking Data,” in *Proceedings of the 5th ACM SIGSPATIAL International Workshop on Mobile Geographic Information Systems (SIGSPATIAL'16: 24th ACM SIGSPATIAL International Conference on Advances in Geographic Information Systems, Burlingame California: ACM, 2016)*, 74–83, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3004725.3004734>.

Run as a platform focused not on salient locations or pauses, but the shape of the line being drawn.<sup>139</sup> As such, my analysis loosely adapted Evans and Jones' process of creating a "spatial transcript" in which the verbal transcript is analyzed in concert with location on the map, with particular salience attributed to these pauses.<sup>140</sup> Each student's walk corresponded with one to three pauses of significance, ranging in duration from ~3-31 minutes. A look at each student's walk with marked pauses of significance is included in the Appendix.

I then coded the data again using the reorganized coding schema with the spatial analysis in mind before finishing the writing of chapter two, which culminated in a "campus geography cheat sheet" with several place-based prompts for campus leaders and educators to use in rehabilitating their own hostile campus environments. I used these spatial prompts to clarify my research questions for the data set, specifically asking: Informed by the experiences of six subaltern students, what is the normative geography of Boston College? What place-making practices did these six subaltern students use to navigate their hostile campus context? Analyzing the data a third time in light of these refined research questions led to the writing of chapters three and four in parallel, which informed the final (for now) coding schema depicted in my Codebook, available in the Appendix.

At this point, I also developed specialized summary documents for each of my participants, including all excerpts from the writing that drew on their narratives.<sup>141</sup> I sent these member check documents via email, inviting them to share whether my portrayal felt

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<sup>139</sup> Roshni Saxena et al., "Fit to Draw: An Elevation of Location-Based Exergames," in *Companion Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (CHI PLAY '23: The Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play, Stratford ON Canada: ACM, 2023), 312–17, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3573382.3616060>.

<sup>140</sup> Evans and Jones, "The Walking Interview," 853.

<sup>141</sup> I am grateful to Kate McNeill's advice on how to member check with participants in a way that felt responsive to my students' limited time and gave them opportunities to be a part of the writing as well. Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

authentic to their views and perspectives and if there was anything they would like to alter or clarify. I heard back with confirmation and clarifications from all students but Mateo.

However, my conversations and relationships with students are still ongoing, perhaps not always legitimated as “data,” but certainly as the community I feel accountable to as I consider the ramifications of this work on pedagogy (especially my own) and higher education.

What I hope this description of my data analysis procedure conveys is the extent to which I interpreted the empirical data and the humanistic texts in concert, such that the final written dissertation was jointly and iteratively produced. This process was meant to mirror the hermeneutical circle proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, reliant on repeated cycles between interpreting a part and the whole.<sup>142</sup> Each interpretation of a text (a part), whether an empirically-generated artifact, a philosophical essay, or theoretical account, brings me back to the overarching research questions of the project (the whole) with renewed vision and inspiration. This change in perception of the whole then shaped how I read and analyzed the next text and so on. As such, I toggled between coding (and organizing) my empirical data and interpreting (and applying) my philosophical data, and it was the iterative engagement of both in hermeneutical rounds that led to the main argument defended in this dissertation.

Therefore, though this methodology section was split into two parts, situated philosophy and PDR, my approach to data interpretation and synthesis was more holistic and interwoven in nature. I envisioned and wrote this dissertation as *one* project that sought to answer the research questions using the methods that were best suited, or said differently,

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<sup>142</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed., (New York: Continuum, 1975).

inviting the voices of those who have something important to contribute to this dialogue about safe spaces, place-making, and risky, transformative education. As such, in the chapters that follow, I drew upon a mix of sources in which the proportion of empirical to theoretical insights is contingent on the guiding research question animating that section. As such, each chapter has a varied composition that was developed iteratively, cycling through the hermeneutical circle.

### ***Looking ahead***

As a reminder, the overarching research question animating this inquiry is: Informed by the experiences of six minoritized undergraduate students, how can PWIs, like Boston College, be rehabilitated as places where risky, transformative education is possible? Each subsequent chapter targets a sub-question using a unique configuration of methods:

- What spatial theory is missing from current engagements with “safe space,” and how might expanded definitions of space improve the educational experiences of subaltern students? (*chapter two*)
- Informed by the experiences of six subaltern students, what is the normative geography of Boston College and what place-making practices did they use to navigate this context? (*chapter three*)
- What do current conceptualizations of safety get wrong, and how should safety be rehabilitated to actualize a risky, transformative model of higher education? (*chapter four*)
- What are working recommendations that educators, administrators, and students can apply to their own places of learning? What are possible openings for future lines of inquiry? (*conclusion*)

To elaborate, in Chapter two, In/Out of Place: The Spatial Struggle for “Home” on College Campuses, I start with the contention that safe space controversies should be framed as *spatial struggles* as opposed to only clashes of speech rights or developmental priorities. A spatial turn in appraising campus flashpoints reveals the “always already existing normative geography,” in which campus stakeholders vie for control over who and what is

deemed “out of place” or “in place” on campus.<sup>143</sup> This chapter develops a spatial framework in three parts for appraising campus geographies and situates it within a safe space controversy at Boston College raised by my former students. The BC case refers to a pattern of targeted vandalism and racialized taunting of the campus’ multicultural residential hall as a central example for why a more nuanced and multidimensional application of space is necessary to address the concerns raised by Lucia, a MLE resident, and other BC students of Color. Therefore, this chapter is characterized by place-based theory-building that draws upon empirical data as a key case study and illustration of spatial struggle.

Chapter three, *Subaltern Place-Making Practices: Navigating the Normative Geography of Boston College*, concretizes the place-based theory generated in the previous chapter by immersion into the particulars of one campus context and the experiences of six subaltern students therein. In this chapter, the narratives and practices of my students takes precedent. Informed by students’ experiences, I first unpack the contours of the normative BC geography based on mundane spatial cues, such as institutional policies or peer interactions, and illustrate the consequences of systemic out-of-placedness. Then, I attune to the resistant place-making tactics that subaltern students used to “mak[e] do” in hostile environments and consider what it is that campus administrators and educators might glean from recognizing subaltern students as active architects of campus space.<sup>144</sup> As such, this chapter prioritizes empirical findings but puts them in discussion with place-based concepts in chapter two. As a result, chapters two and three provide the foundation for building a risky, transformative model of higher education in chapter four.

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<sup>143</sup> Tim Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>144</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, 1. paperback pr., 8. [Repr.] (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 29.

Chapter four, entitled *Toward Educative Risk: Safety as a Spatial Condition for Critical, Transformative Higher Education*, proposes a rehabilitated version of “safety” and “safe space” that adequately contends with uneven campus geographies and the disproportionate impact of out-of-placedness on subaltern bodies. This chapter begins by directly addressing the critique that safe spaces outlaw discomfort and risk-taking, debunking the faulty assumption that safety is antithetical to risk. I introduce Judith Butler’s framework for ethics as a model for critical, transformative education that does not suppress risk or vulnerability, but necessitates it. As such, this chapter serves an integrative purpose, interweaving contributions from the previous three chapters to advance an educational model characterized by place-based safety thresholds, collective responsibility for student inhabitation, and the disproportionate labor costs of place-making practices on subaltern students. This culminating chapter thus draws on diverse sources comprising empirical, humanistic, and artistic texts in roughly equal measure.

Finally, the conclusion chapter delineates tentative guidelines for campus intervention based on this investigation into safe space. These recommendations are not prescriptive, but offer broad prompts that campus administrators, educators, and students can adapt to their own campus context. I close out the dissertation with possibilities for future avenues of research and inquiry.

If I were to give an oversimplified gloss, I would summarize that in chapter two, *In/Out of Place*, an empirical campus case illustrates the need for place-based theory. Meanwhile, in chapter three, *Subaltern Place-Making Practices*, it is reversed: a theoretical framework helps to notice and enrich empirical findings about a particular campus setting and community of students. Chapter four, *Toward Educative Risk*, then draws equally on diverse humanistic and empirical sources to propose an integrative model with applications

for inclusive, critical transformative pedagogy and practice in higher education. Though this abstract might make the process seem neat and tidy, the actual practice of synthesis was messy and extraordinarily challenging. I often struggled with bringing the sources together in a way that did justice to each narrative and voice and the tradition of each method. However, the messiness is true to the process of iteration characterized both by hermeneutics and by design-based research (perhaps, even, an homage to the inherent messiness of the “funk of life”).<sup>145</sup> Each cycle of reading, analyzing, interpreting, and writing altered how I, as the key research conduit, understood the relationship between safety, place-making, risk, and transformation. This dissertation represents one stage in this evolving process.

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<sup>145</sup> Cornel West, “Afterword: Race Matters: Philosophy in the Funk,” in *Prophetic Leadership and Visionary Hope: New Essays on the Work of Cornel West*, ed. Barbara Will (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 193–200.



## INTERLUDE TWO

## Take a Walk with Me

In this interlude, I invite you to match your gait with mine. With each footstep, I hope to show you a bit about how my angle on the world affects my approach to this dissertation. This project was fundamentally grounded in the relationships that were forged between a teacher and her students, which established a foundation of trust and rapport that allowed for honest testimonies to be shared. To draw on Richard Rorty’s language, this project was born out of the “sparks that leap[ed] back and forth between teacher and student, connecting them in a relationship that has little to do with socialization but much to do with self-creation.”<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the power of these sparks can be found in my own self-portraits, which I drafted alongside my students in Interview 1.

Across all of my self-portraits, my identity as a teacher was represented in every drawing, whether it was depicted as a chalkboard, an interconnected classroom

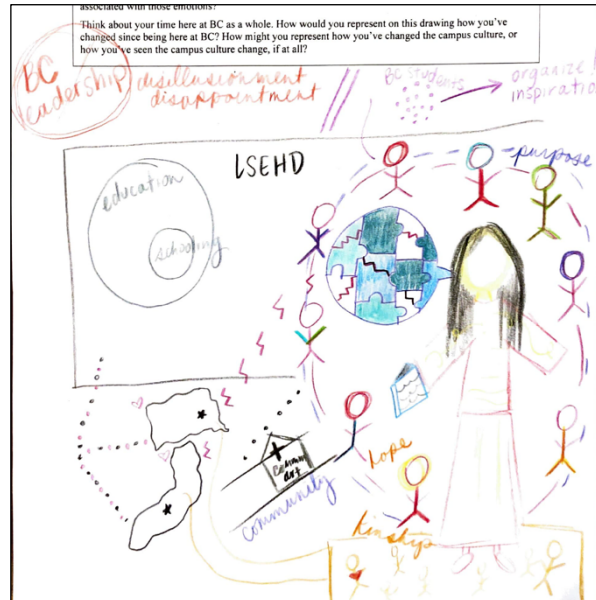


Figure i. One of the author's self-portraits, drawn alongside Anita.

of students, or an apple (original, I know). However, it always served as a central illustration in my attempt to convey how much my own sense of belonging is tied to my identity as a teacher and how much my own investment in this place of learning was stoked by the relationships I developed with my students.

<sup>146</sup> Richard Rorty, "Education as Socialization and as Individualization," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Press, 1999), 126.

This teacher-student relationship also served as the bedrock of my research and helped to shape my identity as an educational researcher. Given my interests and engagement in service and community-based learning prior to graduate school, I was already predisposed to participatory action research (PAR)—I knew that I wanted to partake in research that prioritizes the perspectives and leadership of those with the closest proximity to community issues. As a transplant to Boston, however, I was hesitant about conducting my dissertation research here, because I knew that the timeline of building trust with local communities could not be forced to align with a five-year doctoral program, particularly one disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, as I reflected more on my own experiences at BC, I became aware of an organic source of relationality that took root during this period. I spoke to this reflection in one of my recruitment emails:

as someone who wanted to engage in participatory, community-centered research, I knew that local knowledge, relationships, and trust take time to develop. However, being embedded in the BC for the past few years as a graduate student, researcher, and teacher have helped me to forge relationships and become invested in this campus community—particularly in the students who have shared painful experiences of alienation at BC as a result of their intersectional identities and experiences, but who have created and found pockets of flourishing, belonging, and growth nonetheless. This was the community that I felt I most connected to and who I thought I might have the most to contribute to.

Being a teacher at BC gave me the gift of witnessing students' honest testimonies about their experience, which helped attune me, as a researcher, to this relationship between my students and me as a well of inspiration for inquiry.

This short excerpt from my recruitment email also speaks to my own positioning as a subaltern student within a PWI, a crucial resonance between me and my students. As a current graduate student sharing the same institution and as a former undergraduate student at another PWI, I have lived experience navigating hostile places of learning as a low-income, non-Christian, Asian woman of Color. Like Lucia, I know what it feels like to walk

on the campus paths, knowing that I'll be expected to get out of others' ways, not the other way around. Like Anita, I resonate with the need to un-learn the internalized self-loathing of my skin, my eyes, and my heritage. For me, my "Yellow" features position me as neither White nor Black, but always 'in between,' liable to being played like a pawn to prop up white supremacy if I'm not careful.<sup>147</sup> But like Tyler, my educational experiences are also complex, and the painful memories of exclusion are embedded within a constellation alongside moments of great joy and fulfillment during my time in PWI places.



Figure ii. Two of the author's self-portraits, drawn alongside Lucia (left) and Mateo (right).

For example, I wield the power of code-switching, where I can mobilize academic English in professional spaces, transition into informal slang and cultural references within my White social circles, and foreground my cultural experiences and accented tongue in spaces with other people of Color. This tool, sharpened over time and experience, has granted me access to many diverse communities and spaces like an undergraduate service program with other underrepresented students, a PhD program with other academically

<sup>147</sup> The color yellow, thus, showed up prominently in each of my self-portraits—whether explicitly as the color of my skin, a sun to represent the integrative force of my identity dimensions, or a border enclosing my familial history.

oriented scholars, or a classroom where I teach largely White, high-income, high-achieving students. Each of these communities have been formative in generative ways, shaping my career aspirations, my most intimate relationships, and my identities. However, each of these spaces also require me to contort my body, my turns of phrase, and beliefs in a way that have been splintering for my identity development. My dexterity with English, equipped with a full, poetic vocabulary, has coincided with the slow unraveling of my heritage language, stunting my ability to connect my worlds: my po po (grandma) to my research, my way of life to those of my immigrant aunts and uncles. The complement to my ability to assimilate into nearly any community is often a feeling of belonging to no where or no one, rendering me with a deeply entrenched and debilitating imposter syndrome. It is painful to admit, for example, that the first thing I did when I received my dissertation fellowship award was to check to see how noncompetitive it must have been, how small the candidate pool must have been, for *me* to have been selected. So, there is no doubt that part of the impetus for this dissertation is personal—a desire to rehabilitate places of learning to be more habitable, livable, and less fragmenting for students like me and to take the responsibility to do so for my own students.

Yet, I also recognize that as much as I draw upon my “insider” status as a subaltern student, there are also important dimensions of my current positioning that bestow privileges and confer an “outsider” designation as well.<sup>148</sup> My role as a teacher, despite my attempts to disrupt the unequal hierarchy of power, still comes with a privileged status. Teachers, however widely critiqued and questioned, are still recognized as knowledge-

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<sup>148</sup> Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, “The Space between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 1 (March 2009): 54–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>.

bearers. They have control over a student's grade and wield letters of recommendation, a currency of our credential-obsessed and quantitatively-bent economy. Therefore, this power differential is still present and must be taken into consideration, even if all of students who participated were not actively a student in my class during the duration of the project. I can't ignore the possibility that students felt compelled to participate, yet I also do not want to diminish the equal possibility that students participated as a result of established rapport and a desire to enact change in their environments.

Furthermore, as a PhD student at a prestigious American university, I have extraordinary educational privilege and am well on my way, with the help of a heterosexual marriage and my spouse's income, to the upper middle-class. I know that these facets of my identity—class, education, institutional role, sexual orientation, citizenship status—position me also as an “outsider” to my students. Throughout this process, they raise tensions related to my outsider status, as when Anita admits that there are just some things that she can't explain to non-queer people or that my East Asian features grant me privileges to the Asian community that she did not have as a brown, racially ambiguous trans-woman. Part of navigating this perpetual insider-outsider position is the commitment to building trust with my students so that they continue to feel “safe enough” addressing conflicts with me. In some ways, this process of conspiring with my students is a meta-illustration of what building safer places of learning for subaltern students might look like—by developing a relationship where students feel safe to take risks, question authority, and engage in disagreement.

## CHAPTER TWO

### In/Out of Place: The Spatial Struggle for “Home” on College Campuses

*“[Place] is always being made and always therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that 'finishing' is not on the agenda). If you really were to take a slice through time it would be full of holes, of disconnections, of tentative half-formed first encounters.”*

*-Doreen Massey, For Space, p. 107*

“Safe space” is a polarizing term that has been criticized from multiple angles, but what many of these perspectives share is a preoccupation with “safety” as the primary locus of antagonism. In this chapter, I turn instead toward the *spatial* as another core framework to make sense out of the safe space controversies and consider how expanded definitions of space might improve the educational experiences of subaltern students. I posit that safe space flashpoints are scenes of *spatial struggle*, where campus stakeholders wrestle over “the always already existing normative geography” of a university.<sup>149</sup> A place of learning, like Boston College, is layered with assumptions about *who* is positioned as “in place” or “out of place,” what *actions* are appropriate or inappropriate, and consequently, what *ideologies* are acceptable or transgressive. As such, a geographical analysis of the safe space controversies is a necessary approach to rehabilitating safe space insofar as it illuminates how legacies of exclusion are codified in space and consequently, where to direct interventionist energies and efforts.

This chapter takes as its premise that safe space controversies often make invisible the spatialized contexts in which these incidents occur, whether by assuming the campus geography is flat and ideologically neutral, operating on a thin definition of space, or ignoring space altogether. This is especially problematic because demands for safe spaces, though often posed in reaction to certain speakers or events, almost never attribute the

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<sup>149</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 10.

primary problem to the flashpoint itself. As a former Yale student, Aaron Lewis, suggests about the safe space controversies at Yale in 2015:

the protests are not really about Halloween costumes or a frat party. It is about a mismatch between the Yale we find in admissions brochures and the Yale we experience every day. They're about real experiences with racism on this campus that have gone unacknowledged for far too long. The university sells itself as a welcoming and inclusive place for people of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, it often isn't.<sup>150</sup>

Over and over again, there have been legitimate demands for recognition of an unjust and exclusionary campus geography that continuously positions subaltern students as “out of place.” This occurs when Yale students protest that, “To be a student of color on Yale’s campus is to exist in a space that was not created for you;”<sup>151</sup> when Middlebury students ask, “When will minorities, low income students, and women no longer have to justify their presence in institutions of higher learning?”<sup>152</sup>; and when Wesleyan students decry, “The debate has become whether members of our community even deserve, not only to exist on this campus, but simply to live.”<sup>153</sup> Despite the diversity in events that sparked safe space controversies—from unpopular speakers, dismissive faculty responses, or heated student exchanges—it is clear that there is coherence in diagnosing the problem: consistent reinforcement that minoritized students do not belong and do not feel “in place” on campus. Another way to frame the issue that safe space controversies raise is to contest the

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<sup>150</sup> Aaron Lewis, “What’s Really Going on at Yale,” *Medium*, November 8, 2015, <https://medium.com/@aaronzlewis/what-s-really-going-on-at-yale-6bdbbeeb57a6>.

<sup>151</sup> Yale Students, Alumni, Family, Faculty, and Staff, “Sign the Open Letter to Associate Master Christakis,” 2015, [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSxdyJZ2UBCB9Isl7vP2rTfLXuO2F22yn5Sj9ZRizsxxKisJw/viewform?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSxdyJZ2UBCB9Isl7vP2rTfLXuO2F22yn5Sj9ZRizsxxKisJw/viewform?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>152</sup> A Middlebury student collective, “Broken Inquiry on Campus: A Response by a Collection of Middlebury Students,” March 12, 2017, <https://brokeninquiryblog.wordpress.com>.

<sup>153</sup> Wesleying, “An Open Letter to the Wesleyan Community from Students of Color,” *Wesleying* (blog), September 25, 2015, <http://wesleying.org/2015/09/25/an-open-letter-to-the-wesleyan-community-from-students-of-color/>.

narrative communicated by the “admissions brochure,” which paints the spatial struggle as resolved.

Though critics of safe space might reference the spatial struggle subaltern students regularly navigate (perhaps with a general caveat like, ‘we know that “the playing field is not level; life is not fair”’), safe space debates often become distracted by tactics that, however well intentioned, do not substantively address this unequal terrain.<sup>154</sup> Consider the response of 114 Middlebury College faculty (approximately 31% of the faculty body) in the wake of author of *The Bell Curve* Charles Murray’s visit, in which protestors turned their back and deliberately disrupted his talk and the introductory remarks.<sup>155</sup> In a public statement released to the *Wall Street Journal*, this faculty collective issued a blanket list of free speech principles, including the claim that, “The impossibility of attaining a perfectly egalitarian sphere of free discourse can never justify efforts to silence speech and debate,” without acknowledging that silencing is also the consequence of being made to feel like a perpetual outsider.<sup>156</sup> In a response to the faculty Statement of Principles, students offered this rebuttal,

We hope that Middlebury College would not allow a classroom debate in which a white student argued that the black students in the class, due to inferior intellectual inheritance, did not belong. We ask the undersigned professors to consider the historical and societal context for such a debate, and to consider what base assumptions make the inverse argument, that white students are genetically inferior to black students, so far outside of our collective imagination or dialogue.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>155</sup> It is worth noting that the event ended with one political science professor sustaining an injury from a “thug,” determined to be acting in isolation from the other student protests and inconclusive whether they were even a part of the Middlebury community.

<sup>156</sup> Jay Parini and Keegan Callanan, “Middlebury’s Statement of Principle,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2017, sec. Opinion, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/middleburys-statement-of-principle-1488846993?mod=Searchresults\\_pos1&page=1](https://www.wsj.com/articles/middleburys-statement-of-principle-1488846993?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1).

<sup>157</sup> A Middlebury student collective, “Broken Inquiry on Campus: A Response by a Collection of Middlebury Students.”



I interpret this passage as resistance to faculty's decontextualized call for free speech, which ignores the "historical and social" precedents that affect the extent to which dialogue can be "free, reasoned, and civil."<sup>158</sup> Middlebury students direct attention to how free speech claims often distract from the spatial struggle on campuses that contextualize safe space controversies, and those educators who are invested in collective dialogue across difference cannot ignore the normative geography that situates these contestations. Furthermore, others who take an anti-safe space stance shift blame and responsibility onto the students themselves—sometimes in the form of their fragility as "snowflakes"<sup>159</sup> or their hypocritical intolerance as "social justice warriors" who bully others while playing victim.<sup>160</sup> These stances are often defended as attempting to preserve free speech as the *means* by which racism and inequities on campus can be rectified. Yet does more speech always lead to more equitable outcomes for subaltern students, when not all voices are recognized with equal weight, when some students are effectively silenced before dialogue even begins? The rhetorical "no" to this question is the starting point for many scholars, including Sigal Ben-Porath, Ulrich Baer, and Michael Roth, who opt for a middle path that deems inclusion an equal factor in any quest to defend free speech.<sup>161</sup> My stance nuances theirs to posit that inclusion of subaltern participants *precedes* efforts toward robust dialogue and disagreement. In other words, a certain kind of inclusion—what I will develop as a sense of 'in placed-

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<sup>158</sup> Parini and Callanan, "Middlebury's Statement of Principle."

<sup>159</sup> Jeff Sessions, "Remarks" (Turning Point USA's High School Leadership Summit, Washington, D.C., July 24, 2018), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-jeff-sessions-delivers-remarks-turning-point-usas-high-school-leadership>.

<sup>160</sup> Friedersdorf, "The New Intolerance of Student Activism."

<sup>161</sup> Baer, *What Snowflakes Get Right: Free Speech, Truth, and Equality on Campus*; Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus*; Michael S. Roth, *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

ness’—serves as a threshold condition for free speech, but even more so, for a robust education.

Therefore, in this chapter, I take up a *spatial* argument for subaltern student inclusion. I draw upon texts from critical and feminist geography and queer phenomenology to propose a multidimensional understanding of space as already, always contested. This theoretical foundation provides a more robust spatial framework to evaluate campus scenes of safe space controversy and to explicate the ideologies lodged in the spatial contours of a university campus. With a sense of the normative geography, I explore how those spatially inscribed ideologies condition subaltern students’ experiences, and yet, how students still find ways to subvert the rules of a given campus space and make it hospitable for their own learning.

To start, I will offer a look into some racist incidents at Boston College (BC), which serves as the empirical context for this study. BC has not garnered the kind of media attention that other universities have received regarding high-profile safe space controversies. However, BC is no exception to claims about perpetuating a hostile campus climate for minoritized students. As a campus that I now know intimately from my own experience as a teacher and graduate student of Color and from testimonies from my students, BC warrants accountability as a focal setting for violations of safe space for students situated on the margins. In this chapter, I cover two closely related incidents at BC in detail, which serve as literal interpretations of “spatial struggle.” As such, it serves as a useful case study to illustrate why a spatial analysis is necessary. Then, I will turn to spatial theory to develop a more robust, multidimensional understanding of space and place that offers a series of reflection questions to apply to this case.

### Setting the Scene

In recent years, BC has served as the site of several bias-based incidents that have made many students of Color, queer and trans\* students, and low-income students feel targeted, excluded, and less safe on campus. For example, in December 2018, Michael Sorkin, formerly an undergraduate student in the business school, defaced one of the dorms with a barrage of racial epithets including the n-word and the phrase, “n\*\*\*\*\*s are the plague.”<sup>162</sup> Many queer students and alumni have also been frustrated by the institution’s staunch stance against implementing gender-inclusive policies or committing to pro-LGBTQ initiatives.<sup>163</sup> It is within this hostile context that I focus in on two closely related incidents of racism that served as part of the impetus for situating my dissertation in the BC setting, as well as occurrences that nearly all of my student participants of Color referenced in their interviews with me. I offer this as a case study of an equivalent to a safe space controversy at BC. In this opening section, I will sketch out the contours of these events, drawing on publicly available information via student reporting for *The Heights* or on social media accounts from BC organizations responding to the events. Then, I will return to this case study after offering some theory on space and place, drawing on my students’ testimonies to further contextualize and evaluate this event as a spatial struggle.

At BC, there is a living and learning community formerly designated as the Multicultural Learning Experience (MLE), which was an opportunity for first year students of Color to share a dormitory together. Dorms at BC are binary gender-specific, so in the 2020-21 academic year, two halls within Xavier Hall were designated at MLE floors, with

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<sup>162</sup> Andy Backstrom, “Student Issued Interim Suspension Over Racially Charged Vandalism, BCPD Assault, Walsh Hall Damage,” *The Heights*, December 9, 2018, <https://www.bcheights.com/2018/12/09/bc-student-suspended-racial-epithet-property-damage/>.

<sup>163</sup> “Support LGBTQ+ Students at Boston College”; Baker, “A Message To Prospective Students: Boston College Is Still Homophobic.”

Xavier 3 for women and Xavier 4 for men in the program. In the early morning of January 30, 2021, MLE residents in Xavier woke up to commotion in their hallway. As one MLE resident reported, “I was literally startled out of my sleep at like 2am... Someone [had] just ransacked our hallway.”<sup>164</sup> In a video taken in the aftermath of the event and accounts from MLE residents, the two students responsible for the vandalism knocked over trash cans, rapped aggressively on doors, punched out ceiling tiles, and tore down hallway decorations. The two students were not residents of the building or even the surrounding dormitories, but eventually confessed to vandalism exclusive to the MLE hall for women. This facet is noteworthy, as one resident, Srina Lacet, commented on how the MLE floor was situated as only “one section of the hallway when [Claver, Loyola, Xavier, and Fenwick, CLXF] is a big, long building. It’s too much of a coincidence.”<sup>165</sup>

In response to this occurrence, the language of “safe space” was deployed by both students and administrators. One MLE resident, Destiny Gonzalez, said, “I’m kind of scared to go to sleep at night or like, I have to be on edge. I have to make sure that no one’s going to attack me or attack my home or I don’t feel safe in my own living space. Like that was a lot to digest at the time.”<sup>166</sup> “Everyone should always feel comfortable in their own skin, in their own space,” said another student who previously lived on the hall, “So for them to experience something where somebody comes into their space and then violates that and

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<sup>164</sup> Megan Kelly et al., “Why Is It Only Our Floor?... Why Us?: Multicultural Learning Floor Vandalized Saturday Morning,” *The Heights*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/02/02/multicultural-learning-floor-vandalized-saturday-morning/>.

<sup>165</sup> Kelly et al.

<sup>166</sup> Stephen Bradley, MC Claverie, and Erin Flaherty, “One Year Later, MLE Residents Are Still Left in the Dark,” *The Heights*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.bcheights.com/2022/02/14/one-year-later-mle-residents-are-still-left-in-the-dark/>.

makes them feel in danger or unsafe, was deeply disturbing.”<sup>167</sup> In an email to students, CLXF Residential Director Robert Terreri wrote, “It is our mission within Residential Life to create safe and inclusive communities for ALL our students from all backgrounds, experiences, and identities at Boston College. There is simply no room for the behavior that occurred last night.”<sup>168</sup> BC administrators also confirmed that the perpetrators would be disciplined via the BC Student Code of Conduct.

However, only four days later, in the early morning hours of February 4, 2021, the same MLE floor was targeted again when residents reported two male students walking down their hallway singing a song about “colored girls.” As soon as one of the residents opened her door, the two boys fled and were let into the room of female residents in the adjacent hall, who initially denied that the boys were present. However, the resident director eventually came to address the event, in which he spoke to the two boys for a short amount of time—maybe 30 seconds, one MLE resident reports—and let them go. Meanwhile, he spent about 20 minutes taking statements from the female residents who witnessed the event. For MLE residents, the disparity and divergence in response between the residents, largely women of color, and the perpetrators served as yet another manifestation of racism at BC. As one student, Letacianna Stoudmire, shared, “Basically we’re just all frustrated because there’s no real protection here and no real consequences. And we also don’t know who’s been really attacking us and shouting at us so there’s no way to really protect

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<sup>167</sup> Though this is a case of literal vandalism, which makes living quarters feel unsafe, it is also worthwhile to remind us that threats to safety also come in other less material, but still equally harmful forms. For example, one of the aforementioned safe space controversies centered on a public lecture at Middlebury College by Charles Murray, well known for his research legitimizing racial stratification using scientific discourse. Providing Murray with a spotlighted platform, even with caveats, endorses a discourse that rationalizes the subordination of African Americans. These disparaging discourses can make a Black student feel as unsafe, unwelcome, and alienated as threats to a multicultural hall. Bradley, Claverie, and Flaherty.

<sup>168</sup> Kelly et al., “Why Is It Only Our Floor?... Why Us?": Multicultural Learning Floor Vandalized Saturday Morning.”

ourselves.”<sup>169</sup> Students shared the sentiment that BC is more concerned with protecting those students who caused them harm, rather than the already minoritized students targeted by their flagrant actions. This administrative response was particularly distressing to students, who protested that these events were not isolated occurrences, but an established pattern of bias-motivated misconduct leveled at the MLE floor and students of Color over several years. One only needs to browse the first-hand testimonies posted anonymously on the Instagram account @BlackatBostonCollege to get a sense of the regularity by which Black students, in particular, face animosity on campus. As just one sample, a student wrote,

I went over to a classmate’s dorm to complete a group project. When I got there, there were about three to four additional people there. I guess they were friends of the other roommates. They started telling me how ‘pretty I was for a Black girl,’ and then they asked me, ‘What school do you go to? Pine Manor?’ When I told them I went to BC, they laughed and asked me again. They were in such disbelief they made me show them my ID. The girl who I was doing the group project with was laughing along with them. She didn’t say a word even though she knew we attended class together. In front of everyone, I asked her why she didn’t say, and she replied ‘I thought it was funny. It’s not a big deal.’<sup>170</sup>

This testimony, along with countless others posted in this account, illustrate the normalized BC scene in which these two closely timed, racist events occurred on the MLE floor.

In response to the events at hand, BC made it clear that the perpetrators involved would be disciplined according to the Code of Conduct, though federal privacy laws forbade them from publicly disclosing the exact punitive response.<sup>171</sup> In an email to students, Michael Lochhead, Executive Vice President and Acting Vice President for Student Affairs, also circulated a new “bias-reporting form” that invited students to submit their grievances and expressed a commitment to review the DiversityEdu platform, a module about diversity that

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<sup>169</sup> Hockin, Kiersznowski, and Kelly, “MLE Residents Report Pattern of Harassment In Xavier Hall.”

<sup>170</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CCJjiqSpX1x/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCJjiqSpX1x/?img_index=1), July 2, 2020.

<sup>171</sup> Julia Kiersznowski, “BC Offers Online Reporting Form for Bias-Motivated Behavior,” *The Heights*, February 14, 2021, <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/02/14/bc-offers-reporting-form-for-bias-motivated-behavior/>.

is required of every first year student (enacted in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020).<sup>172</sup> However, many students voiced their frustrations at what simply felt like “a slap on the wrist” for actions that were deliberate in making students of Color feel targeted simply for concentrating themselves in one location.<sup>173</sup> @BlackatBostonCollege juxtaposed the rapid administrative response to COVID-19 spikes, in which they called an emergency zoom meeting for all students on February 9, 2021, to their slow reaction time in responding to discrimination directed toward MLE students. The stark comparison demonstrated, in the words of the student administrators, that “#theheightswereenverOURhome... An environment that reduces us to a statistic to promote themselves, parades us around for diversity photos, and then blatantly ignores us when our counterparts defile and dehumanize us is not our home. Period.”<sup>174</sup> Gonzalez scaffolded upon this sentiment, “It’s like, so your priority is obviously COVID-19—it’s a pandemic, like this is important. But just to see that the reaction could have been that quick was just a shot in the face.”<sup>175</sup> So although students did see an administrative response, they were still disappointed with the outcomes: the delay in response, the extent to which the university downplayed the events in their discussions, and their undue focus on having conversations about diversity with students of Color or MLE residents, rather than the large part of the student body who did not choose to participate in conversations about race or marginalization on campus. Ultimately, students were dismayed by how much BC’s response seemed to miss the underlying cause of the pattern of racist discrimination. In the words of one student, Lubens Benjamin, “It has to be

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<sup>172</sup> Michael Lochhead, “Letter to Students,” Email, 2021, <http://createsend.com/t/d-DD290E6F6B378BB92540EF23F30FEDED>.

<sup>173</sup> Bradley, Claverie, and Flaherty, “One Year Later, MLE Residents Are Still Left in the Dark.”

<sup>174</sup> @BlackatBostonCollege, “Regarding the Recent Hate Crimes on the Multicultural Learning Experience Floor: An Update,” February 4, 2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CK5FkViB6qD/?img\\_index=10](https://www.instagram.com/p/CK5FkViB6qD/?img_index=10).

<sup>175</sup> Bradley, Claverie, and Flaherty, “One Year Later, MLE Residents Are Still Left in the Dark.”

... a whole cultural shift around BC as well. We try to implement these new policies and programs without addressing the root problem at our institutions and like all the underlying causes that lead to discrimination, sexism, bigotry in all its forms—so there’s a lot of work to be done.”<sup>176</sup> Without some attention to addressing the problematic campus culture, the conclusion from these events might resemble the sentiment shared by fellow BC student, David Gentile, in *The Heights*, who claimed that though the perpetrators should be held accountable for their vandalism, the available evidence did not seem to warrant the “life ruining” hate crime label. From their perspective, beyond the exclusive vandalism of the MLE floor, there was “limited evidence” to suggest that this was anything other than “a couple of intoxicated college students who were being disruptive and inconsiderate, with no rhyme or reason to their actions.”<sup>177</sup>

To be fair, Gentile’s public response was measured and generally courteous, attempting to curb hasty conclusions that implicate students’ futures (though notably, the only futures of concern seem to be those of the perpetrators). Furthermore, there was likely more support for their view than might be anticipated, simply shown behind closed doors, perhaps in less publicly appropriate terms. If we expand the scope of interest to the national scale, Gentile’s perspective resonates with other anti-safe space commentators who trivialize harms inflicted predominantly upon subaltern communities. Consider a return to a response penned by Lukianoff and Haidt, who asked, “Would [college students] not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give

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<sup>176</sup> Bradley, Claverie, and Flaherty.

<sup>177</sup> David Gentile, “In Response To “Why Is It Only Our Floor...Why Us’ Multicultural Learning Floor Vandalized Saturday Morning,” *The Heights*, February 4, 2021, sec. Letters, <https://www.bcheights.com/2021/02/04/in-response-to-why-is-it-only-our-floor-why-us-multicultural-learning-floor-vandalized-saturday-morning/>.



people the benefit of the doubt?”<sup>178</sup> In their words, it seems that we should ask the MLE residents, largely women of Color, to give the perpetrators the benefit of the doubt and to question their own responses as overreactions.

The problem with this interpretation is that it is founded on willful de-contextualization and ahistoricity, which I argue is an effort to render the campus context, its geography, flat, even, and neutral—simply a backdrop for isolated happenings that should be judged at face-value. When the context is assumed to offer every student equal footing, Gentile might be justified in claiming that these actions were minor and arbitrary harms performed by intoxicated students. Instead, I want to insist on the necessity of examining this interaction as a material and social brawl for space, which operates on the fundamental assumption that a college campus, like any place, is already spatially structured to align with dominant ideologies—however veiled the contestation might be. A look at this multicultural space through the lens of my students’ experience offers a more nuanced and contextualized interpretation of this spatial struggle.

### **A Turn Toward Space**

Having set the scene with a contemporary example and its uptake, I turn to spatial theory as a resource to attune educators and administrators, like myself, to the contested contours of space and place. Taking the lead of Tim Cresswell, Henri Lefebvre, and Louis Athusser, I propose that structures of space and place serve as one of the primary means by which normative ideologies are created, transmitted, and sustained. In other words, space and place serve as means to prop up the status quo. Such an argument relies on an

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<sup>178</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” 2015.

assumption that space is a dynamic entanglement, rather than a settled entity and prioritizes the role of the body in experiencing, resisting, and re-making place. I will return to the BC example at the end of the chapter to apply some of these ideas.

### **Animate entanglements**

Say I'm your teacher, and on the first day of class, I offer a dreaded icebreaker question, despite the groans that ripple across the room. I ask,

*Tell us about one of your favorite places.*

How might you respond? What kinds of answers might I anticipate? From a crude test in my own classroom with ten undergraduates, most of my students responded with the name of a recognized city or state in which they've lived or repeatedly returned to: Hong Kong, Long Island, Bar Harbor, Cape Cod. These certainly aren't the only possibilities though. I could imagine other perfectly reasonable, if uncommon, responses: a sunny, warm window bench in your childhood bedroom, a flat overhang at the summit of your favorite mountain, the arms of your grandmother enveloped around you. However, though these other answers could be interpreted as instances of place, and indeed I hope to argue why they should be, it is not the typical rendering. Instead, place is often tied to an identifiable point on a map, situated by its physical location and marked as a concentrated center of activity.

Interdisciplinary social anthropologist Tim Ingold raises some concerns about this seemingly commonsense definition of place in his exploration of lines.<sup>179</sup> He proposes that lines serve as an essential metaphor for the twists and turns of a life, when we rid ourselves of the notion that they must always be straight. Instead, he proposes "lifelines" as a live,

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<sup>179</sup> Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*.

meandering trace of our movements, which situates place as “a moment of rest along [its] path of movement.” However, he laments that “place has been reconfigured in modernity as a nexus within which all life, growth and activity are contained.”<sup>180</sup> When place is rendered a dot, Ingold points to the troubling, imagined circumference that bounds all inhabitants (including people, waters, lands, animals, plants) and things within its border. Place is conceived of as settled and already established, constituted by the marked boundary, rather than the animacy of the lifelines entangled in this shared domain. The dot does not care about “where they are or how they came to be there;” it is simply a container which encloses and suspends life.<sup>181</sup>

This suspension is not to be confused with containers like a jar of fireflies or a lidded sample of the mighty ecosystem of a local river—these examples demonstrate the extent to which an enclosure does not diminish the vibrancy of life. However, the argument that Ingold is making is more aligned with decolonial theory, advanced by scholars like feminist geographer Doreen Massey and Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the latter of which recognizes the role of the line and enclosure as the “spatial vocabulary of colonialism.”<sup>182</sup> A place, depicted and realized as a marked territory on a map, establishes a center of power, the boundaries of its jurisdiction, and its counterpart, the “outside.” Life within this enclosure is “suspended” because it captures one instantiation of place, stilled in time. What is understood on most maps as “Boston,” for example, is an attempt to render the name, the borders, and the sovereignty of these lands, at a given moment in history, permanent. It is to colonize, because this attempt to settle and make a place static envisions the lands up to that

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<sup>180</sup> Ingold, 96.

<sup>181</sup> Ingold, 96.

<sup>182</sup> Massey, *For Space*. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2008), 55.

point as uncharted, empty, and conquerable, thereby erasing the lives and livelihoods of the animate beings already inhabiting that space, especially those of the Pawtucket and Massachusett peoples. Instead, Massey proposes a definition of space that resists the tendency to make still and static, instead envisioned as:

the sphere of a dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations. It is always being made and always therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that 'finishing' is not on the agenda). If you really were to take a slice through time it would be full of holes, of disconnections, of tentative half-formed first encounters.<sup>183</sup>

The most salient phrase bears repeating: “‘finishing’ is not on the agenda.” Therefore, a place as settled and static is a means of colonialization that must be abandoned and resisted.

One such instantiation of place that takes this enclosing approach is in human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's discipline-pioneering book, *Space and Place*. Though Tuan certainly plays with the scale of place, oscillating between the immensely tiny, like a corner of the house, to the expansive scale of the whole world, he offers an understanding of place as settled. His account relies on a fundamental distinction between space (and spaciousness) and place, succinctly summarized as two poles of necessity where “place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other.”<sup>184</sup> As freedom, space is characterized by its radical openness, providing the room in which to act, traverse, move, stretch, reach, even if that freedom is merely perceived and not actualized. The quintessential image of space then might be a flat, expansive field where you can see into the horizon on all sides. Space *becomes* place when a human is “in command” of it, “feel[s] at home in it,” such that they impose an anthropocentric schematic upon it.<sup>185</sup> “Man, out of his intimate

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<sup>183</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 107.

<sup>184</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>185</sup> Tuan, 36.

experience with his body and with other people, organizes space so that it conforms with and caters to his biological needs and social relations."<sup>186</sup> Place, in other words, is when the landmarks, the objects, the directions of a space become interlaced with the human body and its intention. At times, Tuan even uses the language of place as space that has been “conquer[ed]” by human values.<sup>187</sup> Place is a concretized node of distinctly human meaning and “essentially a static concept. If we see the world as process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place,” but we do nonetheless.<sup>188</sup> Human beings find and become attached to secure, stable places in which to dwell in a rapidly fluctuating world.

There is undeniably something romantic in Tuan’s vision of place. It conjures images of a sanctuary, offering refuge from a hectic world—perhaps a notch in a boulder that protects one from a raging storm or a community shelter where people come together during crisis. And indeed, Tuan has a point that human beings need something to attach to in order to face endless dynamism and take on the labor involved in navigating change. My argument about safety as a threshold condition hinges on a similar logic: in order to take risks and to bear an often-unbearable world, subaltern students need some felt sense of embodied “home.” However, this need for security and attachment cannot be reliant on a congruent and static conceptualization of place, which is how Tuan describes it. To conceive of place as settled and static is to maintain that it is unalterable and remains constant in spite of time. It is to freeze a place in time as an existing dot—in Tuan’s words, it is a “pause” in movement, a suspension in time that suggests permanence—rather than to recognize that

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<sup>186</sup> Tuan, 34.

<sup>187</sup> Tuan, 53.

<sup>188</sup> Tuan, 179.

places are actively negotiated at the intersection of lifelines.<sup>189</sup> Places, in Ingold's account are *made*, while in Tuan's account, places *exist*.<sup>190</sup> As an alternative to the static node, Ingold

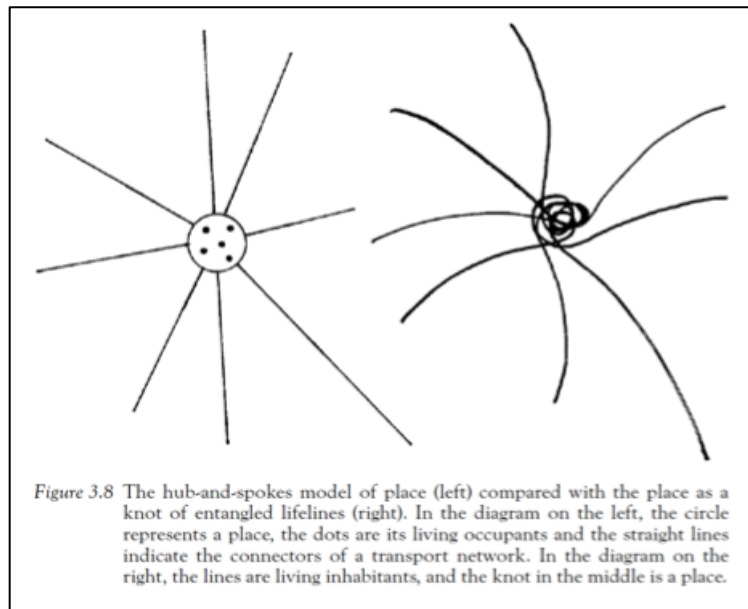


Figure 2.1. A reproduced image from Ingold's book, *Lines* (p. 98).

entangled, such that they must co-construct the place together, over and over again. He depicts the contrast of these two models in a drawing reproduced in Figure 2.1. Place reenvisioned as a knot acknowledges that places are crafted by the animate beings that become

entwined—whether by physical proximity, an overlap in time, or a shared community or common concern. This emphasis on “living inhabitants” is a deliberate expansion of animacy to also include beings like waters, animals, plants, and land, who also play major

<sup>189</sup> Tuan, 138.

<sup>190</sup> To be fair, Tuan would likely protest this characterization, leaning on his model of spaces to defend the presence of dynamism. He might argue that animate beings *are* given the room to converge and dynamically interact in his account, they are simply assigned to the spatial realm. Space, in contrast to the settled haven of place, “lies open; it suggests the future and invites action... Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed.” (54). Though this definition of space gestures toward the possibility of interaction, the metaphor of a “blank sheet” signals Tuan's attempt to isolate space as a flat, neutral surface on which to imprint human values. This distinction between space and place is critiqued by feminist geography Doreen Massey because it privileges place as allegedly closed and congruent, while space is rendered invisible and neutral as its counterpart—reifying settler colonial structures of domination via justified narratives of “discovery.” In light of these critiques, I reject Tuan's distinction and use space and place interchangeably throughout the dissertation, to resist the primacy of place and to uplift the role of space.

roles in crafting place.<sup>191</sup> This notion of place and place-making lies in stark contrast to Tuan's definition, which privileges only human beings as architects of place over all other forms of life. However, the "knot" is not meant to represent permanence. Instead, Ingold takes inspiration from the Walbiri peoples of central Australia who privilege the form of spirals or concentric circles. Spirals do not enclose life within its perimeter but instead represent "the current of life itself" as the movement of each line and their intersections are continuous, imitating the lives of those who animate them.<sup>192</sup> A place then, is not taken as given, but instead recognized as an act of formation. The "knot" is made by overlapping and intersecting spirals, which

are bound together *in* the knot, but they are not bound *by* it. To the contrary they trail beyond it, only to become caught up with other lines in other knots. Together they make up what I have called a meshwork. Every place, then, is a knot in the meshwork, and the threads from which it is traced are lines of wayfaring.<sup>193</sup>

The "meshwork" offers a vision of place as a product of relations between animate beings writ large, and not only present living inhabitants, but also those of ancestral generations who have left traces (or legacies) behind. The relational ties between those of present and past indicate a temporal paradox to place, as place is both a simultaneity of lines, contingent on the present, as well as shaped by relational forces that have conditioned the place from the past.<sup>194</sup> It is the case, though, that a space can be formed from previous lines, yet there are always unlimited possibilities within those confines in which a place can take form.

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<sup>191</sup> It is important to resist the tendency to see this expansive recognition of personhood as new. As indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer gently nudges, this insight is more like a "remembering" of native ontologies, imbued in traditions like the Potawatomi grammar of animacy. For example, about 80% of the Potawatomi language consists of initially baffling verbs until speakers are able to recognize that "to be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive" (131).

<sup>192</sup> Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, 99.

<sup>193</sup> Ingold, 100.

<sup>194</sup> This language echoes Doreen Massey's description of space as a "simultaneity of stories-so-far," gesturing toward primacy of the present. A sense of place is crafted on the 'now'—who is present at a given moment, and once the composition of the space changes, so does the space itself. Massey, *For Space*, 12.

Nonetheless, what the term “meshwork” suggests is an active system in which places are dynamic, socially constituted products. Far from settled or static, places are actively made and negotiated by those whose lifelines intersect. There is room for both spontaneity and intentionality in this vision of place. There is always the possibility of “tentative half-formed first encounters,” to use Massey’s turn of phrase,<sup>195</sup> but also the fortuity of deliberate entanglements, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer’s testimony to the pull of sacred sweetgrass fields for indigenous communities, whose reciprocity leads to dual flourishing of plants and humans.<sup>196</sup> As a knot of entangled lifelines, places are heterogeneous constructions which offer the full range of possibilities in terms of how places might be mobilized. Places can be crafted in a way that works toward a more just collective futurity, yet it is also equally as possible, even more so perhaps if we recognize the entrenched matrix of oppression, for places to be formed in ways that reinforce marginalization and exclusion of subaltern communities. Accounting for the ways in which inclusionary and exclusionary ideologies are inscribed through space can be understood as the “normative geography.”

### **Normative geographies**

If the last section convinced you that places do not simply *exist* but are *made*, then this segment draws on the spatial accounts of British human geographer and poet Tim Cresswell and French social critic and philosopher Henri Lefebvre to delineate the extent to which places are *made to serve* as 1) tools by which those with authority wield and defend their power and 2) one of the means by which subaltern groups resist and question that power.

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<sup>195</sup> Massey, 107.

<sup>196</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, First edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013).



Those two functions emphasize the “always already existing normative geography” of place, which refuses to gloss over how spaces serve as sites of ideological struggle.<sup>197</sup> Instead, using the term “normative geography” draws attention precisely to how certain beings, actions, and ideas are situated as “in place,” at the expense of who or what is positioned as “out of place.”<sup>198</sup>

Let us first turn toward what it means to be “out of place”. When I consider instances when I have felt “out of place”—as a 1<sup>st</sup> grader fumbling over the translation of Cantonese thoughts into English words during show and tell; as the youngest, most junior scholar in a room of established senior faculty; as an Asian woman in a country where a global pandemic is widely referenced as the “Chinese virus,” where “Asian” and “Chinese” are synonymous—each are characterized by a feeling of alienation and the uneasy weight of feeling like I don’t belong here. The “here” references a variety of places. It means that I don’t belong in this native English-speaking classroom. I am an imposter in the academy. I am a perpetual foreigner and outsider in this nation-state. Even the act of incorporating these personal anecdotes in my dissertation feels like a transgression, out of place in an “academic” composition. However, as queer theorist and feminist Sara Ahmed gently chides, “But why call the personal a digression? Why is it that the personal so often enters writing as if we are being led astray from a proper course?”<sup>199</sup> Likewise, what each of my personal vignettes illustrate is the extent to which being “out of place” is a felt sense of *straying* from

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<sup>197</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 10.

<sup>198</sup> In this section, I will draw more in depth from the accounts offered by Cresswell and Lefebvre, given their particular focus on space and place. However, readers are encouraged to read about a similar juxtaposition as advanced by Antonio Gramsci regarding hegemony and subordination, Harper Keenan (and another piece co-authored with Lil Hot Mess) about curricular scripts and improvisation, and Nikolaj Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson concerning the unmarked vs. marked term.

<sup>199</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 22.

the often-invisible rules that govern a space—the established expectations about who and what is proper, acceptable, and normal.

What is important to clarify is that it is not the feeling of being “out of place” itself that is the issue of concern. Every person is bound to feel like an outsider or as if they do not belong at some point. There are many harmless examples of feeling out of place, such as when you walk into a room full of strangers, when you are the only person who misses a pop culture reference, or when you try a new hobby for the first time. Not only is everyone bound to encounter feelings of alienation as part of the human condition, there is also an educational prerogative to facilitate structured and supported de-settlement of students’ ideas and worldviews. Indeed, having your own ideas about what is right, just, proper, and appropriate vigorously challenged is arguably the hallmark of a good education. These forms of out-of-placedness are not the problem. Instead, the problem lies in the *patterns* of out-of-placedness: the ways in which “outsiders” or “imposters” are consistently people from subaltern groups, or how “abnormal,” “transgressive,” or “deviant” actions consistently map onto behaviors that question authority or the existing structure of power. In short, the issue is how the instantiations of in place/out of place reify oppression.

Tim Cresswell’s book, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, targets this connection between place, ideology, and power explicitly. He draws on several historical cases to posit that place plays a significant role in the “construction, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values.”<sup>200</sup> He offers an example related to homelessness in New York City circa 1980s, when homeless people regularly frequented public spaces throughout the city including parks like Tompkin’s Square, sidewalks downtown, and Grand Central

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<sup>200</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 4.

Station.<sup>201</sup> The mayor at the time, Ed Koch, sought to intervene by introducing an “anti-loitering” policy, which would permit local law enforcement to remove homeless people from their dwellings. This law was overturned by the State Supreme Court of New York, yet Koch pressed on, appealing to the American Institute of Architects for support using the logic of “common sense.” About the homeless in Grand Central Station, he says,

These homeless people, you can tell who they are. They're sitting on the floor, occasionally defecating, urinating, talking to themselves... We thought it would be reasonable for the authorities to say, ‘you can't stay here unless you're here for transportation.’ Reasonable, rational people would come to that conclusion, right? Not the Court of Appeals.<sup>202</sup>

Even though Koch is working through an explicit, repressive means of state power—policy and legislation—he also recruits ideology, the implicit rules that govern this space, to strengthen his claim. He constructs and reinforces a dominant ideology that consistently positions “these homeless people” as outsiders or intruders “out of place” at Grand Central Station and “transportation” as the only action deemed appropriate for this space, veiling the extent to which homeless people, through their ordinary tactics of survival, attempt to contest that prevailing view through spatial occupation. Koch can appeal to “common sense” because it is, indeed, the prevailing view. Koch draws power from engaging already existing ideas about who and what actions have been normalized for this setting. In this vein, Koch is enacting his “practice” of this place—mobilizing *his* beliefs about this place through his actions, which layer onto the normative geography. This is why Cresswell hones in on analyzing “actions out of place,” because these marginal cases of transgression expose “the

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<sup>201</sup> Though this is a historical example, it is far from an extraordinary case. These patterns of hostility and marginalization are still very much in place today in cities throughout the U.S. One contemporary resonance related to the context of the PDR study is the contestation over who is positioned as “out of place” on the Boston Common, the largest public park in the city.

<sup>202</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 7.

everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behavior,”<sup>203</sup> which otherwise remain largely undetectable. What this case illustrates is the significance of the term “commonplace”—supposedly “common” ideas about what is just, proper, and appropriate are encoded and transmitted through “place.”

Ideology, in this case, is not simply a reference to *any* ordinary constellation of ideas or belief system. Instead, ideology is defined, in Marxian fashion, to be the particular set of ideas that reinforce the existing hegemony, or status quo, which is designed to serve oppressors at the expense of the oppressed. Cresswell draws from Italian activist and Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who posits in his *Prison Notebooks* that the ability to claim common sense is one of the most powerful and effective weapons in establishing domination.<sup>204</sup> Controlling what reality and set of relations should be accepted as “normal” allows a group to impose their beliefs and power imperceptibly, because subordinated groups are falsely persuaded to see them as their own, as inevitable and largely unquestioned facets of their lives.<sup>205</sup> Being able to manipulate common sense is a practice of ideological deception that, if done well, has the capacity to retain power in perpetuity. Here, it is helpful to incorporate some key facets of ideology at work, as proposed by Louis Althusser. In *On the reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*, Althusser describes ideology as one of the major arms of the state, which makes subjects conform to the existing structure of labor and exploitation—to “‘go’ all by themselves, without a cop behind them.”<sup>206</sup> To ‘go,’ in Althusser’s account, means to act in accordance with the dominant

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<sup>203</sup> Cresswell, 11.

<sup>204</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>205</sup> This phenomenon has also been the target of critical pedagogy vis-à-vis Paulo Freire, who names it as “internalizing the oppressor.”

<sup>206</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014), 198.

ideology, allegedly without coercion or violence. Ideology, as this supreme distortion, is characterized by a few key features. One hallmark of ideology at work is the *invisibility* of its operation when you are “inside” its purview:

one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology. Ideology never says 'I am ideological'. One has to be outside ideology, in other words, in scientific knowledge, to be able to say 'I am in ideology' (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case) 'I was in ideology'.<sup>207</sup>

Ideology is designed to be an invisible project, so that the intentions of those dominant groups wielding it are obscured from those under its influence, under the banner of naturalness. Without some rupture in the ideological distortion, subordinated groups remain deceived.

Another feature of ideology is its seeming *ahistoricity*—how the origins of the current common sense are occluded from view. Delinking ideology from history makes the existing ideology seem timeless, as if a different social and political system never existed nor will it ever exist. As such, ideology convinces subjects that our current setup is

the way it has to be, so that things are what they should be, and—let us come out with it—so that the reproduction of the relations of production is ensured, every day, every second, in the 'consciousness', that is, the material behaviour of the individuals holding the posts that the social and technical division of labour assigns them in production, exploitation, repression, ideologization and scientific practice.<sup>208</sup>

Therefore, ideology both creates and perpetuates the conditions for itself to remain the prevailing view, stymieing any opportunity for change. This is not to say that change never occurs; thankfully, those under the rule of ideology can come to recognize, through critical consciousness for example, the ways in which ideology conditions their behaviors and hope

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<sup>207</sup> Althusser, 191.

<sup>208</sup> Althusser, 198.

for a more just future.<sup>209</sup> However, it is to recognize that the *intention* of ideology is to retain the status quo and quell any efforts at resistance.

Finally, ideology is often misconceived to simply operate at the abstract level of ideas. Just consider the platitude, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The insinuation is that ideas, as inscribed in words or discourse, are not equivalent to actual harm or material consequences. Yet, what Althusser makes clear is the material embodiment of ideology. Ideology “prescrib[es] material practices regulated by a material ritual,” in which the practices present as “the material acts of a subject acting in all good conscience in accordance with his belief.”<sup>210</sup> In short, ideology cannot be flattened to mere ideas, since all subjects act under some ideology and thus materialize its impact. To return to Cresswell’s example, NYC mayor Koch can be understood as an actor working to produce and reify the dominant ideology through his policy decisions about homelessness. His beliefs about the status quo, which includes a characterization of homeless people as intruders in a place where secure housing is assumed to be accessible to all “reasonable, rational” people, become materialized through attempts to remove homeless folks from public spaces. This illustration also importantly nuances the degree to which people are not simply unwittingly subject to ideology. Those in power, who benefit from the existing social and political structures, mobilize ideology deliberately to sustain their dominance, such that those who are blinded to ideology are those who stand the most to gain from that critical knowledge.

This re-connection to Cresswell’s account demonstrates though that it is not only through actions that ideology is made concrete. Spaces and places are also material

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<sup>209</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>210</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 187.

manifestations of ideology. Henri Lefebvre, also from the same school of thought as Althusser, makes this connection using religious ideology in *The Production of Space*. He asks,

What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies? What would remain of a religious ideology—the Judaeo-Christian one, say—if it were not based on places and their names: church, confessional, altar, sanctuary, tabernacle? What would remain of the Church if there were no churches? The Christian ideology, carrier of a recognizable if disregarded Judaism (God the Father, etc.), has created the spaces which guarantee that it endures. More generally speaking, what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production, and by thus taking on body therein. Ideology *per se* might well be said to consist primarily in a discourse upon social space.<sup>211</sup>

The central claim is that spaces are not neutral but constructed from the start as a “carrier” of ideas, such that notions of what is proper and acceptable are transmitted through its features. The church, as an emblem of the Judeo-Christian ideology, not only represents ideas about the existence of God, but also to set social expectations about what behaviors, ideas, and people are permitted within the confines of this space. This entanglement between the ideological and the spatial is why many queer and trans\* folks might be weary about churches—not because of its classic architectural steeple or its intricate stained-glass windows, but because of the exclusionary ideas about sexual orientation in which it has come to symbolize and perpetuate. Christian churches, though other faith traditions are equally as culpable, have historically reinforced an ideology that positions cisgender bodies and heterosexual relations as abnormal, unacceptable, and “out of place.”<sup>212</sup> As such, it takes deliberate effort to counteract the dominance of anti-trans\* and anti-queer sentiment with places of Christian worship. Choosing to fly a pride flag, for example, serves as an external signal of resistance, albeit a minor one, to what is otherwise considered “normal.”

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<sup>211</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), 44.

<sup>212</sup> Indeed, as chapter three will illustrate, this stance is shared by BC as a Catholic institution.

What this example illustrates is that places are often made to represent and sustain the *dominant* ideology—the ideas that have come to be accepted as “normal” and have the luxury of remaining largely unseen (thus “neutral”). This ability to constitute “the prevailing doxa” is dependent on power.<sup>213</sup> If power is defined as “the ability to make rules for others,” then wielding that power allows a person with authority to dictate and defend what ideology reigns as the taken-for-granted and subsequently, the bodies, ideas, and behaviors that register as “out of place.”<sup>214</sup> This mutually reinforcing relationship between power and ideology is a circle, for those who hold power can shape ideology, while the prevailing ideology enables certain groups to stay and gain power. Though the origins of the circle remain unclear, what remains is the conclusion that power and ideology work to retain the existing status quo. The heart of social and spatial struggle then is to intervene in this vicious cycle and wrestle with “the claim to legitimacy from opposing forms of commonsense classification.”<sup>215</sup> It is precisely this attention to the commonplace as a social product, rather than a given, that amplifies the importance of transgressive actions.

Deviations from the established social expectations of a place, such as the safe space confrontations on the MLE hall at BC, offer instructive scenes about the existing normative geography and operating power relations. When the dominant spatial ideology of a college campus is ignored, as it is when safe space incidents are isolated from the larger institutional context, it serves to also render invisible the processes of power involved in assembling space. Lefebvre insists analyzing the relationship between space and power, particularly in the conflicts of space between those with authority and those seeking to resist the spatial

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<sup>213</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 20.

<sup>214</sup> Cresswell, 25.

<sup>215</sup> Cresswell, 20.



contexts of their world. He posits that any “analysis of space brings us up against the dialectical relationship between demand [*from the bottom*] and command [*from the top*], along with its attendant questions, ‘Who?’, ‘For whom?’, ‘By whose agency?’, ‘Why and how?’”<sup>216</sup>

Therefore, he encourages a shift from architecture to “archi-*textures*,” a move that treats space (place, landscape, geography, land) as a crucial text to understand social relationships and the inscription of dominant ideologies.<sup>217</sup> So if a place is a text, consider table 2.1 your cheat sheet as you explore the contours of any terrain.

Table 2.1. Making visible the normative campus geography	
Who or what is positioned as “in place” vs. “out of place”?	
“In place”	“Out of place”
Normal	Transgressive
Good	Bad
Right	Wrong
Proper	Improper
Acceptable	Rejected
Commonsense	Divergent
Doxa	Rebellion
Dominant	Marginal
Hegemonic	Subordinated
Who benefits from this spatial configuration? Why and how is this positioning established or contested?	

### Embodied inhabitance

With our cheat sheet in hand, we can now consider applying these questions to place of learning. How might we fare, evaluating the school at the heart of this vivid testimony by trans\* teacher educator and critical scholar Harper Keenan? Below I quote, at length, one particular memory about a third-grade holiday concert, prior to his gender transition:

Before the concert began, many of the boys went to the bathroom to comb their hair, slicking their white-boy bowl cuts back with water. When they emerged one by one—looking more like Elvis than Jonathan Taylor Thomas—I figured I ought to follow suit. My hair was short like theirs, after all, and I, too, wanted to look nice for my folks. In the bathroom I gingerly stuck my head in the sink and turned on the water faucet, soaking my hair. I patted it dry with paper towels and then carefully combed it back with my fingers until I looked just like Uncle Jesse from *Full House* (my favorite TV show at the time).

<sup>216</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 116.

<sup>217</sup> Lefebvre, 118.

I felt handsome and cool and proud—until I returned to the classroom and saw the look on my teacher's face. Aghast, she yelled, 'Good Lord, what have you done? You look ridiculous! If you were my daughter, I swear I would tan your hide. It's bad enough you didn't wear a dress.' The other kids laughed and pointed their fingers as she grabbed me by my shirt and led me back into the bathroom, where she shoved my head under the automatic hand dryer, combing my hair down to the sides where, to her, it rightly belonged. I turned red and fought back tears. I was embarrassed and ashamed. I never meant to do anything wrong. When she was done, she grabbed my shoulders and turned me to face her. She looked me up and down and said, 'There. Now you look like a pretty girl for mommy and daddy. I swear!'<sup>218</sup>

Who and what is positioned as “in place” or “out of place” in this scenario? In this painful recollection, a young genderqueer Keenan is made to feel ashamed and humiliated by his teacher. She cruelly disciplines him for two transgressive actions, primarily for slicking his hair back but also for not wearing a dress. What's crucial to note about Keenan's supposed misdemeanor though, is that they are not *typically* inappropriate behaviors in the context of a school function. Within the spatial ideology of an elementary school, styling one's hair in this manner does ordinarily fall within the scope of normality, as demonstrated by the other students who did so without punishment. It is the same case with his choice of dress. The crucial difference, of course, is the combination of Keenan's actions *and* his perceived gender identity as a girl.

I argue that his behaviors were singled out as deviant because the normative geography of a place and its corresponding ideas about who or what is proper is always mediated *through the body*. The actions deemed proper for this space were *body* contingent, and gender is a construct that is often tied to bodily expression: boy bodies should be outfitted with a shirt and pants, boy hair should be combed back. The spatial transgression was not in the action along but in the *mismatch* between action and body. As a gender-non-conforming

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<sup>218</sup> Harper B. Keenan, “Unscripting Curriculum: Toward a Critical Trans Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 87, no. 4 (2017): 542.

student, Keenan was punished for rebelling against expectations of masculinity and femininity that were encoded into the spatial ideology. His perpetual out-of-placedness was a deliberate outcome of a space animated by anti-trans\* ideology as enacted upon the body and its expression. As a result of this incident and many others, Keenan concludes, “In classrooms, I was *taught* to hate my genderqueerness. I was *taught* to hate myself.”<sup>219</sup> This is a clear indicator about what bodies and behaviors were normalized in Keenan’s school, arguably a young person’s most salient place of learning, and the painful, dehumanizing material impacts of that normative geography on his sense of self. The bodies “in place” are ones who fit the gender binary and conform to the respective expectations of that gender, while those “out of place” are ones whose bodies defy that standard of gender normativity.

Keenan’s educational autobiography serves as a point of departure to showcase how these patterns of positioning are not exclusive to his school, but to the project of schooling writ large. He uses the term “curricular scripts” to describe what I’ve been referring to as the normative geography. Schools are currently designed to transmit and perpetuate an invisible gendered “script,” or commonsense, which only becomes visible in light of transgressions—when those with bodies who veer off-script are punished. And those bodies subject to reprimand are not simply limited to trans\* bodies. The curricular scripts of schooling also categorize bodies by many other features that clearly mark one as “normal” and its counterparts as “deviant.” His short list includes labels such as, “smart, delayed, big, small, well behaved, defiant, gifted, disabled, fat, thin, quiet, active, black, brown, Latino, Asian, Arab, white, English learner.”<sup>220</sup> Keenan’s case helps us to recognize that space, and its encoded ideology, is always mediated through the body. Furthermore, Sonya Renee Taylor,

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<sup>219</sup> Keenan, 542.

<sup>220</sup> Keenan, 540.

founder of the radical self-love movement and author of *The Body is not an Apology*, extends Keenan's point to recognize that "when we speak of the ills of the world—violence, poverty, injustice—we are not speaking conceptually; we are talking about things that happen to bodies."<sup>221</sup> She reminds us about the material, embodied consequences of the matrix of oppression "that make it difficult and sometimes deadly to live in our bodies."<sup>222</sup> Therefore, the body cannot be ignored in explorations of social critique and spatial ideologies.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, British-Australian feminist and critical queer theorist Sara Ahmed explores this body-space relationship through a phenomenological investigation about the concept of bodily orientation.<sup>223</sup> Ahmed's starting point is to assert that space is not "exterior" to bodies, but that "space is *dependent* on bodily inhabitation."<sup>224</sup> Spaces and places do not exist in isolation but are always experienced through the standpoint of a body. Though Ahmed does not explicitly define "body," I propose that recognition of the body signifies a holistic entity, comprising one's anatomy (and the material space that one takes up), but also one's senses, affect, mind, and spirit. A turn to the body is also a deliberate stance to resist flattening ideological concerns to the realm of the abstract, as a duel only of minds and ideas. Instead, an embodied turn ensures that my investigation of a college campus remains tethered to the actual beings that inhabit the space as emotional, spiritual, intelligent beings who comport their body and movements to the uneven geography of their place of learning. A space is always experienced from the position of a body trying to inhabit or dwell, such that the space becomes like a "second skin" in which

the different 'impressions' of a new landscape, the air, the smells, the sounds...accumulate like points, to create lines, or which accumulate like lines, to create new textures on the surface of the skin. Such spaces 'impress' on the body,

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<sup>221</sup> Sonya Rence Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2021), 4.

<sup>222</sup> Taylor, 4.

<sup>223</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. Emphasis added.

<sup>224</sup> Ahmed, 6.

involving the mark of unfamiliar impressions, which in turn reshapes the body surface.<sup>225</sup>

Therefore, the unique contours of a space imprint themselves onto the body. To use some of our existing terminology, the ideologies inscribed into the normative geography of a space also become impressions on the body. The archi-textures of the space come to bear on the texture of the skin. Political theorist Iris Marion Young, in her essay “Throwing like a girl,” offers one such illustration of this social imprint in her analysis of the bodily comportment of women in sport. She claims that the space

*physically* available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space which she uses and inhabits. Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space which belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted, and the space beyond is not available to her movement.<sup>226</sup>

This inhibited movement, Young argues, shows up in the ways women tend to sit cross-legged, rather than legs splayed apart, or in the minimal amount of lateral space used in a girl’s wind up to a throw of a baseball as opposed to a boy’s. These differences in motility are not “intrinsic” or “natural” to women, but instead demonstrate the ways in which gendered social expectations, which are learned, condition women into taking up less space, even when it is unnecessary.

So the impressions of the social have the potential to be an inflicted wound or a gentle caress, based on the relationship between *this* body and *this* space. In other words, it has to do with the orientation of the body in space, which is contingent on the “corporeal schema” of a “body at home.”<sup>227</sup> Being “in place” means feeling an intimate sense of home,

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<sup>225</sup> Ahmed, 9.

<sup>226</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,” *Human Studies* 3, no. 1 (December 1980): 149–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02331805>.

<sup>227</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 111.

where you are free to extend your body and have it cohabit freely with other things. In Ahmed's words, being at home involves "stretching myself out" and

coming to inhabit spaces, coming to embody them, where my body and the rooms in which it gathers—sitting, sleeping, writing, acting as it does, in this room and that room—cease to be distinct. It times take [*siz*], but this work of inhabitation does take place. It is a process of becoming intimate with where one is: an intimacy that feels like inhabiting a secret room that is concealed from the view of others. Loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter: home as *overflowing* and *flowing over*.<sup>228</sup>

This description of "home" emphasizes the intimacy of coming to merge yourself with a space, such that the two become enmeshed within one another. Which bodies are given permission to inhabit a space in this intimate way? Which kinds of bodies are allowed to "saturate" the space and make it feel familiar to them, so that the distinction between one's body and the space become blurred? Whose bodies are conditioned to see taking up space as a need, such that they have access to an overflowing sense of home and being "in place"? Ahmed's contention is that not all bodies are given equal opportunities to be extend themselves into space. Each body comes into a space with a unique orientation, with certain objects "within reach" and thereby different trajectories for how quickly one can come to be familiar with a new environment. Coming to feel "at home," then, is how quickly and to what extent is a body who enters a dark room able to make the strange familiar, if at all given that "some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others."<sup>229</sup>

What gets raised from this discussion is the notion that bodies bear the impression of their social spaces. Yet, spaces, too, as dynamic negotiations of power, become shaped by the bodies that inhabit them. As Ahmed describes, "The social also has its skin, as a border that feels and that is shaped by the 'impressions' left by others. The skin of the social might

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<sup>228</sup> Ahmed, 11.

<sup>229</sup> Ahmed, 11.

be affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and textures in the ways in which things are arranged.”<sup>230</sup> This is a recognition that there is a relationship between a person and place, a body and space, in which both influence the other. Yet, the impact varies significantly based on existing hierarchies of power. We have established that space serves as a conduit for establishing dominance, and therefore, we can read the “skin of the social” as the “normative geography,” which represents the reigning doxa. Therefore, those bodies who are deemed appropriate and normal by the ideological status quo bear less of a spatial impression on their bodies because the spatial has come to mold itself around them. On the other hand, those bodies who are consistently positioned as “out of place” must tolerate the force of navigating a space whose contours were not designed for their inhabitation, perhaps already brimming with the dwelling of other bodies. As such, those spatial markings on the skin often involve greater pain and awareness—the material consequences of spatial alienation on the body.

Ahmed’s third chapter, “The orient and the other others” considers the ways in which Whiteness serves as an orientation that illustrates the unequal applications of this bidirectionality on non-White bodies. Whiteness, Ahmed argues,

is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, even worlds. In putting certain things in reach, a world acquires its shape; the white world is a world orientated ‘around’ whiteness. This world, too, is ‘inherited’ as a dwelling: it is a world shaped by colonial histories, which affect not simply how maps are drawn, but the kinds of orientations we have toward objects and others. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with.<sup>231</sup>

In this passage, Whiteness is interpreted as a spatial inheritance, a gift that positions a White body with a distinctive, prized orientation in space. This orientation is only possible because

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<sup>230</sup> Ahmed, 9.

<sup>231</sup> Ahmed, 126.

the social has been shaped by a molding from the inside out, such that its skin primarily bears the impressions of White bodies. A person that acquires Whiteness as an unearned privilege is situated such that a diverse range of capital is within their reach, which equips them for navigating a world already shaped in their image.

Let's consider the place of interest in this dissertation. If we envision a PWI university campus to be the "dark room" in which students are attempting the pursuit of inhabitation, then students inheriting Whiteness enter the room from a trap door in the center, while those with a non-White heritage are positioned by the perimeter, literally at the margins. Within reach are resources such as linguistic norms—dexterity with the English language or knowledge about relevant terminology and context-specific jargon; cultural capital about the implicit curriculum including how to ask for extensions, secure paid internships, and converse with professors; or relational resources, such as a parent or sibling who gives advice from prior experience or who encourages a student through challenging roadblocks. Therefore, Whiteness as an orientation situates White bodies such that they are primed to gain familiarity of the space quickly and therefore able to "extend" their body over the space to establish the security of a body-at-home with ease. Being "at home" is a kind of comfort that arises when a body is "so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish between where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and in the act of fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view."<sup>232</sup> Here, again, invisibility is the hallmark of power. When the skin of the body so closely mirrors the skin of the social, then the two become synonymous over time and sedimented as the status quo—the world becomes

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<sup>232</sup> Ahmed, 134.



shaped by White bodies, and a White world continues to allow for the disproportionate inhabitation of White over non-White bodies.

Taken together, Ahmed and Keenan's account spotlights the body as the primary perspective by which space and place is experienced. The body is always already oriented coming into a space, which creates a personalized nexus of proximity and distance dictating what or who is within reach in a body's pursuit of inhabitation. Yet the quest toward a body-at-home must also recognize the shape of the spaces in which one seeks to dwell, already conditioned to extend certain bodies over others. In light of my investigation about the college campus as space of significance, this emphasis on the body raises several questions to add to our cheat sheet, now represented by table 2.2:

Table 2.2. Making visible the normative campus geography and its impact	
Who or what is positioned as "in place" vs. "out of place" in [target space/place]?	
"In place"	"Out of place"
Normal Good Right Proper Acceptable Commonsense Doxa Dominant Hegemonic Scripted	Transgressive Bad Wrong Improper Rejected Divergent Rebellion Marginal Subordinated Off-script/Improvisation
Who benefits from this spatial configuration? Why and how is this positioning established or contested?	
How is the space imprinting onto students' bodies, particularly those subaltern students' whose bodies do not "fit" the space?  How are subaltern students responding to a space that is not designed for their bodily inhabitation? How are subaltern students attempting to shift the habitability of their campus environment?  What interventions must be taken in order to distribute the opportunity for bodily extension and inhabitation between students?	

### Returning to BC

Drawing on the embodied account of the “always already existing normative geography” of a given place, I turn back to the safe space controversy at BC, as it pertains to the two incidents that occurred on the Multicultural Learning Experience residential hall in 2021.<sup>233</sup> What nuance is gained by evaluating these bias-motivated incidents from the standpoint of embodied, spatial struggle? What can I (and other university educators and administrators) learn about how to craft a more inclusive campus environment from close attention to the lived experience of students most proximate to these events? In this case, I draw on the accounts of four student participants who each referenced MLE and/or these particular MLE-targeted incidents in their conversations with me. All of the students referenced here are students of Color—Lucia and Mateo identify as Latinx, Patrick is biracial but often refers to himself exclusively as Black, and both Anita and Andromeda are Asian. Though I will draw upon each student’s reference to MLE and its significance, Lucia’s account is the focal case because she chose to live on the MLE floor both her first and second year at BC. MLE was repeatedly referenced in Lucia’s interviews as a significant aspect of her college experience. Though the official title of the MLE living and learning community has since shifted to the “Fr. Rutilio Grande Intercultural Experience” (GIE), students still colloquially refer to it as MLE, so I follow suit.

It is also worthwhile to note that Lucia was not yet residing on the MLE hall during the two incidents of reference. The incidents took place in January/February 2021, while Lucia moved into MLE in August of the same year. However, Lucia recounts how her knowledge of these incidents shaped her precollegiate vision of BC and her expectations

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<sup>233</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 10.

about what hostility she could anticipate as the next MLE cohort. As such, these incidents cannot be divorced from her own MLE experience, just one semester later. Also, as MLE residents and BC students of Color have repeatedly shared, the two hate crimes that garnered media attention and administrative responses are not abnormal. They are two of a long list of racially motivated “scandals” (to use Patrick’s term) that have occurred at BC across the years, which makes them relevant to investigate even if two of the four students in this study were not yet present in the early Spring of 2021. If anything, it should serve as a sign of its significance that these incidents hold such impact on students who had not yet even arrived.

### **Lucia-at-home**

Opting into the MLE community held enormous possibility for a student of Color at BC. Lucia described her initial reaction to MLE as “super cool” and “something that [she] really needed,” as a first-generation Mexican student from the Midwest. It gave her the opportunity to craft a sense of “home” with other people who “got” her:

I don't have to explain myself to them as much as I would to another person. Like if I'm having a bad day, and I'm just like, “They were standing on a sidewalk again.” They know what I'm talking about, because people do that. People just take up space on the sidewalk, and they don't move. So, I don't have to explain myself all the time. They get my experience here, or like, close enough to it.

This shared understanding allowed Lucia to express herself honestly at home in a way that was not possible with others who did not share a marginalized racial/ethnic identity. To use Ahmed’s language, in this environment with other peers who also experience(d) racial/ethnic discrimination, Lucia was able to imagine her dorm as an extension of her skin, a “stretching over” of her experience over the space. This intimacy could be seen in how Lucia could take it for granted that her roommates would understand her frustrations, without the need for

significant labor in elaboration. Others in this dorm shaped the contours of the space through their shared understanding, imprinting the space with *their* experience of how marginalization shows up at BC and PWIs. In this case, Lucia's observation that her peers were unapologetic about "tak[ing] up space," perhaps even felt entitled to that space on the sidewalk, was a phenomenon that her friends shared. As such, Lucia could extend herself into a space that was made for her body. She fit here. Indeed, this relational and experiential bond became synonymous with the space itself: "coming in and out of your room, in like the communal bathrooms and stuff, it was sort of a nice sense of familiarity seeing people like me and having similar experiences with people like that." Therefore, within the space of the MLE community, Lucia felt 'at home,' so much so that she decided to participate in the sophomore version of MLE the following year. This sense of in-placedness only grew over the course of the following year, as Lucia described how intimately she came to see the space as an honest and holistic extension of herself. She described how this sense of home showed up in the "simple things," like being able to blast music while she showers:

growing up, that's just been how everyone showers in my house: bringing in the speaker and blasting it. We're having a whole individual party in there. So now I'm kind of used to that, and I like showering with music on. So, definitely, it's been more of a safer environment for me to do that. I'm not like, ooh, choosing which songs am I going to play? I just click, 'shuffle' and then go off. Because my taste is pretty all over the place.<sup>234</sup>

In living and sharing a bathroom with her closest MLE friends, who are all fellow students of Color, Lucia was able to recreate an everyday, mundane practice of home. However, the significance was not simply in the ability to play music in general, or even music with explicit language, which was my guess, but specifically the ability to play her own music without inhibition. It was the ease by which she was able to simply hit "shuffle," inhabiting the space

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<sup>234</sup> Lucia's walking interview.

with audio from “really old” Mexican music if she wanted to, rather than only “playing the usual—what everyone listens to, like Bad Bunny, or just the usual...a lot of R&B.” In more communal settings, Lucia felt self-conscious about her music choices given her peers’ subdued responses: “people usually don’t... They’re usually like, ‘What is that?’” Though there were many possibilities to fill in the blank pause in her statement, it was clear from context clues that the response from peers had been less than enthusiastic. Therefore, it was a meaningful experience of belonging for Lucia to be uncensored in her dorm, able to flood her senses with sounds of home without fear of judgment. It is in this vein that Lucia’s experience reverberates with Ahmed’s description of home as a *sensorial* extension of self, where she is able to saturate the space with the “familiar smell of spices [filling] the air.” For Ahmed, home is the place where she can allow “the cumin to spill.”<sup>235</sup> For Lucia, home was where her music freely saturated the space.

Lucia’s testimony about the MLE floor environment demonstrated the extent to which those who inhabit the MLE floor at BC made their imprint on the space and served as place-makers. Here, in the MLE, the students who opted into this residential community were making the choice to entangle their life lines with one another, collectively negotiating into formation a habitable space in which students of Color were the ones who were centered and made to feel “at home.” What was appropriate in this environment were celebrations of ethnic origins beyond Westernized nations, such that Pan-African or Mexican flags were common décor and multilingual interactions were routine. What was normalized in this space was a shared understanding about everyday encounters with microaggressions, such as encounters with sidewalk entitlement on a regular basis, to the point where the

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<sup>235</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 10.

school's regular first-year diversity programming was superfluous. Consider the way that Lucia described the experience of undergoing DiversityEdu as an MLE group:

when I did it, I did with my floor, and it was the MLE floor. So, it was all of us. Conversations went smoothly. Obviously... they ask you in the beginning, 'What are microaggressions?' and people have to raise their hands and try to guess what they are. Then they give you the definition. We were like, 'We've been through this. We know.' So, for our group, it was super easy and stuff.

Conversations went smoothly because of the *normative geography* established within this particular residential community. Discussions about microaggressions were normalized and already established as a part of the spatial "commonsense:" what is "commonplace," given the demographic of students who opted into this environment and their overlapping experiences with marginalization. However, Lucia was under no pretense that what was deemed "normal" on this single hall was routine for every other residential dorm on campus. Extending her reflections on DiversityEdu, she continued,

I know someone from our floor missed theirs, and they had to basically redo it with a different floor, a different group. And obviously, you being the one person of color in a floor of all white women, having those conversations. I feel like that can be really, really nerve wracking.

Here, she quickly acknowledged how the familiarity with issues of diversity and racism were limited to the MLE space and its inhabitants. With another floor and a different entanglement of White bodies and experiences, the normative geography shifted drastically. The subtext, then, was the extent to which the spatial ideology at play on the MLE hall was an exception rather than the norm.

One of the major reasons why MLE students found solace in one another was because of their shared experience of being made to feel "out of place" in the broader campus environment, a microcosm of a world that has proven to be dangerous for nonwhite, non-compliant beings. The pervasive and pernicious norm was one of racist ideology, which necessitated a space like MLE in order for those marginalized to cope, heal,

and organize in solidarity.<sup>236</sup> In this vein, it might be worth stating explicitly that though shared experiences of marginalization served as one avenue by which subaltern students found community, by no means do I seek to reify its presence or sugarcoat its negative consequences. Instead, the ability to draw strength, healing, and community from oppression is a powerful testament to the essential role of resistance in the quest of more inclusive learning environments. Chapter three will explore BC's normative geography in greater depth and detail from the perspective of all six participants, but for now, what is important to note is the extent to which the MLE floor served as a refuge from the larger campus ecology. Deemed a multicultural space by administrators, students who resided on MLE were the ones who served as architects of "home," engaging in place-making practices (e.g. choice in décor, normalizing of multilingualism, shared knowledge of microaggressions) that resisted the spatial ideology of BC. Their actions served as tactics of defiance to a campus geography that regularly positioned their bodies, practices, and beliefs as unacceptable or abnormal. With this foundation established, it becomes clear that the incidents targeting MLE residents served as attempts to discipline this transgressive space and its inhabitants back into submission with the dominant ideology.

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<sup>236</sup> This argument aligns with the discourse on "counter-publics" (e.g. Nancy Fraser offers one such account in her 1990 article in *Social Text*, "Rethinking the public sphere") or "counter-spaces" (e.g. from Critical Race Theory, Daniel Solorzano and colleagues propose the term as a result of their qualitative study with a group of African American students, while community psychologists Andrew Case & Carla Hunter are often credited with developing a counterspace framework to apply to future empirical studies) which propose that communities like that found on the MLE floor arise as a response to hostile, discriminatory conditions. As a form of resistance and/or avenue for collective coping and solidarity, these spaces run "counter" to the dominant class and ideology with an eye toward ultimately rehabilitating the overarching hegemony such that they can be full participants. Though I do not use that language in this chapter, the ideas of counter-publics and counterspaces are compatible with the view offered here. Andrew D. Case and Carla D. Hunter, "Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in Marginalized Individuals' Adaptive Responses to Oppression," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 1–2 (September 2012): 257–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9497-7>; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>; Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students," *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1/2 (2000): 60–73.

### Paradoxical transgressions

To now return to our localized “safe space” controversy—MLE-specific vandalism and derogatory sing-song taunts—I can now contextualize why it is unreasonable, drawing on the language of spatial ideologies, to conclude that these actions were perpetrated (in Gentile’s words) “with no rhyme or reason.”<sup>237</sup> Even though the multicultural living and learning community was a university-sanctioned initiative, its institutional status did not shield the space or its residents from being perceived as a transgression. At first blush, this seems like a paradox, since surely, the obvious transgressions are the acts of discrimination *targeting* the MLE floor, not the MLE hall itself. However, by situating themselves, their experiences, and their actions as “bodies-at-home”, MLE residents, like Lucia, crafted their own counter-geography in rebellion to the spatial ideologies underpinning the BC campus writ large. To dedicate a space where students of Color could be unapologetically centered and fully expressive of their identities at a PWI becomes the real “action out of place,” while the perpetrators’ behaviors can be understood as more of the norm. Lucia offers support for this reading as she recounted the regularity by which she and her hallmates were provoked:

I don't know if I've told you but literally it was week one or two, and there was already a hate crime on our floor, because I was on the MLE floor... It wasn't the first time it happened. I was there. It was first semester last year. A whole bunch of drunk white guys... I'm assuming they were drunk, because I would think that's the only reason they would do that. They kind of just came up to our doors, and they were like, 'What are these flags?' Like they've never seen them before. They were outside my door. I could hear them. I had my flag, and then my roommate had the Pan-African flag. They were like, 'What are these doors?' and they just started banging on all of our doors and running away.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Gentile, “In Response To “Why Is It Only Our Floor...Why Us’ Multicultural Learning Floor Vandalized Saturday Morning.”

<sup>238</sup> Lucia, Interview 1.



In this testimony, despite all that she's heard about hate crimes on the MLE floor prior to starting at BC, Lucia still provided these students with some leniency, excusing some of the brazen behavior due to inebriation. However, her overarching sentiment was clear: the MLE floor was *regularly* subjected to heckling and aggression, however subconscious or lubricated with liquid confidence. The two incidents that received attention from the school's newspaper and administration were not isolated incidents but part of a routine *pattern* of harassment that students of Color routinely tolerated on the MLE floor. If expanded to quotidian racist incidents that students of Color faced outside of their housing, the list would only become more expansive.

Therefore, a detailed snapshot of Lucia's experience as a Mexican student living on the MLE floor demonstrates that the "action out of place" was not necessarily the vandalism or verbal antagonism but the audacity to mobilize a resistant spatial ideology. Interpreting these incidents as part of an ongoing spatial struggle, the students who targeted this space interpreted the presence of the multicultural hall as an affront to *their* space, contending with what it feels like to bear the imprint of a space whose shape does not match their body, perhaps for the first time. In response to the feeling of alienation—mind you, a sense of out-of-placedness that is disproportionately placed on nonwhite bodies—the students who committed these acts could be understood as striving toward re-establishing conformity with the status quo through the use of hostile strategies within their reach. This quest for "normality" sought to reinforce a campus climate that situated White, male bodies "at home" and female bodies of Color as "out of place."

Up to this point, I have been deliberate in using language that attributes the counter spatial ideology formed in the MLE hall not primarily due to the university allocation of residential space, but to the place-making practices that MLE residents enacted to make their

dorm (and by extension, their campus) habitable for themselves. This does not mean that the university leadership and administrators had no role or responsibility to play; far from it. The university, in many ways, did far too little to address the campus climate that warranted a MLE hall in the first place, or to help protect the students who opted into this living and learning community. For example, many of my student participants and BC students quoted in *The Heights* commented on the ways in which the MLE hall was well-intentioned but served a counter-intuitive purpose of singling out these students. Mateo (part of the study) mentioned that “the floor has been targeted for bias motivated incidents. Just straight up hate crimes.” In an anecdote that took place prior to Lucia’s first semester at BC, her sister offered a similar criticism of this spatial arrangement when she pointedly asked, “It’s great that there’s a community, but also, are you noticing that they’re putting you in one place, so it’s gonna be really easy for people to target you?” Concentrating students of Color in this way means nothing from the institution if they are unwilling to protect students they have put in that precarious position. It might even be foolhardy, placing already minoritized students at greater risk of targeted discrimination. Indeed, if the university recognizes the need for this kind of community, given the nature of the campus climate, then they also have to recognize that the campus climate doesn’t automatically change once there is a MLE hall—just like it doesn’t with the hire of one faculty of color, one queer text on the syllabus, or one celebration of Black History Month.

Now, BC certainly did not look the other way, nor did the institution assume that any of their interventions were all-encompassing panaceas. However, the argument is that what had been done was not sufficient, especially in light of the heightened risk MLE residents faced. As referenced early in the chapter, administrators issued disciplinary sanctions via the Student Code of Conduct, hosted virtual town hall meetings with

concerned students, and enriched several initiatives targeting anti-racism (e.g. DiversityEdu, The Forum on Racial Justice in America). However, the problem lies in the extent to which these actions were reactionary, rather than proactive; performative, rather than genuine; and isolated, rather than comprehensive. Remember Gonzalez's point, one of the MLE residents quoted in the articles covering these hate crimes, who was so frustrated by the slow administrative delay as juxtaposed with the immediate response to the uptick in COVID-19 cases. From her viewpoint, it was clear that BC did not prioritize cases of racial hostility on campus because they had the capacity to respond swiftly, yet chose not to. This sentiment was also captured in @BlackatBostonCollege's second statement on the events, which stated, "We'd like to highlight that when COVID-19 regulations were broken last semester, the university had students kicked off of campus and suspended within hours. Therefore, we say it with everything in our hearts when we say Boston College is making a choice when it comes to racism. It's not a good one."<sup>239</sup> These remarks demonstrated students' disappointment with decision-makers at BC, who seemed to be more performative in their actions than committed to changing the campus climate for marginalized students. They responded only to egregious acts of racism, without addressing root causes. This approach came with consequences regarding student messaging. Patrick, a biracial Black student in the study, commented,

I'm not gonna say that I had any incidents directly against me, but I guess it's still like sets a certain atmosphere about what's normal at this school, about what's acceptable... Usually, they're gonna take outright racism seriously, but, you know, it's still definitely possible and I've seen a lot of times, people doing low key stuff, and no one really cares. Yeah, like, I feel like probably wouldn't slide as much as other schools, but...

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<sup>239</sup> @BlackatBostonCollege, "Regarding the Recent Hate Crimes on the Multicultural Learning Experience Floor: An Update," February 4, 2021.

Following this statement, Patrick did recall several incidents of racism such as fielding veiled insults about his do rag or careless remarks he overhears by his roommates or peers.

However, what he referenced was the normative geography of BC—what is communicated as “normal” and “acceptable” when everyday forms of racism occur without acknowledgement or concern. This stance positioned rampant microaggressions as commonplace, reinforcing a campus environment that continued to center and cohere around Whiteness. Lucia emphasized that it was not only BC leadership but also faculty that were partly to blame for this hostile environment. When hate crimes occur on campus, she argued that silence from faculty is itself a stance: “It's more so not even what they're doing, it's what they're *not*. The fact that they're *not* speaking out; they're not supporting in any way.”

Another one of my students, Andromeda, an Asian international student, commented on how even BC's supposedly preventative measures reinforced a palpable feeling of alienation. Andromeda did not opt into the MLE floor, but she lived in the same residential CLXF building where Residence Life decided to install cameras in response to the targeted incidents. In her words, “knowing that I'm living in the only building [on upper campus] that has security cameras, it makes me feel a certain way and makes me act a certain way when I'm there.” Though the cameras were instituted as a measure to establish a sense of protection, Andromeda felt uneasy about how, in practice, they served as more of an explicit reminder about her precarious status on campus, which came to bear on her body. She described how she was “a little more careful” when she walked by herself to her dorm, fearful that as a person of Color, she would be targeted for racist attacks. When I asked whether the cameras, in that vein, gave her any sense of security whatsoever, she conceded, though with caveats: “To a certain extent. The camera there...if anyone wants to do something, it wouldn't prevent them from doing something, because they already know,

‘They will catch me on camera.’ It will be something that they will have to deal with their consequences.” Here, Andromeda admitted that the cameras were helpful in ensuring that future perpetrators would be held accountable for their actions. Yet, the impact of this approach was limited because all students were aware that the cameras now existed. The surveillance might prevent students from engaging in racist actions on this hall, but it does not deter students from bias-motivated incidents anywhere else on campus. It is this restricted capacity that led Andromeda to describe this measure as merely a “band-aid.” It did nothing to mitigate the overarching spatial ideology that persists openly throughout BC.

About the normality of racism, Andromeda concluded, “I think that's the most dangerous part—that it is not a secret. Everyone knows it. And everyone, in a way, accepted it, normalized it. It's not something special.” Her statement raised a somewhat paradoxical inference; it would be less dangerous if racism was a secret. However, Andromeda’s stance made sense in the context of inciting social change. If racism was a secret, then revealing its presence held promise of corralling support and maintained the illusion that her peers would not condone racism if they were aware of it. However, what Andromeda suggested is that her peers and administrators were aware, to the point of normalization, which made their inaction and lack of care seem particularly insidious and dangerous.

Taken together, the overwhelming evidence drawn from these student experiences suggests that BC’s normative geography is deeply etched with racism and white supremacy, which illuminates why the creation and inhabitation of an MLE hall marks such a significant contrast and indeed, why it would provoke such heated, spatial struggle. So perhaps the remaining question is, what is a PWI like BC to do in situations like these? A recognition of space as co-constructed means that the work is, by nature, ongoing and always a work-in-progress. There isn’t a finish line to cross in which a university can be said to have “reached”

inclusion or belonging. Instead, universities must be aware of the ideologies encoded into the structures of their campus environment and routinely re-evaluating who and what is positioned as normal, good, and appropriate. This kind of awareness necessitates reciprocal partnership with students, particularly those who are historically marginalized, and a commitment to listening to what they have to share about their experience. With enough attunement, university leaders and educators can notice not only the ways subaltern students are made to feel alienated, but also their everyday tactics for crafting habitability. This work of place-making toward parity of “campus-as-home,” therefore, is context-specific and re-negotiated with each new addition to the knot of place. The next chapters offer a model for what this process could look like, as I wrestle what I learned from my students about rehabilitating BC as a place of learning.

## INTERLUDE THREE

### Campus Architecture, Part One

In Yale alumnus Aaron Lewis' response to the safe space incidents at Yale University, he insists on naming the dissonance he feels as a student of Color between "the Yale [he] find[s] in admissions brochures and the Yale [he] experience[s] every day." However, this "mismatch" is far from exclusive to Yale. Could any other [elite, predominantly White institution] be substituted in Yale's place? In this study, Anita's appraisal of Boston College seems to indicate that her PWI would qualify too. When she read the fine print of the normative BC geography, she found that BC was implicitly coded as "a good school [for White students]."

This interlude joins up with the next, interlude four, to offer a series of four digital constructions in two parts that play with this discrepancy in campus representations, starting with the generic map of Boston College (fig. iii) that one might receive as a prospective student, then advancing through three other 'campus geographies' etched with the entangled lifelines of six subaltern students at BC.<sup>240</sup> Through these plays with lines and text, I provoke the participant to interpret campus maps as textured landscapes, attuning to subaltern students' paths as a way to capture the "[BC] they experience every day" more wholly.

#### Referenced texts

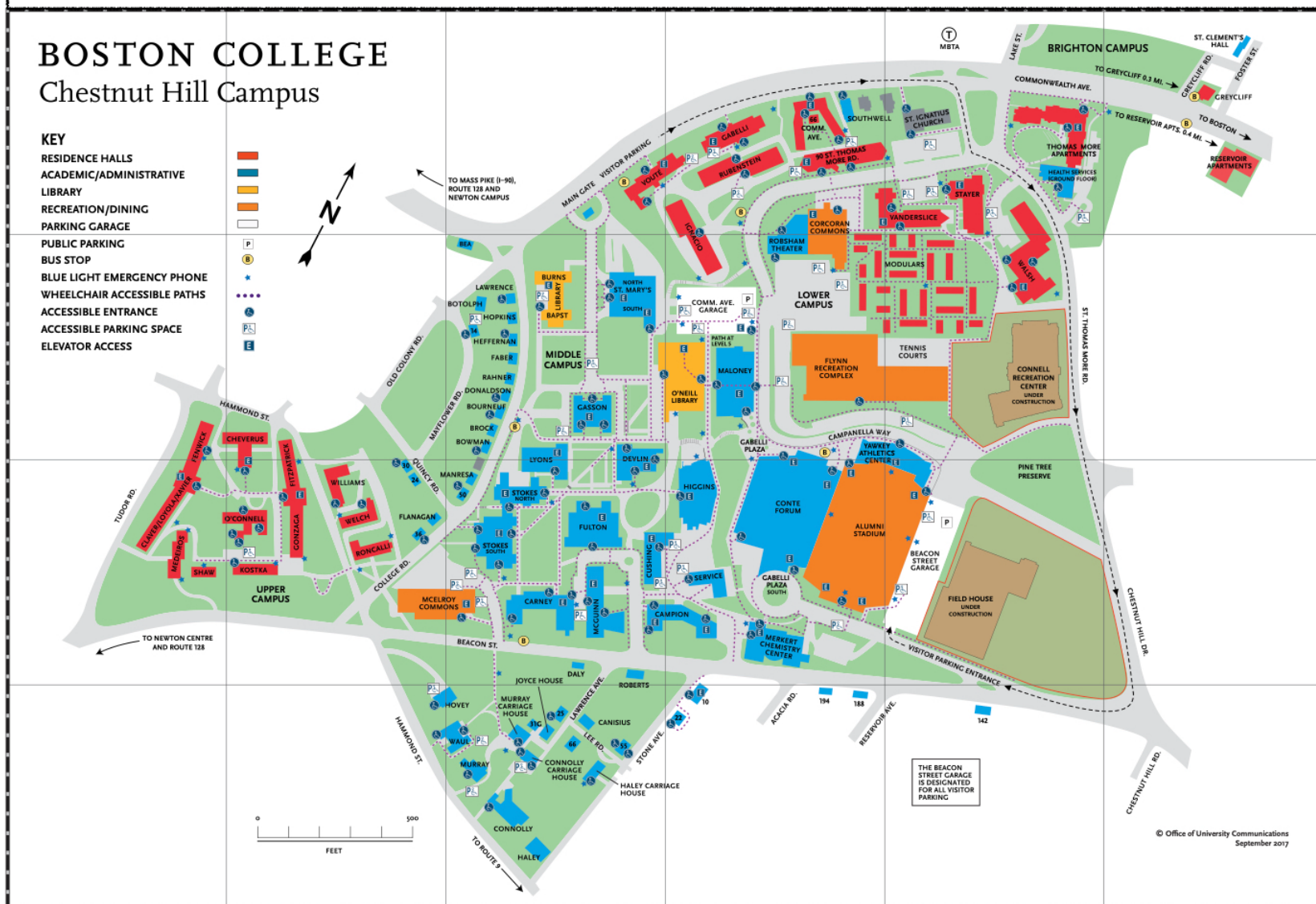
Figure iii: (from top to bottom) Aaron Lewis, "What's Really Going on at Yale," *Medium*, November 8, 2015, <https://medium.com/@aaronzlewis/what-s-really-going-on-at-yale-6bdbbeeb57a6>; Anita, Interview 1. The campus map comes from the official BC website.

Figure iv: Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 103.

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<sup>240</sup> The original map of the Chestnut Hill Campus of Boston College comes from the university website, in which all rights are reserved. This map shows up in nearly all versions of interludes three and four, though manipulated for visual design purposes. *Chestnut Hill Map*, n.d., n.d., <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/about/maps-and-directions/chestnuthill-campus-map.html>.

"The protests are not really about [Halloween costumes or a frat party]. It is about a mismatch between the [Yale] we find in admissions brochures and the [Yale] we experience every day."



"It is kind of disheartening to realize that [BC] really markets itself as this 'good school,' but in parentheses:  
*A good school for [white people], for [white students].*"

Figure iii. The BC from admissions brochures.



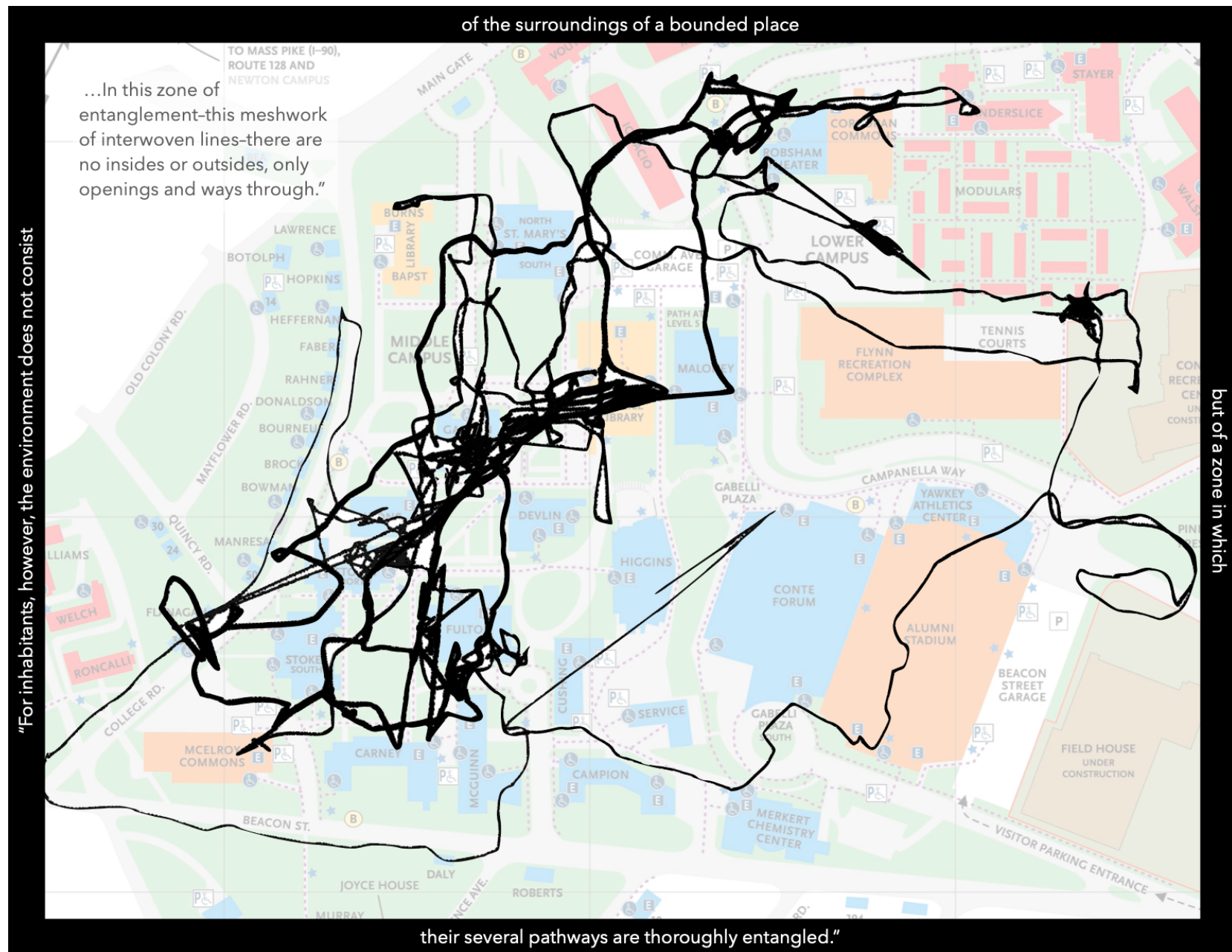


Figure iv. BC as a "zone of entanglement."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Subaltern Place-Making Practices: Navigating the Normative Geography of Boston

#### College

*"I think that some of the change I would want to see [at BC]: just it being more of a welcoming environment for students who are not like 'the usual' kind of student here. More welcoming, so that when my people, people back home ask me, 'Should I go there?' I'm like, 'Yeab, if you want to.' Now, I'm like, 'Yes, but!'"*  
*-Lucia, Interview 1*

In the previous chapter, I centered on Lucia as a focal participant, since she lived in the multicultural residential floor at Boston College for two consecutive years, the setting for multiple discriminatory incidents (what I have deemed safe space controversies) that had occurred prior to her enrollment. Her insider knowledge from within a targeted place on campus helped to illustrate how an analysis of the normative campus geography—one that does not narrow the scope of analysis exclusively to a single event—is necessary to understand and protect subaltern students' transgressive efforts to craft habitability for themselves. A crucial facet of this case was the extent to which the normative BC geography was deemed hostile by and for the students who opted into the multicultural residential hall. In this chapter, I contextualize the BC normative geography in greater depth, analyzing across all six subaltern student narratives from the PDR study, to answer some of the questions raised by the "cheat sheet" developed in the previous chapter. I reproduce the series of questions here (table 2.2) with an asterisk marking the prompts that will be addressed in this chapter.

Table 2.2. Making visible the normative campus geography and its impact [Reproduced]	
*Who or what is positioned as “in place” vs. “out of place” in [target space/place]?	
“In place”	“Out of place”
Normal Good Right Proper Acceptable Commonsense Doxa Dominant Hegemonic Scripted	Transgressive Bad Wrong Improper Rejected Divergent Rebellion Marginal Subordinated Improvised/Off-script
*Who benefits from this spatial configuration? Why and how is this positioning established or contested?	
*How is the space imprinting onto students’ bodies, particularly those subaltern students’ whose bodies do not “fit” the space?  *How are subaltern students responding to a space that is not designed for their bodily inhabitation? How are subaltern students attempting to shift the habitability of their campus environment?  What interventions must be taken in order to distribute the opportunity for bodily extension and inhabitation between students?	

To pose those questions in direct, empirical terms, I ask:

1. Informed by the experiences of six subaltern students, what is the normative geography of Boston College?
2. What place-making practices did these six subaltern students use to navigate their hostile campus context?

Organized by these two questions, this chapter makes visible the realities that undergird safe space controversies as spatial, power-laden struggles by empirical immersion into the contours of the Boston College campus. The first half of this chapter is guided by research question #1 above regarding the normative geography of BC as a focal place of learning. I draw on the embodied narratives of six minoritized students at BC to posit who or what is positioned as “in place” or “out of place” in this campus setting. The students’ observations cohere in a description of BC as a White, socioeconomically elite, gender-normative, and heteronormative space that reinforces their alienation primarily through

mundane, quotidian cues. I organize this section with respective headings to personify each of these spatial dimensions: 1) “White Space,” 2) “So much wealth” 3) No room for gender ambiguity, and 4) Queer issues “take up just a little space.” Taken together, subaltern students’ interpretation of spatial signals compound to form the distinctive and localized “archi-*texture*”<sup>241</sup> of the BC campus geography.

However, students’ stories not only heighten awareness about the hostile, conditioning forces at play in their daily experience, but also highlight their transgressive practices of spatial rehabilitation and imagination. Thus, the second half of this chapter centers on research question #2, illustrating subaltern students’ creative tactics for surviving, coping, and resisting the alienation associated with the BC campus geography. Nearly all six students were able to negotiate greater habitability for themselves through at least one of the following strategies: 1) seeking out “skin”-extending relational spaces, 2) withdrawing into private refuges, or 3) refusing to comply with prescriptive rules. One student, Patrick, however served as an outlier, whose place-making practices were more passive than the others. However, a closer analysis of his narrative offers insights regarding the powerful conditioning force of the normative campus geography at BC. This chapter amplifies my students’ everyday realities and resistant place-making, illuminating the consequences associated with abandoning safe spaces and sidelining the spatial.

### **Unpacking the Normative Geography of Boston College**

One of the most significant patterns of place raised by students was the extent to which exclusion and discrimination was normalized at BC, especially prominent along lines

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<sup>241</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 118.

of race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. These four facets of out-of-placedness thus serve as the organizing headers for unpacking the BC normative geography, respectively entitled: 1) “White Space,” 2) “So much wealth,” 3) No room for gender ambiguity, and 4) Queer issues “take up just a little space.” As I unpack each alienating contour of the BC campus geography, I highlight how subaltern students unveiled assumptions about who and what was “normal” vs. “deviant” almost entirely from subliminal, quotidian cues with place. In table 3.1 below, I offer a typology of spatial cues that students referenced in their perception of the normative BC geography, with institutional policies being the most overt signals to place, while the other three categories deal primarily in covert indications of discrimination.<sup>242</sup>

Table 3.1. A typology of spatial cues that compound to forge a normative geography of place	
<i>Spatial cue</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Institutional policies	Distribution of resources (e.g. toward certain clubs, centers, initiatives), disciplinary procedures (or lack thereof), dormitory and bathroom classifications
Peer interactions and corresponding assumptions	Conversations with roommates, differences in lifestyle habits, discrepancies between private and public perceptions
Interactions with campus leaders or those with authority	The actions and responses of administrators, faculty, staff to bias-related incidents; silence; openness to listening
Embodied signals*	Food choices, artwork displayed, attire or fashion, music
*This spatial cue develops further in the latter half of the chapter on place-making practices.	

These seemingly minute spatial cues reinforce hegemonic ideologies, whose power is contingent on the capacity to sustain a façade of ahistoricity, invisibility, and obviousness.<sup>243</sup> Identifying and attuning to these hidden spatial signs is the necessary first step in appraising

<sup>242</sup> I am grateful to Kate McNeill for helping to shape and organize my originally unwieldy ideas for this section into a structure that lets my students’ narratives shine.

<sup>243</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

the terrain of a college campus. Each section will foreground how subaltern students discerned the contours of their campus through a combination of spatial cues and correspondingly how these facets of space imprinted upon their bodies and experiences.

### **“White space”**

By far the most prominent characterization of BC was that it was a “White space,” a label used most frequently by Anita, a low-middle-income trans\* student of Color, but it was accurate in nailing sentiments shared across all five of the students of Color (Lucia, Mateo, Patrick, and Andromeda).<sup>244</sup> They shared the appraisal that BC was designed for the White body and cohered around Whiteness. Lucia’s testimony from the previous chapter regarding the targeted vandalism of the MLE hall and racially motivated jeering also supported this pattern that the “normal” BC student was assumed to be White. However, Anita’s shorthand did not refer to race alone. In her words, “white space” designated a campus where “a lot of things (events, programs, etc) were not made for [her] or [she] wasn’t the student they had in mind (thinking the average student is white & rich & cis)” when designing the learning environment. It was clear that Anita’s critique was not simply based on race but on an intersectional analysis of BC, constructed to serve the “average” student, who was situated at an advantageous juncture of race, socioeconomic class, and gender expression.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Tyler, the only White student in this group, focused mainly on her axes of disadvantage, which included her low-income identity and sexual orientation as a queer woman. This is important to flag because there were tensions that were raised amid the six student narratives, such as Tyler’s dearth of attention to her own privilege as a White student on campus (though to be fair, as her former teacher, I know that she is reflective about her White privilege). However, Tyler is not an outlier. Most students spoke to their subaltern identities rather than their privileges, such as Andromeda who became visibly uncomfortable with conversations about class as a student from a wealthy background. The exception is Mateo, who was highly aware how his disadvantaged and advantaged identities interact.

<sup>245</sup> Though this organization of headers in this section might not necessarily capture the intersectional nuance, it is worth highlighting that students with overlapping marginalization (like Anita) do experience BC differently than others with more privileges.

A quintessential example of “White space” for Anita was her service-learning classroom entitled PULSE, ironically, one of the initiatives on campus that was branded heavily as social justice oriented. She had originally enrolled in PULSE because,

I knew I wanted to, I guess, build on my own social justice sort of thing. I wanted to volunteer at a place that needed.... Like, that was a marginalized community. When I was looking through places, looking through the options, I noticed there was one of them, which was [New England Health]. They predominantly deal with, I guess, HIV patients and just the LGBTQ community, like they probably predominantly do that. And I wanted to volunteer just so I can help, I guess, help my community.

Anita’s intention was to enrich her own practice of social justice, finding avenues to support *her* communities, who she knew from firsthand experience could use additional resources and attention. As critical community engaged scholars like Tania Mitchell and David Donahue have pointed out, the motivations for White vs. non-White students to participate in service often diverge. Students of Color, like Anita, often approach service as “going home (to their own or similar communities)” while service-learning courses often operate on the assumption that students are privileged White folks “serving the Other” or encountering “difference.”<sup>246</sup> However, despite Anita’s intent, scheduling limitations within a hyper-competitive matching process between students and community organizations landed her at an after school youth center in a wealthy Boston suburb. She described this placement as “frustrating” because it made her question whether she was “really helping out” and why this community was selected as a PULSE site if “it seemed like they had enough funding.”

Anita’s bafflement with her service responsibilities was especially pronounced in juxtaposition with Lucia (her close friend) and her experiences in her PULSE placement. Lucia was assigned to an elementary school struggling to recover from a recent flood that

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<sup>246</sup> Tania D. Mitchell and David M. Donahue, “I Do More Service in This Class than I Ever Do at My Site:’ Paying Attention to the Reflections of Students of Color in Service-Learning,” in *The Future of Service-Learning: New Solutions for Sustaining and Improving Practice*, ed. Jean Strait and Marybeth Lima (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009), 176.

rendered part of the classroom unusable. Anita expressed how “pissed off” she was after hearing about the circumstances Lucia’s organization was facing, because “*that’s* a school that needs help, and here I was serving these students.” This juxtaposition raised a tension for Anita about resources—about how a PULSE site was identified and how students were allocated to sites. This site placement felt problematic for Anita, because she knew how much need there was elsewhere, and instead, those resources were being directed toward students, programs, and organizations that were already upper or middle-class. Anita raised this concern with her PULSE professor, but she was told that she needed to stay with her service site all year. Anita’s reflections so far draw on two kinds of spatial cues to expose the normative geography: institutional policies, as it pertains to the distribution of the PULSE program’s resources, and interactions with those with authority, like her professor, who was unwilling to accommodate Anita’s request. Together, these structures of place implied to Anita that *her* notions of service were transgressive and out of line.

Anita also commented on the ways in which her PULSE course texts and peer discussions consistently reinforced that the classroom was not designed for her, as a student from an “inner-city school” with a majority Black and Brown population. A key illustration of this dynamic was Anita’s recounting of a conversation about gentrification, a discussion that assumed students did not have any awareness about the practice. She described it as “crazy that [she] was learning about stuff [she] already learned about in high school,” having studied and lived through gentrification. She spoke about how her high school was positioned right next to a rapidly gentrifying area, so she witnessed the community ‘transform’ each day. However, she felt “disappointed” by the ways that social issues were raised in the classroom, because it made it clear to her that the course was intended for “white students who lived in a bubble.” This observation was reinforced over and over



again. In another discussion about exposure to race and racism, Anita overheard her peers repeatedly share the same sentiment—“Oh, I was in a private school, like a fancy private school, and I didn't really learn about race”—which eventually prompted her to interrupt the conversation with the insight that when you are Black and Brown, “topics about race [were] just integrated in our classes.” *Not* talking about race was not an option. Anita felt called upon to educate her peers in class, given the entrenched privilege that she regularly encountered, even though she described how hard this engagement could be as it made her “stick out” even more from what felt like a homogenous community.<sup>247</sup> These interactions with her peers reinforced that BC was a place whose contours were not designed to fit her subaltern experience. This classroom was not constructed with someone like her in mind, a student who has been exposed to racism and gentrification and who sought to engage in service to support *her* community, rather than to gain exposure to “diverse” communities. In the focus group, Anita and Lucia conversed about how they were already forced to “see” and participate in cultures and communities different than their own every day via the insular BC “bubble,” thus not needing the same kind of exposure to difference as their peers. As a result, Anita felt the imprint of the archetypal BC student body in nearly every peer interaction, reinforcing her alienation.

Patrick also offered an example of “White space” via peer interactions in the dining hall during a period when COVID policies were strictly enforced. One of the restrictions was a limit on the number of students who could sit at a table. He recalled that,

one of the workers, she's like Asian, right? She came up and she says, "Five people per table" because there's too many people at the table. And then right after she said that, one of the other kids is mocking her like, "Five potato" or something like that.

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<sup>247</sup> In the place-making pattern of refusal, later in this chapter, I will return to one interaction in Anita's classroom where she chronicles her peer and teacher's reactions to one of these shared insights.

Yeah, everyone laughed and like, I didn't even say anything, maybe I should have, but I wasn't gonna say anything.

In isolation, this might seem like a minor incident, but in context, Patrick's anecdote gestured at the normality of this kind of interaction; one in which BC students make racially derogatory comments and snicker about linguistic accents different from their own when no one is looking. Patrick's vignette offered a glimpse into the private student culture, which was characterized by "low key stuff" that slid under the radar, in which "no one care[d]" about intervening, even him. Though Patrick's lack of action might reflect badly on him, it also raises tensions when it comes to subaltern students' responsibility to intervene and educate peers about their racial bias and privilege, especially since the labor for this work is not evenly distributed between minoritized and majoritarian students.

Andromeda, an Asian international student, raised the topic of another notable racist incident that occurred during the data collection period, which had been commonly referred to by BC students as "the Perspectives incident." The controversial event occurred in an introductory philosophy class, entitled Perspectives, between a White and Black student discussing race. As reported secondhand in the student newspaper, *The Heights*, a White freshman initiated a heated discussion with the remark, "I respect the Founding Fathers and their ideologies, but I don't see how it makes sense for people of color to destroy their own hoods." Other students of Color in the class sought to explain why that characterization was misguided, "while the professor tried to change the topic" (an important detail to Andromeda and others). The White student continued the conversation by sharing that he believed racism no longer existed today, gesturing to the Black student when asking, "Are

you a slave?”<sup>248</sup> Reflecting upon this confrontation, Andromeda shared that it both surprised and didn’t surprise her, given what she knew about the campus climate for POC students:

It just makes me feel a little... I don't know. Like, knowing that they are freshmen and during the Perspectives class, which the focus is open mindedness, different perspectives. The fact that the teacher tried to change the topic is like... you should address the topic and say to the students... like, address it appropriately, instead of trying to brush it off and not talk about it.

Andromeda expressed frustration and disbelief, particularly when it came to the teacher’s response, who she charged with responding to this disavowal of racism directly, rather than trying to “brush it off.” Especially given the nature of the course as one involving “Perspectives,” Andromeda expected the professor to step in and address the topic, to “at least say something to the students,” rather than leave students of Color to reckon with the implications of this denunciation of racism and the audacity of using a Black student’s “freedom” as evidence. Therefore, in a classroom that was committed to different perspectives, the teacher had a responsibility *not* to shut down this thread but to use it as a learning opportunity to disrupt harmful post-racial narratives. She expressed being startled by this lapse in accountability and expected the professor to “use that as an opportunity to educate the whole class.”

When asked to elaborate on what didn’t surprise her about this scene, she clarified, “It doesn't surprise me in the sense that it has happened before, like comments like that. And there have been different incidents on campus that's not respectful. And I don't know, especially for POC students, it's hearing about that happening every year. It just doesn't feel

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<sup>248</sup> It is also worth noting that the Heights updated this article two days later with the caveat that the reporting had “not yet been independently confirmed” and is based only on what was shared at a student government meeting. An antiracist student organization, FACES, also criticized the reporting for getting some of the statements wrong and for prioritizing speed of publishing over accuracy. None of the students in this study were present in that class, so they are responding to what has been circulated about the incident. Sofia Laboy, “Student Assembly Reacts to Alleged Incident in Perspectives Class,” *The Heights*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bcheights.com/2022/10/26/student-assembly-reacts-to-alleged-incident-in-perspectives-class/>.

safe? Like it can happen to me next time.” This comment speaks to the normality of this kind of occurrence. Andromeda might have been a bit surprised by some of the particulars of the event, but she experienced the discriminatory attitudes and sentiments as routine facets of the BC culture that reprised again and again each year. She was clear that this was not an outlier incident, but one that resonated with the pattern of racial discrimination that characterized the campus. As a result, Andromeda didn’t feel “safe” on campus, understood as the perpetual possibility of being subject to disparaging remarks and behaviors. However, these feelings of targeted threat were not limited to disappointing responses from teachers. Students also consistently expressed frustration at the university’s default, “sweep it under the rug,” response to claims of bias or discrimination. Lucia, for example, was often disheartened by the administration’s choice to stay silent in the face of students’ pleas for response and action, which was the case following this “Perspectives incident.” In the focus group, when the incident was raised as a discussion topic, she remarked,

I think it's important also, just to recognize the silence. The fact that it hasn't been talked about further, and I know probably in most people's classes, it wasn't talked about. I feel like that was something really different in my classes, because my professors really have the sense that learning is not like an absolutely controlled environment where nothing else is happening, like people come into class with things. So just recognizing that and the fact that there shouldn't be silence, these things need be talked about.

In this reflection, Lucia commented on the dearth of response from BC administrators, but also most faculty outside of the school of education where she was a student, as telling spatial cues about what was deemed normal for this campus place about race and racism. The default stance from those with authority was silence, which made them complicit in extending and reifying a hostile campus environment.

Taken together, students of Color at BC overwhelmingly established that their place of learning was steeped in often-invisible Whiteness. Whiteness was reified as the norm through disheartening responses by those with authority, including administrative silence to

bias-related events and deflections by teachers; interactions with peers, who mocked linguistic accents different than their own; and institutional policies for allocating resources and volunteer hours to PULSE placements without reckoning with need or fit with the student. These spatial cues sedimented into a campus geography which defaulted to affirming White bodies, experiences, and privileges.

### **“So much wealth”**

Tyler, a White queer woman with a low-income background, expressed frustration with the campus-wide norm around wealth. As a school with a disproportionately high number of students from the top 1% of the wealth distribution (16.1%, as of 2013) and a large majority (70%) from the top 20%, Tyler (as well as Lucia, Anita, and Mateo) remarked on the palpable alienation of navigating a place steeped in socioeconomic privilege.<sup>249</sup> These feelings of being an outsider came down to differences in seemingly minute and ordinary habits like, when Tyler consistently reached for items on the bottom shelf of the grocery store, while her friend reached at eye level without checking prices; or her due diligence in checking the menus for affordable options before committing to going off campus for a meal with her friends. At one point, she pointed to the normalized discourse about travel as a quintessential characterization of the campus culture, where a typical peer conversation might have resembled this retelling:

‘Oh yeah, where’s all of you and your family’s going for winter break?’ or like, ‘Oh, you guys are going on vacations.’ The ways in which people talk about their travel or sometimes their experiences that makes it feel like it’s so secondhand nature for them and those people. And then they’ll group around and talk about all their extravagant travel things. And you’re like, ‘Oh, I’ve never been out of the country.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s weird.’ And I’m like, ‘Wait, is that weird?’<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Chetty et al., “Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes: Boston College.”

<sup>250</sup> Tyler, Interview 1.

This commentary gestured at what was deemed “secondhand nature” for students on campus, or in other words, what was normalized as appropriate or as “in place.” When Tyler’s peers labeled *her* family’s practices as “weird,” it was a move that rendered Tyler’s choices and lifestyle transgressive, while positioning (however implicitly) theirs, the dominant group’s, spending habits as correct or fitting. The only place that Tyler was able to find solace for her “weird” money-conscious practices was with her “Montserrat” friends—other low-income students identified by the university for access to resources and a first-year seminar acclimating them to campus life. Rather than facing her wealthy peers’ uncomfortable silence regarding explicit reference to financial constraints, or even worse, their guilt-informed attempts to pay for her meals, she limited her conversations about her class-based noticings to Montserrat-majority groups. Furthermore, she also worked two jobs so that she did not have to constantly raise concerns about financial means with her friends, thus reducing the extent to which she was confronted with spatial cues regarding her marginal status.

As a low-income student, Mateo described it as “daunting” to be a part of “a community with so much wealth” because it meant routinely facing reminders about how he diverged from the norm of a BC archetypal student, from the clothing he wore to his everyday decision-making to the kind of employment responsibilities he needed to take on to make his education possible. One illustration he offered was with regard to his judicious care in selecting textbooks. Even with the allocated funding from the Montserrat Office, Mateo shared that working class students were “picking and choosing, like ‘Oh, it’d be better for me to have this book, hardcopy, and then maybe this book, I can find online on some

sketchy website.”<sup>251</sup> As such, it was far from an automatic assumption that he would have the means to purchase all of the books he needed. Another calculated decision for Mateo involved stretching his meal plan to cover the entire semester, while other students had no reservations about adding more money to their plans. This came down to the minutiae of setting a maximum dollar amount per day, which meant,

you pretty much have one to two meals a day, like on the meal plan. And if you don't get beverages, then you can kind of squeeze out the two during the day, but you have to stay like around like \$24/26. Each meal is at least \$13. So, you're just getting the meal itself. No cookie, no drink, no nothing after in addition. So, you're thinking of that. So, you're thinking of food, you're thinking of books. There's a bunch of things that you're thinking about, that if you were to have a higher income, you could just come here and just not have to think about those things, and it could be... I don't know, definitely a better experience to just kind of live in the BC life.

This reference to “the BC life” directly insinuated the normative campus geography and what it meant to fit the BC student mold: it was the ability to take financial stability for granted, such it did not constantly occupy one’s thoughts and undergird each action. It was not to be constantly reminded of one’s deviation from the norm, encoded as the dearth of red Canada Goose patches on winter jackets or a lack of frustration by the inflated prices for food from the dining hall. For Mateo, living “the BC life” also referred to the capacity to make decisions about employment and how to spend one’s free time. Mateo chose to serve as Resident Assistant (RA) for financial purposes, which was a time-consuming and demanding position that constrained his capacity to participate in other meaningful activities on campus, such as the all-male step team with the friends he made during one of the BAIC’s (the Thea Bowman AHANA [African, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American] Intercultural Center) summer transition programs.

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<sup>251</sup> Mateo, Interview 1.

Lucia also spoke about her experience as a dining hall and laundry service worker on campus as a necessary avenue to afford college, which situated her in an uncomfortable power dynamic with other students on campus at the expense of her own health and wellbeing. Her work in food service at BC was not only monotonous but deeply uncomfortable, given the historical resonance of being positioned to serve a largely White student body. This experience led her to “dissociate” often as a coping mechanism to get through her work responsibilities, which often left her physically and emotionally drained. Anita offered her insights on the topic by contextualizing Lucia’s employment within the broader demographic of service workers at BC, including both students and staff, in comparison to the student body. She noticed,

I feel like most of the workers, or actually the majority of the workers here are people of color. And I remember talking about this with Lucia. Lucia, she took a job at BC dining, and she told me how she felt weirded out to be serving white people. And I see that, and it's just like, yeah, it feels eerie to think about how these service workers have to, I guess, take a majority white students' orders. And it's like, I don't know. There's not a lot of student workers who are white here.

This juxtaposition demonstrated an existing campus landscape in which it was normalized for low-income students and groups, who are largely people of Color, to cater to the demands of a predominantly White, wealthy audience. To use Anita’s words, working class students like themselves often needed to take service work to survive at the “bottom,” while, privileged, wealthy groups were able to bypass service employment. As a result, BC replicated a stratified economic and racialized system which assumed that the “typical” BC student did not need to work—or if they did, it was not in a “real job” but in positions within BC’s “charity program for students,” to use Patrick’s sardonic terms, denoting low effort employment such as working at the BC gym or library. Meanwhile students from low-



income backgrounds were pressured to take “brutal,” labor-intensive roles that made them feel subservient to the privileged BC student body.<sup>252</sup>

In summary, subaltern students revealed the socioeconomic contours of the BC campus geography to be geared toward the experiences of wealthy students. Through institutional policies that inadvertently reinforced a stratified labor market and inflated food prices, insensitive peer inquiries and habits lacking awareness of class privilege, or embodied signals established through attire or external presentation, students read the “archi-texture” of campus to be one in which they were a constant outsider. Taken together, it was clear that BC extended the bodies and thus the experiences of students with socioeconomic privilege, making the terrain more rugged for those with financial instability.<sup>253</sup>

### **No room for gender ambiguity**

Insults and microaggressions at BC were not exclusive to race and class. As a trans\* woman of Color, Anita testified to the pervasive enforcement of a rigid gender binary at BC. Regarding university policies, Anita described the alienation that she felt navigating a housing system, indeed an entire campus, that was explicitly imprinted as responsive only to either man or woman. BC’s housing policy, she explained, was “that people with the same sex need to be roomed on the same floor,” which meant that her only option was to be housed alongside people that were born male. That is still the case today. She described the pain and hurt navigating this system that was not designed for her. She reflected,

I came out of high school, and I started transitioning. It was hard, because I wasn't allowed to have this ambiguous identity, because I was just figuring out my gender identity. Because you were either male or female. So, what happened was my first year, I was put on a male floor. And the first-year housing is all communal, so it was

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<sup>252</sup> Lucia’s term from the Focus Group.

<sup>253</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 118.

kind of awkward. It was very uncomfortable for me to use the communal bathrooms.

“I wasn’t allowed to have this ambiguous identity.” That encapsulates much about the normative BC culture in relation to gender, which was explicit about what genders (men/women) were acceptable and what gender expressions would be tolerated. Anita was able to eventually negotiate with a Student Affairs administrator who at least placed her in a single room with her own private bathroom on the male hall. Yet even this process served as a spatial cue for Anita, for this supportive administrator disclosed that “she [was] the only person at BC with institutional power that [was] working on LGBTQ issues.” That in itself was a signal about how few resources the university allocated to supporting queer and trans\* students, reinforcing cisgender students as the campus default archetype. With no option other than being placed on a male hall, Anita constantly fielded internal thoughts like, “Do they know? Do they think that something’s weird about me? I don’t want to be trouble or something.” Self-doubt, alienation from peers, and constant dignity-based discomfort—these were some of the effects of being positioned as systemically “out of place” on campus. Housing policies, bathroom designations, and formal university records all reinforced that BC was an institution that was not made with a student like Anita in mind. It was a campus climate that was hostile to any “gender benders,” to use Harper Keenan’s term, and quelled the possibility of gender play or ambiguity.

Moreover, it was clear from Anita’s account that it was not only overt institutional policies that reinforced a binary gender script, but also strong implicit cues that came from self-policing peers. Anita described wading through a “traditional” environment in which everyone adhered to the same gender norms:

[I] notice how, I guess, men and women dress themselves. You can tell that this is a girl because she's wearing Lululemon. She has blonde hair. She has a ponytail. You can tell this is a guy because it's just like, I don't know, copy/paste? It's like they

can't look ambiguous. I feel like that's the majority of the population at BC. Like, you can't stray away from that gender binary, to the point where everyone dresses the same. That's what I notice.

Anita attested to a gendered code that dictated what it meant to be a “woman” and a “man,” all while remaining largely unspoken. Its conforming force was expressed through minor sensorial cues, such as a dress code, particular brand names, and seemingly minor fashion decisions—all of which worked together to dictate what it meant to “fit” into this community, constraining the ontological possibilities in this environment. Z Nicolazzo, in her study with trans\* collegians, deemed this phenomenon “compulsory heterogenderism” to recognize the extent to which “binary notions of sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” cohere and show up “in ways that deem any transgressive practices of gender socially abhorrent, abject, deviant, and impossible.”<sup>254</sup> As someone who saw fashion and attire as a means of creative expression, Anita felt the compulsory force of heterogenderism as the pressure to “tone it down, just a little bit. Because considering how, I guess the word would be monotonous, the BC population is, I already stick out. So like, I don't want to stick out even more.”

To be clear, this stymieing of gender experimentation was not only harmful for Anita and trans\* students, but also cisgender students who were robbed of an opportunity to be imaginative in their own expression. Anita recalled a class discussion about gender roles, which led to one woman’s realization “that the way [she] dress[es] is very rigid.” In response, the professor offered the blanket recommendation to the class to “be free” and “flexible” with gender, rather than succumbing to the pressures of fitting into gendered stereotypes. Though this suggestion was not inclusive of Anita’s experience, the takeaway was that the

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<sup>254</sup> Nicolazzo, 76.

binary-gender mold at BC was harmful for *all* students, because it conditioned cisgender and transgender students alike to “acceptable,” dichotomous forms of external perception (attire, hair styles, makeup, accessories) and behaviors. This was the case for Andromeda, who practiced art through unconventional fashion and external presentation. Even as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, she still felt the conditioning force of rigid gendered expression. In her words,

So, if I'm with my friends, I wouldn't worry about anything of how I am: what I look like or how I am presenting myself, because I know they wouldn't judge me. But if I'm going to class, then I would—I don't know—depending on the class too. Depending on the professor, I would think, ‘Okay, maybe today, I won't do a crazy eyeliner. Today, I won't wear something too colorful.’

Andromeda's willingness to play with presentation was often stifled in the monotonous environment of BC, which made her play with color, makeup, dress, piercings, and tattoos register as “crazy” or transgressive. However, Andromeda was judicious in *choosing* the context for fuller, more unconventional self-expression. In contrast, for someone who defied the gender binary like Anita, experimentation and “sticking out” was not optional. Thus, Anita disproportionately felt the conditioning imprint of gender on her body and experience as a trans\* student. Furthermore, as Anita became more recognizable as a woman by others, she also noticed the gradual shift in the ways that her ideas were received. Whereas before her transition, others would “trust” her contributions, she became aware of how others now took a doubt-first stance to her ideas. Anita's transition gave her firsthand testimony to the harmful consequences of a rigid gender binary and sexism, especially the intersection of the two. In her words, if her thoughts were already being disregarded as a femme-presenting student, “what if they know that I'm not just a woman, but I'm a trans\* woman? Would they ignore me completely?”

The cumulative effect of covert and overt spatial cues revealed to Anita (and to Andromeda, to some degree) that BC was molded to the form of the cisgender body and its binary-gender scripted expression, especially skewed in favor of men. Whether she was confronting gender-conditioning forces through explicit housing policies or implicit peer pressure, Anita's experience demonstrated how the campus geography of BC left little room for the bodily inhabitation and belonging of gender-benders. Gender ambiguity and experimentation were not aligned with BC's topography.

### **Queer issues "take up just a little space"**

BC was also described as heteronormative space by several students, who drew on largely implicit cues from peer interactions and institutional policies to make this evaluation. Tyler, for example, described BC as a place in which other students would not openly "consider themselves homophobic," but often unwittingly perpetuated harmful stereotypes about their queer peers. With reference to her self-portrait, Tyler described an experience of quiet suppression as a queer student within an overwhelmingly heteronormative culture:

I drew the lesbian symbol because sometimes, not feeling like I could hold someone's hand here. That's something I've always struggled with growing up. I want to be able to hold someone's hand and feel like... not afraid but feels comfortable. Like, I don't want to feel neutral. I want to feel super comfortable. I still haven't, at least not here all the time, in public.

In this campus geography, Tyler perceived that the ability to hold hands with another woman in public would be transgressive. She did not go so far as to say that she felt "afraid" to do so at BC, but it was clear that "neutral" was not the ideal metric for success. The bar, for Tyler, was not an environment devoid of embarrassment, fear, or shame for being a lesbian, but one which allowed her mundane display of affection to be normalized, to stay mundane and unremarkable. Instead, the norm at BC was to condition Tyler into

suppressing her sexuality. One instantiation of this conforming pressure came through peer taunting. Since Tyler gendered expression had shifted over time to more femme-presenting fashion, she and her partners were often both perceived as women by others on campus. As a result, any public displays of their queer relationship were subjected to fetishization by men on campus, whether through inappropriate “chummy jokes,” verbal cat-calling, or unsolicited innuendos. Even in cases where peer interactions remained seemingly innocuous, Tyler reflected that being with another woman, as an openly gay person on campus, made her “feel weird” and out of place, not because of her mundane practices of affection, but because she was made to feel that they were in the “wrong” bodies to enact these practices. This peer subtext crafted an unpleasant, heteronormative environment for Tyler where she remained hypervigilant and self-conscious about how she expressed herself. It muffled an important facet of her identity and relationships with others, indicating clearly to her that the norm at BC was heterosexuality and to defy that parameter was to provoke peer harassment.

Tyler not only faced peer microaggressions for being queer but also for not fitting into her peers’ default caricature of a gay person informed by queer stereotypes (e.g. “the gay best friend,” “theater kids”). She was often subjected to backhanded “compliments” like, “I’ve never met a gay person that was smart” or judgmental peer chiding for “not acting professional” due to her “flamboyant,” goofy personality. These examples demonstrated how there was an “appropriate” and socially enforced standard to abide by as a queer person at BC, if one veered from heteronormativity at all.

Anita also established how the dominant queer template at BC coincided with Whiteness, since her experience with queer affinity spaces had been largely subsumed by colorblind LGTBQ issues. For example, she attended a retreat for about 25 queer students hosted by the Center for Student Outreach and Support, in which she was one of four

students of Color. There was a programmatic block dedicated to intersectionality, in which a White student asserted that “it is not an oppression olympics,” flattening the diversity in the room to declare that “even though we have different problems. We all still have the same problem [of homophobia].” This privileged stance, which did not recognize the ways in which oppression overlaps and interlocks for people with multiple disadvantaged identities, frustrated Anita who felt that her intersectional experiences were delegitimized and trivialized. These experiences reinforced for Anita that queer students of Color were doubly positioned as “out of place” at BC, such that it was an “either/or” situation with regard to community. They either chose to be a student of Color in White queer spaces or chose to be a queer student in heteronormative spaces of Color, but not both. This intersectional facet of BC’s campus geography was represented on Anita’s self-portrait (fig. 3.1) by a series of fists, which was a depiction of BC students as generally “woke” but that the issues that they organized around were usually imbued with Whiteness (hence why the bigger fist is White).

Furthermore, Anita’s self-portrait depicted a final spatial cue evoked by the BC

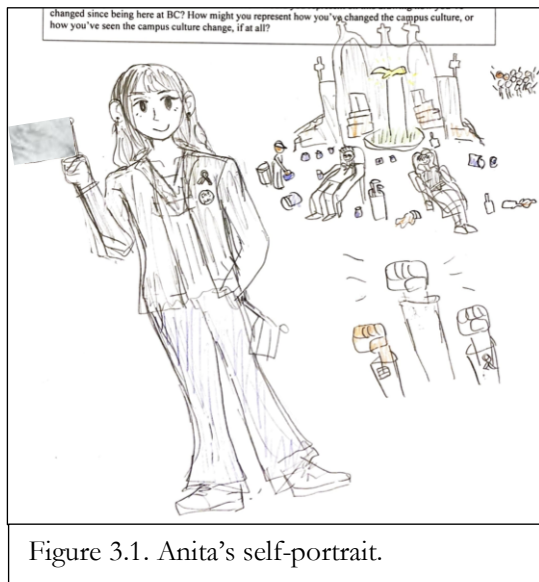


Figure 3.1. Anita’s self-portrait.

administration’s repeated rejection of petition for a LGBTQ Center on campus:

when I'm looking at the little trans\* flag [behind my back] and how you can see the queer [on my lapel], it takes up a little tiny space.<sup>255</sup> I think it symbolizes how queer issues take up a little, not much, not a lot of space, just a little space at BC. Because there's no resource center, and how students have been pushing for a Queer Resource Center so that queer students can talk and form a community, but it keeps getting rejected. It's kind of weird how they reject having that, but also having like a little section of allowing like the GLC events to happen, having a retreat for that. So it's

<sup>255</sup> As a note, I redact the ethnic flag that Anita proudly raises, in an effort to maintain her anonymity since she is already revealed to be one of very few trans students of Color at BC.

like, they have it, but they don't want to talk about it, or they don't want it to be seen. That's how I picture it.

Anita's representation illustrated how little room (literally and figuratively) queer issues were given by BC administrators—no material allocation of space, few resources, and minor concessions where queer events were privately, not publicly, sanctioned. The staunch stance by BC leaders on an LGBTQ resource center coalesced with discriminatory peer interactions to send a strong message regarding who and what was positioned as “in place” to Anita and to other students like Tyler, Lucia, and Mateo. BC administrators willfully chose to “turn the other cheek”<sup>256</sup> to their queer students and alumni, indicating that they were unwilling to intervene in a hostile campus geography with regard to sexual orientation. In so doing, they endorsed the spatial status quo and perpetuated the continued alienation of queer students on campus.

### Summary

The experiences shared by these six subaltern students suggested that to varying degrees, what was “normal” at BC was mundane, covert exclusion such that those with minoritized identities were regularly positioned as “out of place.” Though the students in this study generally emphasized their own marginalized identities and corresponding alienation, their experiences overlapped to suggest that the shape of BC was molded to extend the skin of White, heteronormative, socioeconomically elite students who fell within the gender binary. This finding was not to suggest that other dimensions of exclusion did not matter, such as those tied to colonialism, ableism, religious minoritization, or rural instantiations of poverty. Those facets were likely less visible as a result of students' (and my

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<sup>256</sup> Anita, Interview 1.



own) privileged identities. However, this study reported on the dimensions of these six students' experiences with place, which was never meant to be fully encompassing or comprehensive. Instead, the purpose was to "walk with" subaltern identities to better understand the campus geography from their standpoint, which offered thick, relational resources to the broader dialogue about DEI efforts in higher education. I was under no pretense that this study could do it all. However, what this study does contribute is an attunement to the impact of quotidian spatial cues of various forms on subaltern students' experience. Below, I offer a summary table that showcases how the four categories of spatial cues manifested for the four dimensions of the campus geography covered in this section. As table 3.2 depicts, these minute interactions and observations accumulated, crystalizing in clear signs of alienation for those students whose bodies and experiences did not fit the BC archetype.

Table 3.2. An application of the typology of spatial cues that compound to forge a normative geography of place along racialized, class-based, gendered, and queer dimensions				
<i>Spatial cue</i>	<i>“White space”</i>	<i>“So much wealth”</i>	<i>No room for gender ambiguity</i>	<i>Queer issues “take up just a little space”</i>
Institutional policies	Inequitable PULSE service placements concerning the distribution of resources such as volunteer labor and lack of flexibility regarding site-student fit	A “neutral” hiring practice that results in stratified labor positions, where low-income students and staff serve elite, White consumers; enrolling a significant proportion of students with familial incomes in the top 20% of the wealth distribution; “gouging” inflation of dining hall food prices	Campus dormitory classification, bathrooms, and formal documentation operate on the gender binary; only one campus administrator allocated for LGBTQ issues (also relevant for “interactions with campus leaders”)	Repeated rejection of LGBTQ resource center in favor of private offerings; only one campus administrator allocated for LGBTQ issues (both also relevant for “interactions with campus leaders”)
Peer interactions and corresponding assumptions	Private peer snickers about multilingual speakers’ accents; vandalism and racialized taunting of the MLE hall	Cavalier comments about travel and vacation; stark differences in everyday habits of food shopping, textbook selection, and the calculus of stretching the meal plan	Peers’ doubt-first stance to contributions by women; self-policed adherence to gender roles	“Chummy jokes” and fetishization by male students; uncomfortable staring at mundane practices of affection between queer couples; rampant queer stereotypes; non-intersectional practices in queer spaces
Interactions with campus leaders or those with authority	Administrative silence or “sweep it under the rug” tendencies in the wake of racially motivated incidents; teachers attempting to “change the topic” rather than address racism in the classroom; curriculum that	Demanding, draining and time-consuming expectations from campus employers	Professors not accounting for non-binary students in their pedagogy or creating environments that cause students to “tone down” their appearance	BC leaders’ “turn the other cheek” policy to petitions for queer resources and support

	assumes a lack of exposure to policies affecting low-income communities of Color, like gentrification			
Embodied signals*	The kind of food served and presented as “authentic” in the dining hall; the dearth of languages spoken or heard besides English	Student trends featuring expensive branded items, including Canada Goose jackets (with a red patch), Louis Vuitton wallets	“Monotonous,” rigidly binary dress code that includes hair length and color, clothing brands, color, and makeup	Felt sense of hypervisibility (“being looked at”) with two people with the same gendered presentation
*This spatial cue develops further in the latter half of the chapter on place-making practices.				

### Place-Making Journeys

These quotidian spatial cues at BC coalesced to form a campus geography that was alienating to the subaltern students in this study, but it would be a mistake to assume that the relationship between space and student was unidirectional. Just as campus spaces conditioned students' bodies—understood as holistic embodiment, involving the mind, spirit, perceptions, emotions, and actions—and pre-structured their map of possibilities, students also re-shaped places based on their movements and resistant practices. This section highlights how students in this study still served as innovative campus place-makers, experimenting with the everyday tactics of survival in a hostile space. To attune to students' everyday strategies of resistance, I draw inspiration from Michel de Certeau's discussion of quotidian "tactics," such as walking, reading, dwelling, cooking, and talking. In *The practice of everyday life*, de Certeau refers to these practices as "the procedures of everyday creativity," which,

constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production... the goal [of attuning to these tactics] is not to make clearer how the violence of the order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline.' Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an antidisdiscipline.<sup>257</sup>

de Certeau asks us to be attentive to innovative and imaginative strategies that subaltern individuals and groups employ, even when they use the tools of the oppressor. For example, even if a community is forced to use a colonizer's language, he asks us to consider how they use it in a way that subverts, however minute, the hegemonic order—making it theirs via their accent or the ways they apply language toward coalition-building or preservation of

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<sup>257</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xiv–xv.

their own histories for generations to come. de Certeau spotlights the resistance characterized by ordinary habits, like the changes that renters make to their apartments and the paths pedestrians trace with their routines, if only we are open to seeing it. Similarly, I take up de Certeau's orientation in this latter half of this chapter by explicating how the everyday practices of the subaltern students indexed their ongoing place-making strategies to make their campus safe enough for their own transformation and growth. In light of this purpose, I asked: What place-making practices did these six subaltern students use to navigate their hostile campus context?

As developed in chapter two, "place-making" comprises actions by inhabitants who seek to change, adapt, resist, or scaffold a shared place. In other words, these are actions that sit at the locus of an inhabitant and a place, where place is expansive in definition to include material structures, relational ties, historical resonance, and temporal dimensions. In this section, informed by de Certeau's emphasis on tactics of survival, I focus specifically on the quotidian strategies by which subaltern students "ma[de] do" in an institution that was not designed for them, crafting habitability (however minute) nonetheless.<sup>258</sup> Though there were countless examples embedded within the data, I prioritize three major place-making practices: 1) seeking out "skin"-extending relational spaces, 2) withdrawing into private refuges, and 3) refusing to comply with prescriptive rules. For each pattern, I offer a brief overview from multiple student narratives and then delve into a thicker, more-detailed portrait from one student's place-making journey. Though I present these practices as actions taken by an individual student, their strategies are often more relational in nature, especially when I take up an expansive definition of animacy (as those offered by Tim

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<sup>258</sup> Certeau, 29.

Ingold, Doreen Massey, and Robin Wall Kimmerer in the previous chapter) that does not exclude more-than-human inhabitants of space. These strategies involve students' ability to make room for their inhabitation by relying on relations to self, to other people, and to the more-than-human, such as animals, plants, and even objects. Patrick's strategies are also featured in this discussion, but he served as an outlier from the other students in that his place-making practices generally veered toward acquiescence rather than proactive resistance. While Lucia, Anita, Mateo, Tyler, and Andromeda resisted the conditioning forces of the university and enacted their spatial agency to various degrees, Patrick's response was more compliant in accepting the spatial norms. I return to his more fatalistic approach near the end and consider what lessons his journey offers in terms of rehabilitating safe spaces of learning.

### **Seeking out “skin”-extending relational spaces**

One of the prominent strategies that students used to craft habitability was to seek out relational spaces on campus that were affirming to parts of themselves otherwise repressed. Sometimes, this meant that students opted to participate in existing extracurricular activities, such as cultural dance teams or ethnic-based affinity clubs, or student/academic affairs-led programs (however flawed), such as those coming out of the BAIC, the Center for Campus Ministry, the Monserrat Office, or the Student Outreach and Support Services Office. Students also attempted to build their own space if there was not yet a historical precedent, which involved some students co-constructing a dorm space that actually felt like “home,” particularly dependent on the mix of roommates, rooming configuration (i.e. number of

rooms, common space, bathrooms), location on campus, décor, and shared practices (e.g. a cleaning schedule, cooking, social activities).<sup>259</sup>

These evolving spaces served as one major source of “home” for students, which allowed them to “extend their skin,” to use Sara Ahmed’s terminology. In these spaces—bundles of relational ties, historical inheritances, sensorial dimensions—subaltern students were able to express parts of themselves that did not otherwise feel welcomed in the broader campus environment. Andromeda, for example, negotiated a dormitory space where her roommates were all women of Color with “multicultural experiences,” which meant (to her) that as a mini residential community, there was a diversity in nationalities, belief systems, spiritual practices, and political stances. This “home” environment gave Andromeda a sense of ease when it came to raising important issues of concern, like the Perspectives incident, to discuss. She described it creating “little roommate moment[s]” where she did not have to hide her concerns about incidents of racism, as she did with her previous roommate, but could raise them as relevant and necessary to address together. Andromeda also described the “Asian Caucus” (a collection of Pan-Asian cultural clubs) as “finding this safe space to be.”<sup>260</sup> This statement was not cut off, a truncated version of “finding this safe space to be \_\_\_\_\_.” Andromeda’s phrasing seemed to suggest that in these communities, the ontological possibilities were not as constrained for subaltern students—they were (more) imaginative, expansive places where one could simply “be.” Mateo’s participation in a BAIC seven-week transitional program called Options through Education (OTE) served a similar

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<sup>259</sup> The juxtaposition between “existing” and “made” spaces is not meant to replicate the problematic dichotomy between settled, stagnant places vs. dynamic, negotiated places. Instead, the notion that some of these spaces were “existing” programs is simply a recognition that these clubs and organizations have a history in which these students entered *in media res*. They are still dynamic constructions. Students who chose to tie their lifelines into these “knots” of activity still helped to shape the space moving forward.

<sup>260</sup> Andromeda, Pilot Interview 1.

purpose for his BC journey. OTE is open to a select group of 25 incoming first year students, chosen by the admissions office “based on rigorous criteria of accomplishments, determination, leadership, talents, and potential in spite of challenging educational and financial circumstances.”<sup>261</sup> Three of the participants in the PDR study were selected for OTE, which was a highlight experience for all of them. Having attended a Catholic high school that was “very very White” and homogeneous, the OTE experience helped Mateo to establish a strong relational foundation by which to reclaim important parts of his identity that were ostracized in high school:

I just had never been with that many students that were also low-income and came from different backgrounds. And then our sophomore year, we all roomed together. There's nine of us, and I think we could speak like 12 languages, all put together. I was like, ‘That is amazing.’ Amazing. I learned so much about my friends’ culture through them. All the different cultures. I think it's so cool. Just like to be in a space like that. And I think OTE provided that, honestly.

The enthusiasm and joy emanated from Mateo when he spoke about the relational impact of OTE and what it meant to be in a space where his low-income background, multilingualism, and ethnic origins were celebrated and a cause for gathering. As such, it was no surprise that a significant dwelling place (~23 minutes) during Mateo’s walk was in Gasson 100—the starting and ending location for the OTE program. Lucia’s narrative, as a focal example, offered a snapshot about what it could mean to co-construct places to just “be” herself with one of the ethnic clubs on campus, a place where her subaltern body was free to stretch out and saturate the space.

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<sup>261</sup> “Options through Education,” Boston College: Pine Manor Institute for Student Success, n.d., <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/sites/pine-manor-institute/mentoring-tutoring/options-through-education.html>.



***Lucia: “I’m Mexican when I’m with MAS”***

Lucia, who identified as Mexican, described the impact of being a part of the Mexican Association of Students (MAS) on campus. This was one of the five symbols represented on her self-portrait in relation to place (see fig. 3.2), indicating a strong influence in her own identity development. Lucia, in explaining why MAS showed up on her portrait, shared that “a lot of times, I’m not Mexican here. I’m Mexican when I’m with MAS.” This speaks to how much MAS served not simply as a mere extracurricular activity or club, but as an enclave within BC that allowed her to “[find] a lot of her people” and express the Mexican identity she held, which was otherwise repressed within the broader campus environment. Lucia elaborated,

Because, first of all, here in Boston, there's not a big Mexican community, so it's not like, I can go somewhere like that. And then also, the daily aspects, like what I eat changes completely. When people ask me, what's your favorite type of food? I'm like 'Mexican food,' because it's literally all I eat back home, because that's all there is. So, coming here, that's very different. So I've kind of lost that part of me. Or things just like, I speak Spanish way less now. Most of time, when speaking Spanish here, it's also in academic settings, so I feel like I have to change in some sort of way the way I speak too. So, I feel like that's the only safe space I have to really connect to that part of me and honestly be who I was back home because that was like my everyday.

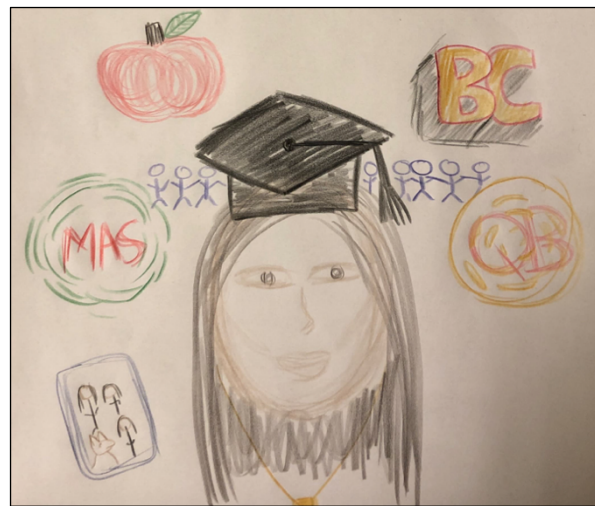


Figure 3.2. Lucia’s self-portrait.

What was telling about this passage was the way Lucia spoke about her identity formation in relation to MAS, as nested within BC. She described a double negation—two ways in which she was denied the affirmation of her Mexican identity. The first was associated with the small Mexican population in the context of Boston, and the second was navigating a campus

where her daily interactions made her feel like she “kind of lost that part of [herself].” The person that she was “back home” was someone who spoke conversational Spanish every day, who could speak and engage with others in this language, who routinely ate “authentic Mexican food.” These were some of the sensorial and quotidian facets of what it meant to embrace being Mexican and able to feel a sense of belonging, and the deprivation of those features was exactly what made Lucia feel like no longer herself at BC. She described having to contort her tongue to speak in a different register of Spanish in the classroom, condition her palette to different flavors in the dining hall, and acclimate her eyes and ears to a different world at BC. She experienced a sense of loss—“dramatic changes in [her]self” that made her question, “who am I?”—akin to what other immigrant students or communities of color forfeit in the process of engaging in a possibly assimilative education. However, MAS as a relational affinity space was the “only safe space” she had amid this unfamiliar landscape that allowed her “to really connect to that part of me and honestly be who I was back home.” In other words, it was one of the only spaces that allowed her to sustain her Mexican identity and resist some of the conditioning pressures of the normative campus geography.

As such, Lucia played a large role in MAS, serving on their student leadership board and taking initiative to not only increase the reach of their organization at BC, but also amplify the possibility of Mexican affirmation and pride. For example, on our walk, Lucia described taking on a new project that spoke to this purpose. She had recently been contacting local Boston organizations who were versed in folklórico, a traditional Mexican dance that she practiced and performed in high school for four years. Her motivations stemmed from the affirming experience she felt as a folklórico dancer and her desire to facilitate the same kind of experience for other Mexican students at BC:

for me, that experience connected me so much to my roots and everything. And because it was out of my choice that I wanted to go and do it, and then my parents

would come and see me, and I would see how proud they are. And just dressing in the traditional clothing is just so affirming. And I'm like, if that was then, in my community, which was predominantly Mexican, and if I felt that way there, imagining how people would feel here, like in a PWI, dancing and just exploring that tradition. I feel like that'd just be really cool for a lot of people to do.

Lucia emphasized how important that kind of “affirming” experience could be for fellow peers, especially in an environment like BC, which forced Mexican students to comport so much of themselves to survive in the current campus geography. This was not to say that MAS was at all perfect. Lucia was adamant that there was still work to do in terms of inclusion in MAS. When she first started participating, the club was comprised mainly of wealthy, international Mexican students, which signaled that to be “actually” Mexican was to come from Mexico. Instead, her leadership role in MAS, alongside other Mexican Americans, was to establish a welcoming community in which “You’re Mexican because you are Mexican. You don’t have to check certain boxes for that to happen.” As such, Lucia’s leadership role was to continue place-making such that MAS did not operate on a hierarchy of authenticity, contributing to further marginalization of Mexican students on campus.

Furthermore, she described the buoying effect that MAS had on her ability to practice resistance in other spaces. Once Lucia left the space created and negotiated with MAS and went back to the classroom, the contrast between the spaces was painful but also gave her the courage to question norms, like asking her Spanish professor, “Why are we only reading white European men? It's Spanish class. There's like a whole Latin America that speaks Spanish.” Though her professor dodged the critique by redirecting her to more explicit “Latin American” courses, this action showcased Lucia’s attempt to transgress the norms of her classroom space. She attempted to make this classroom more habitable for her own Mexican identity formation and took the risk of social critique in an otherwise inhabitable space. Lucia’s experience and investment in MAS was a homeplace where she could simply

“be” Mexican and invest herself in the project of allowing other Mexican students to express their heritage proudly as well. Lucia’s involvement and leadership in MAS offers a strong illustration of place-making as home-making, constructing pockets in which important parts of her identity were able to be expressed, rather than repressed.

### **Withdrawing into private refuges**

In addition to seeking out and crafting expansive spaces of expression, another significant pattern in students’ place-making practices involved spatial withdrawal. This pattern became particularly visible during analysis of the shared, student-guided walks. The walking interview was selected as part of the methods for the PDR study primarily for the promises associated with shared movement and side-by-side orientation. The hope was that the peripatetic methodology would rouse stronger relationality between ambulators and between the ambulators and place. However, in analyzing the walks, one of the surprises that came from co-present walking was an attunement to stillness and the charged weight of those pauses. Each walk included an average of two destinations (sometimes planned, other times spontaneous) where our movement would slow to a near stop for anywhere between ~3-30 minutes. Sara Ahmed speaks to the significance of these pauses as a practice of inhabitation through occupying time-space. By being willing to “dwell” in a space, it signals “a process of coming to reside, or what Heidegger calls ‘making room,’ and also to time: to dwell on something is to linger, or even to delay or postpone.”<sup>262</sup> Here, Ahmed suggests that the willingness to linger in a space is a place-making practice, since dwelling offers the possibility of ‘making room’ for oneself and occupying that space for prolonged periods,

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<sup>262</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 20.

even in areas that are not welcoming to that inhabitation. Therefore, to dwell can serve as a form of resistance or transgression, and the spaces of dwelling hold special significance.

Many of those stops on our shared walks were either associated with the previous place-making pattern involving more holistic expression or this pattern of retreat. Here, the term “retreat” signified a place on campus where students chose to withdraw, usually alone, though not always. These student havens included Mateo’s tie to “the labyrinth” tucked into a far corner of campus, which was a walking maze that memorialized BC alumni killed during the 9/11 attacks. He described this place as a sheltered refuge where he would walk alone at night, trying to process emotional turmoil. Mateo was cognizant of his male privilege in feeling safe enough to walk this labyrinth in the dark, as it is not something that he would ever recommend to his younger sister, also a BC student. Andromeda’s refuge was a secluded location on campus which she called “her spot.” It was a grassy area, shaded by a large



Figure 3.3. A cropped image of Andromeda’s map from the pilot interview



Figure 3.4. A photograph taken by Andromeda on her walking interview during the pilot study.

tree at the top of a small set of stone steps and marked by a little door, as represented in the snapshot of her map from the initial interview. What was special about this “little spot” for Andromeda was not that it was shared with other people, but that it offered a distinct opportunity for solitude and connection with nature. Her kinship to this place led her to

“steal” a heavy Adirondack chair from a different location and “drag it across the grass” to this scene, so that she could dwell there more often. This was just one example of how Andromeda engaged in transgressive place-making. Unfortunately, by the time Andromeda led me to “her spot” during our walking interview, the large tree that provided shade was cut down. In the photo on our walk (fig. 3.4), you can see the stump that is left over.

A question that this pattern might raise is whether seeking out refuges should be understood as a *place-making tactic*. Isn't a refuge something that is found, rather than made? Isn't withdrawal from hostility also retreating from one's place-making abilities? A closer look at Tyler's places of retreat on campus help contextualize why crafting refuges should be considered a tactic of habitability.

### ***Tyler: Leaning on “Angelo”***

Tyler and I had been looking forward to our walk together, since she had shared in previous conversations that meandering was a regular part of her practice. Early on in our walk, Tyler shared that she wanted to take us to “one of her most sacred spots on campus.”

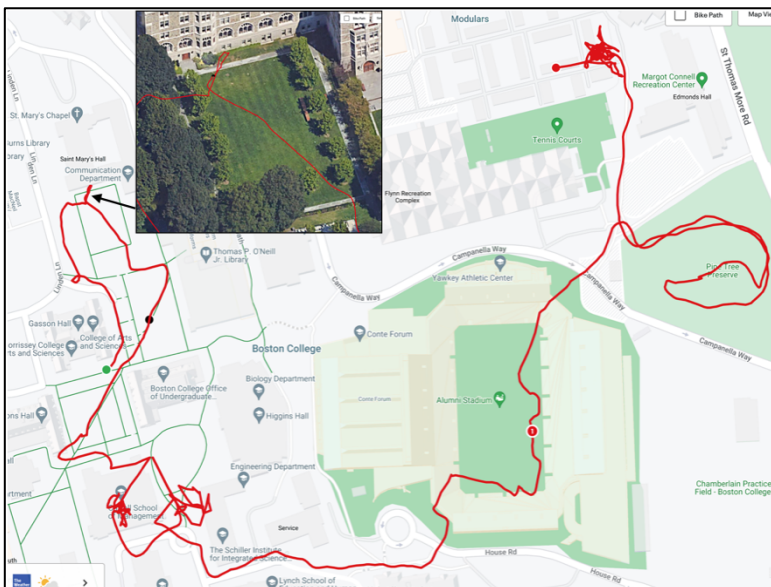


Figure 3.5. A GPS-generated map of Tyler's walking interview (background), with highlighted areas to indicate where she took a brief pause.

She walked us to a “sunken” section of the lawn in front of Saint Mary's Hall (as shown on fig. 3.5) and pointed out a particular bench in the corner with an inscription. This place held special significance for Tyler for multiple reasons. The first was the uncanny and

serendipitous circumstances which led to its discovery. In narrating the origin story of this relationship between her and this bench, Tyler described a moment in which she “really just need[ed] a place to be alone,” where she could cry. This particular bench was open, and caught in a swell of gratitude, Tyler ended up saying “thank you” aloud as she approached the seat. Then, as she neared the bench itself, she caught sight of the memorial placard on the bench (fig. 3.6), which surreptitiously read, “No problem.” In Tyler’s words, “in a moment of when I needed something to lean on, this inanimate object of a bench was really personified for me.” This moment of uncanny connection led



Figure 3.6. A photo of Tyler’s “sacred” bench, taken by the research and cropped as to not reveal the student’s identity.

her to refer to this bench simply as “Angelo” and as her “safety zone”—a place that she would return to over and over again when she was feeling particularly vulnerable.

An important dimension to this place was not only Tyler’s kinship with Angelo, but also its almost unbelievable sound insulation. As we were stepping down into the lawn, which is offset about six feet from ground level, Tyler asked me to pay attention to the change in noise. There was significant construction-based clamor in the background, but she readied me for the sudden “zip out” of sound and wind. It became much like a vacuum, where the sights and sounds of the campus became muted, thus leading to Tyler’s characterization of the space as “a pocket of nothing” amid the chatter and chaos of campus. Furthermore, the isolating and peaceful nature of this location, despite being in an open lawn, was helped by the landscape architecture: “it just feels nice and intimate because you’re always coupled up with the two trees, so you’re really... especially when the leaves are there, you really feel like you’re kind of cubbed in, like everyone has their zone.” It was this



intentional design that allowed Tyler to feel like she could retreat to Angelo during moments of hardship, when she needed to be alone, while also observing that this space served a similar purpose for other students as well. She noticed, for example, that the other people drawn to the space were also “in that same position to where they need[ed] a breather. So if anything, I feel like it’s a good collective of like, ‘this is a safety zone for a lot of people.’ I’ve seen other people cry here. I’ve cried here.” Tyler offered the notion of safety, here, as the ability to retreat to an isolated area for a “breather,” where it was possible to contend with overwhelming negative emotions. It signaled a kind of sensorial and symbolic rupture from the campus—a zone where the noise cut out and Tyler could escape, however brief.

Nothing Tyler suggested up to this point necessarily points to an experience of marginalization as the cause of escape. Anything from romantic heartbreak, quarrels with family members, or overwhelming academic stress all seem viable options to provoke retreat, none of which seem to be specific to subaltern students. Indeed, others like political theorist Hannah Arendt, for example, have offered accounts of the human condition that argue for the universal need for private shelter. In Arendt’s view, every human being relies on the ability to “return back from the outside world and withdraw into the security of private life within four walls... [which] constitute a shield against the world and specifically the public aspect of the world.” Without this baseline security, human beings’ “vital quality is destroyed.”<sup>263</sup> Research on developmental psychology also supports Arendt’s thesis, particularly during this period of late adolescence, if they are traditional 18-22-year-old college students. They are in a particularly vulnerable and malleable developmental stage characterized by heightened sensitivity to social stimuli, such as peer perception and

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<sup>263</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education (1961),” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, trans. D. Lindley (New York: Penguin USA, 1977), 186.



judgment, and more likely to engage in risky, experimental behavior during identity development.<sup>264</sup> As such, the developmental context arguably situates college students to see any environment, much less a college campus, as one with high stakes for their confidence, relationships, and future trajectory.<sup>265</sup> Was there anything about Tyler's refuge and escape from campus life that distinguishes it from any other adolescent's struggle to cope with hardship during this tumultuous stage of life, or from the universal human need for retreat?

The short answer is no. Perhaps Tyler's pull toward spaces of refuge, like Mateo's or Anita's, was not unique and simply representative of a more universal need to withdraw at points to survive a harrowing developmental period. It could be the case that some of the drivers for Tyler toward retreat were exactly the same as any other student on campus who falls into the hegemonic majority. However, given how powerfully Tyler and the other minoritized students in this study had testified to an alienating campus geography, encoded to the point that one student claimed that it was "present in every second of my life here," I think it would be disingenuous to analyze these patterns isolated from the broader campus context.<sup>266</sup> As such, I return to Tyler's narrative and reference to the normative geography in one of her reflections about the significance of Angelo. She surfaced a memory about another bench in front of her childhood home and shared,

Growing up, my family were always the type of people to appreciate what we have. So, we always appreciated our times sitting on my stoop and just being with one another, which I feel like has led me to appreciate the fact that even though I'm in a different bubble of a place that maybe a lot of people don't have the same values, I

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<sup>264</sup> Committee on the Neurobiological and Socio-behavioral Science of Adolescent Development and Its Applications et al., "Adolescent Development," in *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*, ed. Richard J. Bonnie and Emily P. Backes (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2019), 25388, <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>; Lauren E. Sherman et al., "The Power of the *Like* in Adolescence: Effects of Peer Influence on Neural and Behavioral Responses to Social Media," *Psychological Science* 27, no. 7 (July 2016): 1027–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616645673>.

<sup>265</sup> Many thanks to Brinton Lykes, who helped me to notice and clarify this point from a developmental standpoint.

<sup>266</sup> This was one of the anonymous post-it comments left on the theme, "Navigating the dominant BC student culture" during the interactive exercise in the focus group.

still feel so drawn to something I grew up with. Yeah, so I feel like that's what keeps me coming back and feeling connected to it, despite all the other chaos that goes around.

This was an example that illustrated how the experience or meaning of a given place is contingent on factors far beyond a location on a map. Angelo's significance on Tyler's life was not only constituted with relation to her senses, a serendipitous encounter, and its literal placement on campus but also because of an attachment forged through memory and association. Angelo, as a bench, came to symbolize Tyler's *values*, which were associated with her home, her family, and her socioeconomic identity—the confluence of which she represented on her self-portrait (fig. 3.7, bottom left) as a speech bubble enclosing a little house, dollar sign, and a heart. This inclusion was meant to represent how money-conscious practices were not simply “the means of buying stuff” for Tyler, but everyday



Figure 3.7. Tyler's self-portrait.

tendencies and practices that sedimented together to constitute an entire low-income culture and identity of its own. Therefore, the magnetism of Angelo came from a discrepancy between her values and that of the broader campus environment. She kept “coming back” to Angelo because it served as a retreat from “this different bubble of a place” whose values conflicted with her own.

In this vein, crafting special havens for withdrawal can serve as useful coping strategies in an otherwise alienating environment. Though there are certainly reasons why Tyler and other subaltern students might be drawn to refuges that have nothing to do with the hostile environment in which they navigate, there is also evidence to suggest that the

alienating campus geography does serve to drive minoritized students to refuges for the purpose of coping and recovery.

### **Refusing to comply with prescriptive rules**

In decoding the antagonistic campus geography of BC, the subaltern students in this PDR study deftly identified the covert “rules” that were reinforced through structures of space and place. These norms included the rigid binary gender normativity embedded in how students dressed, the assumptions in classrooms about students’ lack of exposure to racism or gentrification, and the wealth signaling concentrated in red patches emblazoned onto students’ winter jackets. These implicit and explicit guidelines not only served to reinforce a campus culture in which non-White, transgender, queer, and low-income students were positioned as “out of place,” but also continued to sustain ideologies propping up an existing, stratified system of marginalization. Given the pressure to abide by the dominant spatial rulebook, it no surprise that there were instances when students felt compelled to simply acquiesce to existing norms. For example, Lucia spoke to her coping mechanism of compartmentalizing, where she deliberately tuned out the racist remarks and microaggressions she faced daily in order to prioritize her schoolwork. Her strategy was to

try to leave everything that's happening behind and just focus on this. That's something I do for my own sanity, for my own life. Well, I actually have to do good and graduate, because I'm paying to be here, so I have to get the most out of this class right now, so I have to leave everything else behind. But I mean, it definitely comes up.

Lucia demonstrated the calculus that went into navigating an environment was not conducive to her learning. She needed to “leave everything that’s happening behind,” even though she mentioned in another passage how it is near impossible to pretend as if the classroom was an “absolutely controlled environment where nothing else is happening.” She

recognized how students could not simply check parts of themselves at the door and yet, she tried nonetheless because the stakes of not doing so were too high. She had to “do good and graduate,” and that meant splintering her experiences in order to do so. However, there were also significant moments in Lucia’s journey and in those of the other students’ where they chose not to acquiesce or assimilate to the prescriptive norms of their campus climate, but instead refused to cooperate.

Students took transgressive action in multiple forms. Anita and Andromeda transgressed by expressing themselves in gender-ambiguous ways, refusing to contort their makeup, attire, or external presentation to meet the norms of a “normal” student. In a place where “white space” was closely tied up with a heavy binge drinking culture and where privileged students and alumni regularly generated a wide radius of litter for service workers of Color to clean up, students like Andromeda, Anita, Lucia, and Mateo refused to participate. They chose to do activities with their core group of friends that did not involve trash accumulation or they chose not to drink altogether. Mateo, for example, made a personal decision to stay sober given the negative role that alcoholism has played in his family. However, he described how he often wavered his first three years of college because it was “just this norm” on campus. He stayed firm, however, and resisted the peer pressure to participate in the rampant drinking culture, avoiding the likelihood of addiction, the discretionary cost of such a habit, and being complicit in what he saw as a harmful social culture. Furthermore, as an RA, he refused to comport to the pressures he felt from Residence Life (and indirectly, from the BC administration) to maintain BC’s supposed “alcohol free” policy, especially when he saw the racialized and economic contours of the practice on campus. As such, Mateo repudiated the pressure placed upon him to keep

“everything in check” and act “like a police force” in his role as RA, a position he only took for financial purposes in the first place.

Tyler, in contrast, thrived in the social tailgate scene at BC, despite opting for sobriety near the end of her tenure at BC as well. Nonetheless, she engaged in norm resistant actions through initiating uncomfortable conversations with her peers. As a White woman who has generally assimilated quite well on the surface, Tyler’s peer circle consisted of mainly majoritarian students who often inadvertently reinforced an alienating campus environment. They often attempted to appropriate concepts like “gay-dar,” actively used disparaging ableist terms such as the r-word, or mobilized ill-informed class assumptions like questioning a person’s low-income status if they have an iPhone. Tyler demonstrated acts of resistance in how she instigated conversation, explaining how their actions were problematic or misguided, even if well-intentioned. However, equally important was the extent to which Tyler was judicious with her educative endeavors—not engaging in this labor with an “outer tier friend,” for example, or using silence as a strategy to signal a transgression, allowing the discomfort to linger. Anita offered a closer look at the use of silence as resistance in her classroom.

***Anita: “But no one understood”***

In an aforementioned section, Anita revealed signs that indicated her PULSE classroom operated on unspoken assumptions about the archetypal BC student. She flagged how her teacher framed questions that assumed students came from a sheltered background, for example, or the homogeneity of the student responses. Though Anita did often participate to offer a contrarian perspective, usually pulling from her own lived experience, one particular instance of misrecognition caused her to withdraw her participation altogether, with the exception of speaking once per class, for credit. To set the context, a

White, male, private-school student was expressing his frustrations about serving Black and Brown kids at a local non-profit, an organization that Anita, as a local resident, knew well. She said that he was venting about “how the students are rowdy...and raised how he was uncomfortable with how the students use racist language” and asked for help from the class regarding how to engage with students at his site. Anita said that by this point in the year, she was “peak,” insinuating that she had reached a limit: “I was *ready* to say something.” So she raised her hand, and she said something like: “I used to be like those kids. I have worked with those kids. I can imagine how it would be weird for them to be working with a white upper middle-class guy. There’s a disconnect there.” She saw herself in those children and offered advice from her insider status. Anita shared that “what you need to do to be cool with them is to give back what they’re giving.” However, she immediately regretted her decision to speak because,

everyone took what I said the wrong way...Because the teacher said, ‘so you should just use racist language back.’ And it pissed me off because they didn’t understand. And it made me think that they would never understand what I’m saying, because there is a disconnect. They haven’t experienced it, so they can’t understand. And because of who I am, they aren’t going to try and understand what I’m saying. I was trying to say that you need to match their energy. But no one understood.

This misrecognition felt like the last straw for Anita, who shut down after this incident. What’s important to note was that the tipping point was not necessarily this incident per se, but the accumulation of repeated attempts on her part to educate her peers and foster an encounter with a different way of life: one in which gentrification was not limited to a theoretical policy on the page but a practice with real consequences for one’s neighborhood. One in which “giving back what they’re giving” was not a suggestion to use racist language, but to match the students’ energy and show them *your* willingness, as an outsider, to meet them where they are at. However, each of her attempts, including this one, ended in the same result: misunderstanding.

One interpretation of Anita's response is resignation, a fatalistic throw of the hands in frustration and defeat. The alternative reading that I suggest, however, is one of resistance and resilience. Anita reached a juncture in this classroom with her peers and even her professor where she confronted the reality that she would not be intelligible to this community, despite her best efforts. The "disconnect" between her experiences as a trans\* woman from an urban, low-income community of Color and that of her peers was too great to overcome in *this* setting. In *this* space with its unique configuration of bodies, histories, and norms, Anita realized that her efforts to negotiate a more inclusive and diverse space would be continuously rebuffed. This was not a space that was going to be habitable for her mind and body. In an act of self-preservation, Anita decided to withdraw her efforts from this alienating environment and practice resistance through her silence and her "strategic disengagement," a practice that Micere Keels found to be common amongst minoritized students, particularly Black women.<sup>267</sup> By disengaging, subaltern students could make space for other more nourishing activities. If Anita practiced resistance through interrupting dominant narratives before, now her practice was to refuse to give up her precious time, energy, and labor to a space that did not recognize her place-making efforts. Her silence was a refusal to invest any more of herself into this place, this classroom community that did not return the favor.

### **Patrick as an outlier case**

At the start of this section, I foregrounded Patrick's place-making journey as one that served as an outlier from the other students, even though there were still resonances in

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<sup>267</sup> Keels, *Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students' Search for Community at Historically White Institutions*, 62.

several areas. For example, Patrick too spoke to a normative BC geography that was hostile to students of Color, as indexed by “intermittent scandals on campus or whatever of varying degrees,” referring to cases like the targeted vandalism on the MLE hall or the Perspectives incident, and “low key stuff” related to quotidian acts of racism that went unrecognized. However, there were also significant divergences that made Patrick’s navigation of BC distinctive from the other students’ narratives, which are worth noting as an outlier case.

***“Uninvolved” at BC: Instrumentality as a consequence of alienation***

One of the most prominent differences about Patrick, as compared to the other students in this PDR study, was the extent to which he struggled to find/make spaces of affirmation and belonging. In the section on “skin-extending” relational spaces, I spoke to the ways that each of the other students were able to negotiate into being habitable spaces to express parts of themselves otherwise suppressed at BC. These spaces included cultural clubs, school sponsored programs, and dormitory living environments. Patrick also sought out these kinds of spaces to some degree but relied on *non-subaltern-specific* channels to do so, including random housing, intramural team selections, social activities, and his classes. This meant that he trusted the default institutional structures to facilitate his journey to belonging. However, this confidence in broad structures of place proved to be unsuccessful in many ways, with COVID playing a significant factor as well his first two years at BC.

First, Patrick opted into the “Healthy Living” residential dorm, a living and learning community. In Patrick’s words, “all of my roommates were White, because I went random.” It is clear from his phrasing that this is the BC normative geography is at work—opting for “random” housing translated into “White space.” He found that he didn’t feel comfortable raising the topic about race in general, since he “didn’t really want to cause any tension or arguments with the people [he] was living with.” In this intimate space of a should-be home,



Patrick often found himself ill at ease. He offered this key illustration of their roommate dynamic:

One time, you know how different sports leagues will have the advertisements or the things like, 'End racism,' the little activism stuff? So, I was watching sports with my roommates, and they're talking about how stupid it is that they're trying to shove in the political stuff or whatever. How they don't care about that. They're just trying to 'do sports.' And I think I said something like, 'Damn...' I forget what I said, but I said something, right? Then I forget what they said, but I realized, I don't know if it's really worth my time to try to argue with it with them. Especially because I'm the only one, right? Like, I'm not White, right? I just let it slide.

This roommate interaction convinced Patrick that investing his time and energy into this space was futile, since he felt outnumbered and was clearly cast as the outsider in this context. Like Anita's snapshot of silence as resistance, this decision by Patrick could also be read as a form of self-preservation. Rather than deplete his energy arguing with his roommates who clearly shared the dominant perspective (in alignment with the broader campus climate of exclusion), Patrick chose to "let it slide" and opted for a different roommate group the next year. However, one of the main differences between Anita and Patrick was the extent to which Anita's strategic disengagement made room for other culturally sustaining activities in its place, such as participation in her cultural club or activities in the BAIC. Though Patrick's disconnection was also deliberate, he did not have spaces of affirmation or belonging to fall back on as Anita did, which largely had to do with Patrick's reliance on general BC channels for seeking out those relational spaces. Extending from the insights about BC's normative campus geography, these seemingly universal structures were not designed with subaltern students like Patrick in mind, which did not ultimately serve him well.

In addition to random housing, Patrick attempted to craft deeper peer relations through activities like intermural or pick-up basketball, chess, and recreational marijuana use. Even though he was not particularly passionate about any of these activities, they were his

strategies for forging intimacy and bonding. Consider the way that he talked about smoking, after an initial disclaimer about whether he should really “be telling me this or not:”

Cause alcohol is only if we go out, like go to a bar or go to a party. Because I'm not gonna get drunk just chilling in the room. But you can smoke, chilling in the room. We can put on some TV, and I feel like chilling in the room is more... I don't know, it's more intimate than going out to a party or something like that. There's more bonding in that way.

This reflection was an example of Patrick attempting to enact the positive, affirming space that he hoped his dorm room might become. He spoke about basketball in a very similar way.

I guess going to the gym and playing sports or whatever has been a way that I could keep in touch... because honestly, I don't even like basketball that much, but I'll do it to see my friends. I have an excuse to seem productive, play a sport, be active. Then you can talk to them, you know?... Like what are you gonna do if you don't have something to do? I guess you could get food but then what? When you're done, it'll be kind of weird. You got to do something else that takes a little more time.

Playing basketball and smoking marijuana were place-making strategies for Patrick, as they provided an activity for peers to cohere around for a long duration of time. To return to Sara Ahmed's language, they provided the means by which individuals were able to successfully “linger” or “prolong” the experience; to “dwell” without the “weird”-ness and awkwardness that might accompany. At times, his efforts seemed to pay off, as he was able to craft moments of casual intimacy with his roommates during his sophomore year, where they became “almost like a mini family.” That intimate space was characterized by “everyone [being] relaxed around each other, calm, you know, joking around. They are not afraid to say what they're thinking or yeah. People can be themselves.”

But, most of Patrick's place-making efforts were not successful. His inability to secure an intramural basketball slot, for example, led him to bemoan that “everyone says, ‘get involved and all,’ you know what I mean? But it's like, sometimes they don't even let

you get involved.” As a result, he shared that “this year, especially, I just kind of go to classes and not much else. So I don't know what to do on the BC campus or in Boston.” Therefore, the portrayal of his college experience was largely about his *lack of* engagement and his attempts to “keep [himself] on track academically.” Both were factors that fed into the most prominent way he described himself throughout this project: as “lazy.” This self-deprecating description was embedded throughout his self-portrait, the way that he talked about himself, and the way he described salient locations on campus. Consider these two comments in concert:

First, it's just my bed [referring to the top drawing in his self-portrait] because I don't know, I feel like being in college sometimes, **it makes me lazier than I am**. Well, it's different because you're so close to where you live. Or at least for me,

I just walk five minutes, and I'm back from class. I feel like it's really easy for me just to go back in bed, **waste time**, rest, just **do nothing**.

I feel like **I need to have stronger self-control** sometimes because I have stuff to do, but I just kind of **waste my time just chillin in my room**. Then it's not a good use of my time, obviously. You said something about getting stressed, but I feel like I have the opposite problem. Sometimes I don't get stressed enough about stuff. So I'm too: ‘alright, **let me just waste my time**, even if I have things I know I need to do.’

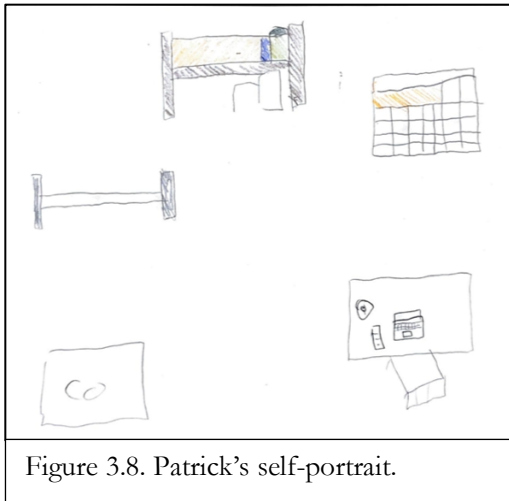


Figure 3.8. Patrick's self-portrait.

These disapproving appraisals of self were a significant dimension of Patrick's narrative, in a way that drew him apart from the other students whose self-portraits often reflected primarily positive facets of themselves and their experience. Patrick hyper-focused on his flaws—his unproductivity, his lack of motivation and self-control, and his inability to master time management. Therefore, when Patrick proposed that he was “uninvolved” at BC, it seemed to be synonymous with “laziness.” As a result, most of Patrick's experiences at BC

fell into the category of retreat. He often withdrew to his dorm room, into his academic studies, and the gym.

Even though the importance of academics was raised often in Patrick's talk, he made it clear that his study was extrinsically motivated. His measure of success was contingent on accessing a higher tier of post-graduate employment, which meant that Patrick's judgement of BC was purely instrumental: "if I graduate college just get a job that doesn't really require that, I would consider it a failure, you know?" His view of BC as a means was buttressed by a resigned stance about the existing normative geography. He took a pragmatic view that anticipated that any "expensive Catholic" school like BC would be expected to cater to a religious socioeconomically elite student archetype. As such, "it's nothing that's actually too surprising. If you read about it or go into it, just the base assumptions you would make about a school like this, lots of it kind of holds up." What was normalized at BC was unsurprising to Patrick, and though he thought that greater diversity in the student body would be "nice," he was not optimistic that BC is the type of school that would attract minoritized students.

Taken together, one interpretation of Patrick's journey is one in which the power of the normative campus geography prevails, rebuffing his initial attempts to forge habitability and ultimately stymieing future place-making negotiations. Instead, he retreats and generally yields to the norms of BC, seeing his out-of-placedness as an inevitable dimension of the means necessary to achieve financial wealth and employment security. Some of the consequences of alienation, for Patrick, seem to be some dissatisfaction with himself and his experience but a resistance to deeper self-reflection or to continued efforts as a campus place-maker. I argue, however, that universities cannot dodge their role in this process. Though it is easier to blame Patrick (for, indeed, he blames himself) for his disengagement,

his case demonstrates the harmful consequences of an alienating campus climate left unchecked and unquestioned. His outlier case raises the paradoxical question, is his case of alienation the norm or the exception for students regularly positioned as “out of place” at BC?

## Summary

Across all six subaltern students’ journeys, each participant negotiated greater habitability at BC despite the hostile normative geography. “Habitability” denoted the extent to which a student was able to “make room” for more parts of themselves in an environment that reminded them regularly that it was not designed for subaltern bodies and experiences.<sup>268</sup> The last chapter proposed that every being is a place-maker, for the shape and feel of a place is always negotiated amongst the members, whether subconsciously or deliberately. So, for those communities historically excluded from institutions of higher education, including students of Color, women, trans\* and queer students, low-income students, their mere presence and survival at BC serves as a renegotiation. What the latter half of this chapter sought to highlight, therefore, were some of the survival tactics that students deployed in order to navigate this hostile environment effectively. Students “made do” in at least three ways, by: 1) seeking out “skin”-extending relational spaces, 2) withdrawing into private refuges, and 3) refusing to comply with prescriptive rules.<sup>269</sup> These were the place-making strategies that students used on an everyday basis to construct habitability, such that they were able to express otherwise repressed facets of themselves freely, including the ability to speak one’s heritage language and taste familiar food on one’s

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<sup>268</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 20.

<sup>269</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 29.

tongue; to cope with and recover from adversity, like taking a “breather” from the chaos and intensity on a sunken bench; and reject complicity with exclusive or problematic norms, like classroom conversations steeped in privilege. These strategies represented a subset of everyday resistance practices used by Lucia, Andromeda, Mateo, Anita, and Tyler, who actively took up their role as architects of place. In so doing, they enacted “spatial imagination,” the creative capacity to see that the norms of the space are not settled, but alterable.<sup>270</sup> They recognized that there was a capacity for the spatial to be otherwise and for the norms of BC to change in favor of their habitability. Their actions yielded some greater room for habitability, however small, which demonstrated the bidirectional, not just the unidirectional negotiation of space. In other words, these students recognized that structures of place shape and constrain their experience, but they as place-makers also exert an influence on their place of learning.

In contrast, Patrick took a resigned stance about the BC normative geography, not because its current state benefitted him (as might be the case for majoritarian students), but because that was the intended design of the place. Patrick’s case was one in which exclusionary architecture of BC was successful in garnering fatalistic passivity and luring him to renounce his place-making powers. His acquiescence reflected the lack of reciprocity he felt with place, and in a place that felt unchangeable and inhospitable, it was no wonder why he saw it as means to get through, rather than a place to dwell, tinker, and explore. The fact that the other students were able to overcome the threats to belonging and affirmation served neither as evidence of some character flaw in Patrick nor confirmation that the campus climate was fine in its existing state. Instead, their resistant place-making should be

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<sup>270</sup> Massey, *For Space*.

1) recognized as a form of disproportionate labor, though creative and agentic; and 2) taken up as foundational cues by other campus inhabitants to fulfill their shared responsibility rehabilitating a more habitable campus space. Thus, the place-making journeys of all six students unite to demonstrate the need for continued, evolving efforts toward mitigating a hostile campus geography. Without shared responsibility and accountability for place from other inhabitants, universities like BC reinforce a notion of place that is stagnant and exclusionary.

## INTERLUDE FOUR

### Campus Architecture, Part Two

This interlude continues from interlude three to offer two other depictions of the BC campus geography, now foregrounding the individual lines from each student's walking interview. Each colored line traces the path of each student's walk with me, entangling into a distinctive subaltern architecture that re-writes the official BC map, if one is open to seeing it.

#### Referenced texts

Figure v. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), 118.

Figure vi. (from right to left, first two passages are from Ingold) Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 81; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, 1. paperback pr., 8. [Repr.] (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 97.



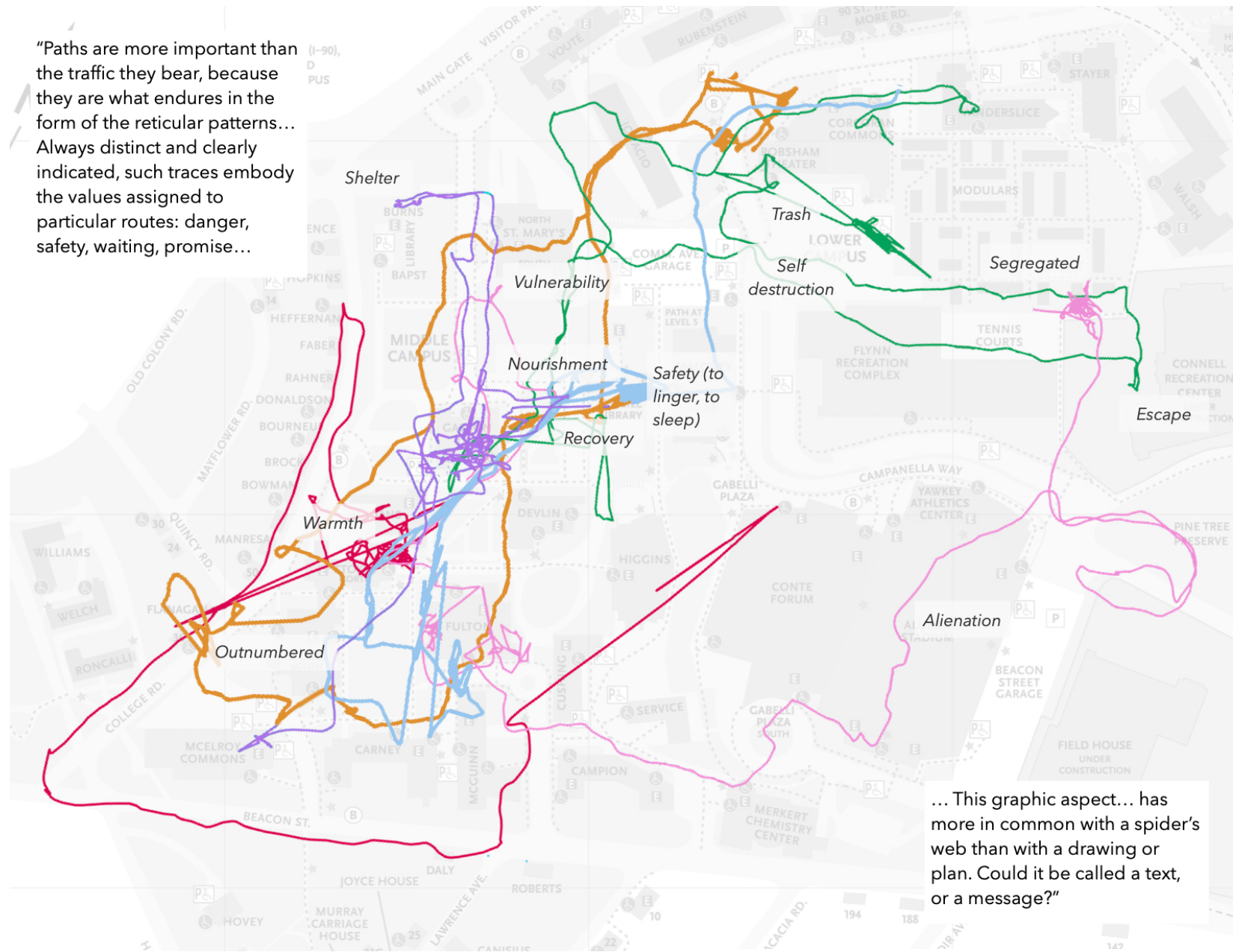


Figure v. Subaltern traces.

# BOSTON COLLEGE

## Chestnut Hill Campus

### KEY

ANITA	Blue
ANDROMEDA	Red
LUCIA	Orange
MATEO	Purple
PATRICK	Green
TYLER	Pink

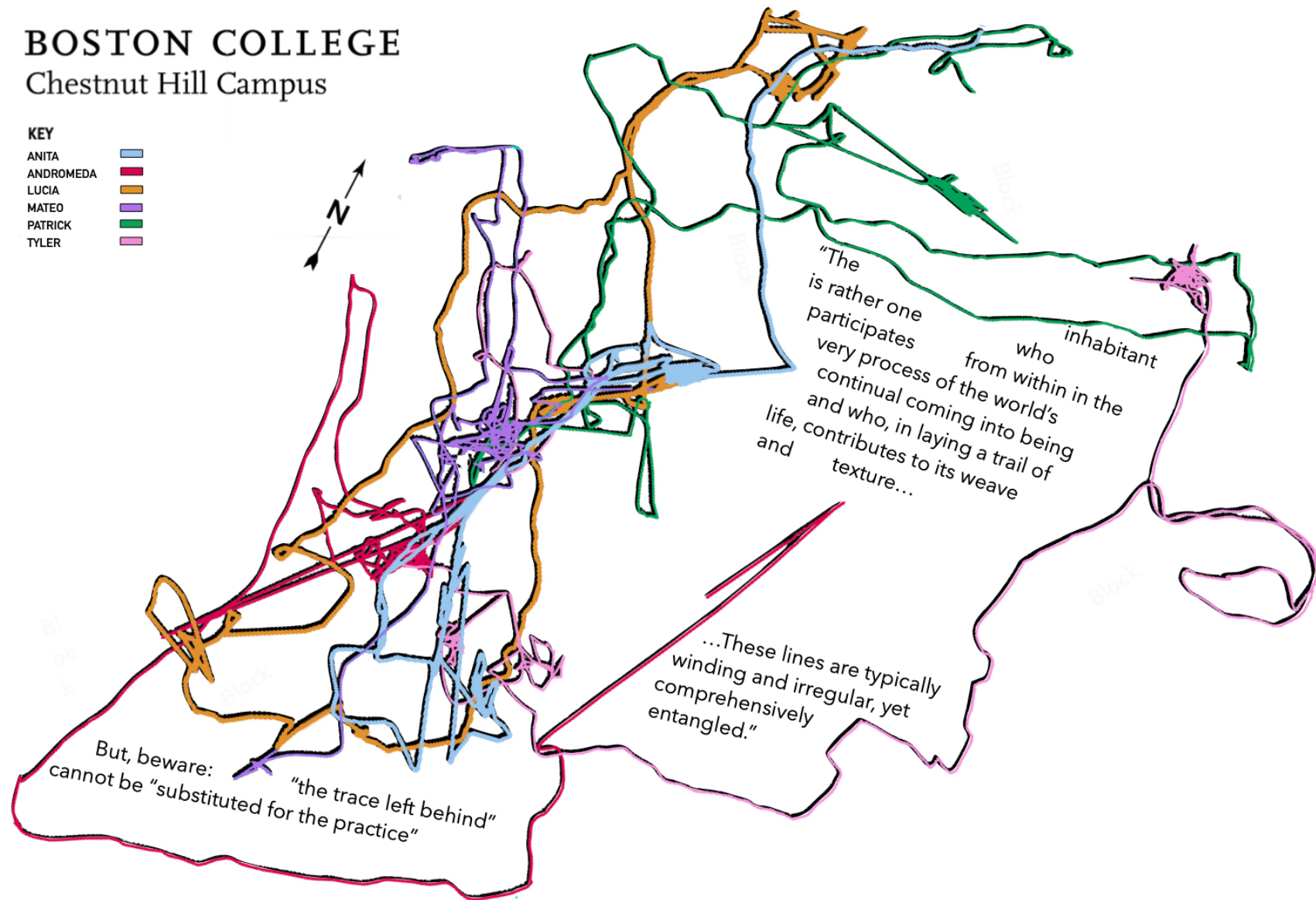


Figure vi. Reading the subaltern text-ure of BC.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Toward Educative Risk: Safety as a Spatial Condition for Critical, Transformative

#### Higher Education

*“Seeing resilience as something one practices... places the onus squarely on postsecondary educators for creating contexts that enable trans\* students to live as their full selves so they need not spend so much energy responding to contexts that challenge their very existence.”*

*-Stephen John Quayle, in the afterword to Z Nicolazzo’s Trans\* in College, p. 167*

Up until this point, I have tried to make the case that the demands for safe spaces can be understood as a call to reckon with the normative geography of college campuses, acknowledging and responding to the power-laden contours of who and what is positioned as in place/out of place at American universities. Without attuning to how structures of place continue to reinforce domination and marginalization, subaltern students’ attempts to craft habitability in hostile places of learning will continue to be impeded and imprinted as spatial transgressions—otherwise branded as safe space flashpoints in the public discourse. This chapter extends the dialogue about safe spaces through exploring the roles that safety and risk play in educational environments characterized by uneven terrain. In what follows, I advance a model of education that responds directly to the critique that safe spaces prohibit risk-taking and discomfort; I draw on Judith Butler’s account of ethics to sketch a purpose of higher education that is contingent on risk and vulnerability. I call it a critical, transformative education because it charges students with the task of shaping (or transforming) their identities, their responsibilities to others, and a society in which this process is accessible to all. This kind of formative endeavor, Butler proposes, is relationally dependent and inextricable from social critique. Given the high stakes of an education that asks students to take on self- and world-making, I contend that the responsibility to engage in educative risks is shared between members of a university environment such that students, educators, and administrators all have a role to play in establishing the conditions by which

students, particularly those from marginalized positions, are able to wholly participate. I call these spatial conditions negative and positive safety, to use Jessica Harless' terms, which correspond respectively to mitigating causes of systemic out-of-placedness and cultivating a strong foundation of in-placedness.

This chapter is organized into two parts. The first half responds to the question, "What do current conceptualizations of safety get wrong?" by contending with the prominent anti-safe space critique mounted by FIRE and First Amendment lawyer Greg Lukianoff and NYU psychologist Jonathan Haidt, otherwise known as the accusation of "coddling the American mind." I devote space in this dissertation to dialogue with their account because I have serious concerns about letting this "coddling" argument have the final say in the discourse about safe space. Though my call for a kind of risky learning might suggest that I am allied with these critiques, this is far from the case as I will show how this prevailing "coddling" narrative about safety and safe spaces misunderstands what risks are educative and under what conditions they are possible. A critical analysis of their argument reveals at least four problematic assumptions, which if implemented, will lead to a university environment:

1. where safety, in all forms, is *dismissed* and *trivialized*
2. characterized by an *ambiguous* promulgation of risk-taking, which unwittingly encourages a draining and miseducative form of risk
3. that neglects to recognize the *spatial conditions* that make educative risk-taking possible
4. where educators and administrators are excused from their *shared responsibility* in mitigating harm and facilitating the kind of risk encounters that educate.

These factors interlock to form a campus place that serves the interest of majoritarian students at the expense of subaltern students, fortifying the existing social order. Given these problematic consequences, it is particularly concerning to consider the discursive reach of Lukianoff and Haidt's rhetoric, popularized in their widely circulated Atlantic article "Coddling the American Mind," which has been cited by many commentators, even former

President Barack Obama. I think it would be a harrowing concession to abandon safety because of their dominating view. Instead, I insist on a critical rebuttal of their view drawing on literature about, by, and with subaltern communities. In the second half of the chapter, I consider the question about how safety should be rehabilitated by staking out a model of risky learning that addresses the shortcomings in Lukianoff and Haidt's account of safety and distributing the responsibility for a critical, transformative education amongst all members of a campus environment. Instead of falling prey to the notion that safety curtails the possibility of risk, I propose a reimagining of safety as a threshold condition to access an education worth wanting: one that is inherently precarious, relationally dependent, and steeped in critical analyses of power and privilege.

### **Rejecting the “Coddling” Argument**

In their book, *Coddling the American Mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*, Lukianoff and Haidt build on their article to explain contentious campus incidents about safe space, trigger warnings and speaker disinvitations as the result of faulty, widespread acceptance of “Great Untruths,” their terminology for “three terrible ideas” about growth and development. The first is the “untruth of fragility,” which claims that children and students are easily harmed and in constant danger. As a result, they should be protected at all costs from any threat, whether real or imagined. The second is the “untruth of emotional reasoning,” which affirms the belief that students should act in accordance with their feelings, rather than their cognitive reasoning. Finally, the third is the “untruth of us vs. them,” which trains students to categorize others into oversimplified, antagonistic binaries (i.e. good/evil, victim/oppressor, perpetrated/aggressor). The result of these well-intentioned ideas is a generation of young people, who matriculate into American

universities with “distorted” thinking, which “increases their likelihood of becoming fragile, anxious, and easily hurt.”<sup>271</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt then connect this consequence back to the safe space debates; these hypersensitive students are then prone to overreacting to minor slights, like an email from a university administrator; unwilling to tolerate speech that challenges their beliefs and feelings, such as a talk by a controversial speaker; and tend to assume the worst about others, like their peers or teachers, rather operating on a charitable standard of giving people the benefit of the doubt.

“Now, since we know you are in grave danger, let’s discuss how you can hide.”<sup>272</sup>

This is the advice that Lukianoff and Haidt, in their hypothetical therapy session with an anxious college student, equate with the safe space approach. In their view, a focus on safety is analogous to amplifying danger and fear, despite evidence to the contrary. The obsession with safety, Lukianoff and Haidt claim, is predicated on a false understanding of the young adult as fragile, liable to be harmed by a dangerous world. The primary metaphor that the authors use is an image of the adolescent as a candle, vulnerable to be blown out by life’s challenges. Extending this metaphor to the safe space campus controversies, they reckon that “if you see yourself or your fellow students as candles, you’ll want to make your campus a wind-free zone.”<sup>273</sup> This is Lukianoff and Haidt’s characterization of safe space incidents—including the controversies when Yale students of Color called for the resignation of the Christakis over an email about insensitive Halloween costumes or when Middlebury students disrupted a campus talk by Charles Murray—each a misguided attempt, in their read, to render the campus “wind-free.” Students’ desire to rid oneself of any rebuke or

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<sup>271</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018, 9.

<sup>272</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 29.

<sup>273</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 25.

challenge comes from flawed, if well-intentioned parenting and/or paternalistic attitudes by university administrators, who, in the name of safety, shelter students from any possible threat. This approach instates a vicious feedback loop:

kids become more fragile and less resilient, which signals to adults that they need more protection, which then makes them even more fragile and less resilient. The end result may be similar to what happened when we tried to keep kids safe from exposure to peanuts: a widespread backfiring effect in which the ‘cure’ turns out to be a primary cause of the disease.<sup>274</sup>

Instead, Lukianoff and Haidt draw on biomimicry to posit a shift in frame, which envisions the adolescent as “antifragile.” Antifragility is a characteristic of systems whose strength is *contingent on* being regularly tested. In order to build elasticity and resilience, muscles must be regularly subjected to stressors, like weightlifting. The takeaway is clear: overcautious overprotection, i.e. coddling, of young adults like college students, is harmful for their development as healthy, resilient individuals. “Safetyism deprives young people of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them more fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims.”<sup>275</sup> The underlying message is an operationalization of a safe space as a deliberately risk-free environment—a playpen—devoid of any rigorous challenge or threat. Safety is synonymous with concepts like comfort, caution, insularity, and atrophy; while safe space advocates are characterized as weak, unable to cope, and “hiding from scary ideas.”<sup>276</sup>

Lukianoff and Haidt have good intentions. Their intent is to promote an institutional and social culture in which students can flourish as responsible agents of their own learning. They argue that safetyism disempowers students because it positions them as victims that are

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<sup>274</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 26.

<sup>275</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 28.

<sup>276</sup> This is an excerpt from journalist Judith Shulevitz's op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled, “In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html?_r=0).

easily triggered, prone to cognitive distortions, and dependent on an adult overprotection, rather than resilient actors able to withstand the challenges of life. Furthermore, they offer six broader patterns that contextualize why these myths are so pervasive, including research about increasing political polarization and antagonism between opposing parties; the rise of adolescent depression and mood disorders, particularly as it relates to social media; and changes in approaches to parenting, including more regulation and less play. Yet, despite being well-intentioned, a closer look at their account reveals several three flawed arguments which counteract their goal to empower students:

1. Toughen up! Pathologize the student, not the problem.
2. Words aren't violence.
3. Stay out of my playpen!

This section debunks each argument from a critical, marginal stance, echoing Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins' use of standpoint epistemology.<sup>277</sup> This orientation is crucial in exposing the bias preserved in supposedly “neutral” or “universal” accounts, like Lukianoff and Haidt's, which operates from and reinforces a privileged stance. I illustrate the disparaging consequences of each assumption and how the counterargument guides the safety intervention proposed in the latter half of this chapter.

### **Toughen up! Pathologize the student, not the problem**

One significant trademark of infantilized youth, Lukianoff and Haidt argue, is distorted thinking. The authors claim that the college students leading the charge for safe spaces, as well as the educators and administrators who cater to their demands, exhibit strong signs of cognitive distortions at work. They quickly summarize nine cognitive

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<sup>277</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), 221–38.



distortions, which they refer to throughout the book when explaining safe space defenders' behaviors and wrongdoings. These distortions include emotional reasoning, which is "letting your feelings guide your interpretation of reality" and catastrophizing, "focusing on the worst possible outcome and seeing it as most likely."<sup>278</sup> These are the two thought patterns which show up prominently in the Atlantic article. Others on the list include overgeneralizing, all-or-nothing thinking, mind-reading, labeling, negative filtering, discounting positives, and blaming. Lukianoff and Haidt mobilize this CBT-informed heuristic to evaluate artifacts from safe space flashpoints, like an open letter drafted by three Black students in the aftermath of the disrupted speech of Heather MacDonald. MacDonald is a conservative political commentator known for her pro-police stance and author of *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine our Culture*. They begin with a quote from the student letter, followed by their diagnosis of the problem, lodged in the distorted thinking of the students:

The students continued: 'If engaged, Heather Mac Donald would not be debating on mere difference of opinion, but the right of Black people to exist.' This sentence includes *fortune-telling*, as the students predict what Mac Donald would say. It also includes a rhetorical flourish that became common in 2017: the assertion that a speaker will 'deny' people from certain identity groups 'the right to exist.' This thinking is a form of *catastrophizing*, in that it inflates the horrors of a speaker's words far beyond what the speaker might actually say. The students also called Mac Donald 'a fascist, a white supremacist, a warhawk, a transphobe, a queerphobe, [and] a classist.' This is *labeling* running wild—a list of serious accusations made without supporting evidence.<sup>279</sup>

What this passage does is go through these students' words, line by line, and use it as evidence to pathologize. Each quote offers affirmation that the problem lies in the thought patterns *of the students*. Yet, taking another step back reveals a problematic pattern of behavior

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<sup>278</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018, 33.

<sup>279</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 80.

from Lukianoff and Haidt, who offer a non-critical analysis of student protesters' expressions of indignation without substantive engagement with power.<sup>280</sup>

A slight detour into the sociological phenomenon of anger uptake helps illustrate the problem inherent in this view. Feminist philosopher Shiloh Whitney describes the typical response to expressions of anger by individuals with subaltern identities, if any: refusal and refraction.<sup>281</sup> She draws on a passage from another feminist thinker, Marilyn Frye, who says,

It is a tiresome truth of women's experience that our anger is not generally well-received. Men (and sometimes women) ignore it, see it as our being 'upset' or 'hysterical,' or see it as craziness. Attention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and to the topic of our 'mental stability.'<sup>282</sup>

Frye's passage suggests that the typical response to anger, particularly when that person is from a minoritized background, is to refract critique and skepticism back onto the expressive person, rather than to take seriously the matter that provoked the intense response in the first place. Whitney studies a breakthrough case in her analysis, a viral video of Black writer and activist, Kimberly Jones, expressing her rage about systemic racism in the streets of Atlanta amid Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Jones chronicles a historical sweep of violence and exploitation against Black people in little over six minutes, provoking listeners to consider whether or not her anger or those of her fellow protesters is justified. As compared to the typical deflection of attention onto the minoritized speaker, Whitney recognizes how responses to this COVID-era scene were actually instructive. Respondents were "moved" by Jones' video, "permitting the anti-racist anger of others to sensitize them

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<sup>280</sup> This insight was offered to me generously by my colleague, Taiga Guterres, in a dissertation workshop session in 2023. Thank you.

<sup>281</sup> Shiloh Whitney, "Anger and Uptake," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 22, no. 5 (December 2023): 1255–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09924-z>.

<sup>282</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 84; as cited in Shiloh Whitney, "Anger and Uptake," 5.

to the insults and injuries that provoked it” rather than to pathologize the person expressing the anger.<sup>283</sup>

In *Coddling the American Mind*, however, Lukianoff and Haidt’s approach clearly falls into the latter category. Their argument is grounded in diagnosing pro-safe space college students as victims to psychologically unhealthy thought patterns, fixating on their “mental [in]stability,” rather than what motivates their anger. I argue that Lukianoff and Haidt’s critique of safe space advocates engages in pathologizing behavior that distracts from subaltern students’ assertions of exclusion and discrimination. They even go so far as to blame minoritized groups for those hostile environments. Consider Lukianoff and Haidt’s discussion about the pitfalls of teaching about microaggressions:

Yes, one certainly *could* interpret these everyday questions and comments in this way, as tiny acts of aggression, rebuke, or exclusion—and sometimes that is exactly what they are. But there are other ways to interpret these statements, too. More to the point, should we *teach* students to interpret these kinds of things as acts of aggression? If a student feels a flash of offense as the recipient of such statements, is he better off *embracing* that feeling and labeling himself a victim of a microaggression, or is he better off asking himself if a more charitable interpretation might be warranted by the facts?”<sup>284</sup>

Notice how the authors offer their rhetorical questions exclusively from the perspective of a person subjected to microaggressions. The advice seems to be: if you suspect that a microaggression had been perpetrated, *you* should give the aggressor the benefit of the doubt. You should not “start by *assuming the worst about people* and reading their actions as uncharitably as possible.”<sup>285</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt place the onus for reflection and collegiality on the subaltern, as if it is their wrongdoing that warrants intervention, while the perpetrator is excused from any accountability or action. Indeed, they claim “it is unjust to treat people

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<sup>283</sup> Whitney, “Anger and Uptake,” 2.

<sup>284</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018, 37.

<sup>285</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 36.

as if they are bigots when they harbor no ill will. Doing so can discourage them from being receptive to valuable feedback. It may also make them less interested in engaging with people across lines of difference.”<sup>286</sup> So not only are hostile environments and interactions that fault of minoritized people (or safe space advocates), they are also to blame for the unwillingness of privileged, possibly ignorant or bigoted, folks to accept criticism or tolerate discussions “across difference.”

Though these victim-blaming, pathologizing tactics might seem blatant, Lukianoff and Haidt shield themselves from these kinds of critiques because their assessment seemingly applies to an entire generation of coddled students—the iGen or Generation Z—not subaltern students in particular. However, they develop their argument by villainizing the archetypal safe space defender, citing campus incident after incident where those protesters are namely minoritized students from multiple axes of difference, even when other examples of weaponizing safety discourse from privileged stances exist. Lukianoff and Haidt consistently draw on incidents where the demands for safety equate to addressing contemporary manifestations of oppression for subaltern students, or to use their shorthand, “demands from the Left.”<sup>287</sup> As such, it seems there is another message when one reads between the lines: the so-called “fragile” students leading safe space protests stands as a proxy for minoritized students. That subtext is what makes this assumption—diagnosing the problem as lodged *within the students*—so problematic. Rather than contending with the possibility that it is the hostility of the conditions that might warrant intervention, Lukianoff

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<sup>286</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 37.

<sup>287</sup> The only exception to this pattern is in chapter three, when Lukianoff and Haidt mention a safe space controversy at Texas State University, in which a Latino student’s article about dismantling whiteness (using rhetoric like “white death will mean liberation for all”) was interpreted to mean literal genocide of white people. There was significant backlash on and off campus, which included hate mail to the newspaper and writer, petitions to defund the newspaper, and calls to retract the article. FIRE defended the first amendment rights of the newspaper in this case. All of the other examples refer to safe space calls from the margins.

and Haidt assess that subaltern students' faulty patterns of thinking result in "extra thin skin," which chastises students to 'toughen up' and 'be resilient.'<sup>288</sup> Yet, the way that antifragility is operationalized in anti-safe space discourse first disregards the resilience that is required for a subaltern student to even survive in oppressive conditions and navigate institutions not designed for them. It seems that regularly combatting stereotype threat, fending off microaggressions, and withstanding reminders of exclusion do not count as rigorous enough challenges to develop antifragility. Furthermore, Lukianoff and Haidt's use of antifragility as resilience falls into the trap of grammar described by trans\* scholar and higher education educator Z Nicolazzo.

In *Trans\* in college*, Nicolazzo problematizes the commonsense use of resilience as a noun: as "something that one must possess" or "something that one has or does not have (e.g. an ability)."<sup>289</sup> Instead, she draws upon Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity to propose resilience as a verb that is practiced by subaltern students and communities. This shift is a deliberate step in depathologizing trans\* students, allowing

one to recognize how particular environments might limit practicing resiliency because of cultural manifestations of transgender oppression (i.e., the gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism). One's environment is interrogated as the source of such an inability to practice resilience rather than suggesting a character flaw or a problem that reflects negatively on any particular individual.<sup>290</sup>

Nicolazzo, therefore, criticizes an approach to resilience that does not adequately reckon with the influence of context. The environmental conditions establish whether a space is

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<sup>288</sup> To be clear, Lukianoff and Haidt are far from alone in this appraisal. There are many other commentators who also align with this critique of college student "hypersensitivity" or "extra thin skin," who have similarly labeled safe space advocates "snowflakes" (Sessions, 2018), naïve adolescents "eager to self-infantilize" (Shulevitz, 2015), and intolerant "bullies even as they see themselves as victims" (Friedersdorf, 2015). Lukianoff and Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," 2015. Sessions, "Remarks." Shulevitz, "In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas." Friedersdorf, "The New Intolerance of Student Activism."

<sup>289</sup> Nicolazzo, *Trans\* in College*, 88.

<sup>290</sup> Nicolazzo, 90.

conducive to practicing resilience, such that alleged ‘non-resilient’ actions do not signal a weakness of the person but a collective failure, and thus a shared responsibility. Nicolazzo’s study includes several trans\* student testimonies that exemplify the prominent role spatial conditions play in resilience practices. For example, Reagan relied primarily on relational environmental cues to judge whether or not resilience was possible. If their trusted friend, Ginnie, shared the space with them, Reagan leaned on Ginnie’s support to confront staff and students who would consistently misgender them. In Reagan’s words,

Ginnie actually helps me a lot with it. Because sometimes I’m so emotionally exhausted from all of this . . . I don’t want to say anything. It’s like, literally, if I say something, I’m gonna burst into tears. . . . So Ginnie’s like, ‘Well, would you like me to, like, correct them? Would you like me to say something?’ And usually I’m okay with it. ‘Cause someone will be like, ‘Oh, hey ladies,’ and she’ll be like, ‘Oh, just one lady.’”<sup>291</sup>

Ginnie’s presence and willingness to correct others on Reagan’s behalf (with their permission), gave Reagan an opportunity to practice resilience by prioritizing their emotional well-being and replenishing their energy reserve, enabling them to persist rather than break down in these misgendering spaces. Ginnie’s presence was a relational facet of the environment, which shaped Reagan’s capacity to engage in behavior that prioritized her capacity to persevere and grow in the face of conflict. Furthermore, relying on Ginnie also illustrates relational resilience, the notion that resilience can be a group practice rather than a solitary endeavor.

This dialogue with Nicolazzo demonstrates the problem inherent in Lukianoff and Haidt’s assumption about the negative “fragile” label, wrongly issued to minoritized students. It pathologizes them for a lack of resilience for not knowing how to “deal with adversity,” rather than grappling with how to effectively craft the environmental conditions

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<sup>291</sup> Nicolazzo, 91.

by which practicing antifragility is possible for subaltern students.<sup>292</sup> Yet it is not simply that the term “fragility” is erroneously placed on subaltern students. “Fragility” or “extra thin skin” as a pejorative title is not a helpful concept for majoritarian students either. It valorizes an educational goal of developing in students some level of practiced invincibility, a calloused orientation toward the world that makes one able to withstand any threat. My point though is twofold. When educators and administrators resist the lure of scapegoating students for being ‘weak’ or prone to ‘distorted thinking’, attention can be reinvested in efforts to address and rehabilitate campus conditions for resilience and strategies for overcoming enactments of oppression. Spatial conditions matter, and any inclusive model of education must account for the differential positioning and impact of an uneven campus geography. Second, I want to problematize the notion that sensitivity is a vice. Work on anger uptake from Shiloh Whitney suggests that a more just future necessitates an *increased sensitivity* to claims made by minoritized communities, an openness to listening and responding to what provokes righteous anger rather than misdirecting attention towards the sanity of the expressive person. It’s true that students’ claims cannot simply be accepted as unquestionable truth or that demands can be dictated merely by students’ feelings. That would not be respecting subaltern students as serious learners, whose claims, like everyone’s, are subject to scrutiny and engagement. Instead, I am insisting that we must not dismiss and trivialize subaltern students’ appeals as the result of “bad ideas” and take seriously the notion of heightening sensitivity to others’ pain as an educational priority. That makes a case for the virtue of cultivating “thin skin” rather than a vice, a theme I will take up in the latter half of this chapter.

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<sup>292</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018, 87.

**Words aren't violence**

To their credit, though Lukianoff and Haidt are against safe spaces, they acknowledge that physical safety is important and address the need to reduce bodily violence. Their problem is in students' conflation of *words* as violence, the notion that inviting a speaker who defends the police and holds the stance that racism is overblown can be synonymous with actual, physical danger. This "concept creep" allows students to claim that violence also "cover[s] a multitude of nonviolent actions, including speech that this political faction claims will have a negative impact on members of protected identity groups"<sup>293</sup> Ultimately, this expansion of violence, in their view, enables fragility since students' subjective affective assessment—in other words, one's mere *feelings* of victimization—is satisfactory reason to be deemed violence. Lukianoff and Haidt describe this phenomenon as "emotional safety," of which they are vehemently opposed.<sup>294</sup>

Though this distinction between physical and emotional safety is relevant, it also rests on hasty and privileged assumptions that presume calls for "safe space" bypass bodily harm and violence. However, the reality is that physical "safety" is not assured, particularly for many of the minoritized students colleges and universities are so eager and encouraged to recruit. To name only a few examples: students who identify as women are still facing a university culture writ large that is riddled with a disproportionately high number of sexual assault cases, such that sexual violence and campus safety remains at the top of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)'s list of higher education policy

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<sup>293</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 76.

<sup>294</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 21.



priorities for 5 years running.<sup>295</sup> Violence is also concentrated as marginalized identities overlap and interlock. The 2015 U.S. Trans Survey—the largest survey of trans\* folx led by trans\* folx in the United States—offers findings that speak to larger social trends that we can assume also hold true in campus environments. Of the 27,715 survey respondents, 47% of the respondents were sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime; 54% have experienced some form of intimate partner violence; and 40% have attempted suicide in their lifetime, almost nine times more than the U.S. average. In another example, Elianny Edwards develops a race-informed heuristic for evaluating the school safety of Black youth based on extensive review of school climate frameworks.<sup>296</sup> Physical safety remains one of six essential categories of safety as operationalized in her model not because physical safety is *all* that matters in education, but precisely that it cannot be assumed to be guaranteed. Edwards' work demonstrates how the sublimation of safety as an educational priority is a consequence of colorblind policies that assume educational institutions to be racially neutral. Likewise in the safe space debates in higher education, the erasure of physical safety comes from a similar race-blind orientation, occluding the questions: who has the privilege to take their physical safety for granted? Who could reasonably assume that physical safety isn't a priority embedded in calls for safe space?

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<sup>295</sup> See the AASCU's Policy Matters series, which posts a "Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues" each year up until 2021 and then their "Public Policy Agenda" which is posted each year since then. Two are cited here for reference. AASCU Government Relations and Policy Analysis Division, "Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2020," Policy Matters: A Higher Education Policy Brief (Washington, D.C.: The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2020); American Association of State Colleges and Universities, "2024 Public Policy Agenda," Public Policy Agenda (Washington, D.C.: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2024).

<sup>296</sup> Elianny C. Edwards. "Centering Race to Move Towards an Intersectional Ecological Framework for Defining School Safety for Black Students." *School Psychology Review* 50, no. 2–3 (July 3, 2021): 254–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1930580>.

Not only that, words are not mere statements, cleanly divorced from violence; just as ideology is not mere ideas, divorced from material consequence.<sup>297</sup> There is substantial literature in sociolinguistics, for example, that demonstrates how closely linked speech and action can be. The concept of a speech act is the quintessential counterargument, understood as a “performative utterance” in which one’s talk is interwoven with conduct: the notion of saying “I do” in marriage, bets, commands, greetings, or requests are all examples of words that perform as deeds.<sup>298</sup> However, more applicable to these cases are examples of hate speech, laws, or threats, oppressive speech acts that can wound the body, constituting a violence in itself. Linguistically driven violence can also beget physical violence, as illuminated by the mainstream discourse that “adultifies” and criminalizes Black youth.<sup>299</sup> This rhetoric assumes young Black boys are “dangerous,” “aggressive,” or “hypersexualized,” which plays a significant role in *manifesting* violence against them. These words contribute to developing pernicious, enduring stereotypes that have dire physical and psychological consequences, as in the case with Tamir Rice’s murder. Rather than being recognized as a 12-year-old boy playing with a toy gun in his neighborhood park, Tamir was perceived as an armed Black adult, “maybe 20.”<sup>300</sup> Our speech acts contribute to physical, systematic violence against certain communities.

Furthermore, Lukianoff and Haidt falsely assume that violence only comes in the physical form, pointing to the lowest rates of child abuse, kidnapping, and death in years as

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<sup>297</sup> I reprise this insight from chapter two, when Louis Althusser rejects the myth that ideology floats in its own abstract dimension; instead, he is clear that “ideology has a material existence” (184) that is “inscribed in the acts of practices” (187). Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

<sup>298</sup> J. L. Austin, “How to Do Things with Words,” in *The Discourse Reader*, ed. Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, Third (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 52.

<sup>299</sup> Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>300</sup> Izadi, E., & Holley, P. (2014, November 26). Video shows Cleveland officer shooting 12-year-old Tamir Rice within seconds. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

key evidence to demonstrate how physical safety should no longer be a primary concern.<sup>301</sup> However, there are many more “color[s] of violence.”<sup>302</sup> In a collection of essays, poems, and testimonies compiled by Incite! community organizers, authors testify to *economic* violence as a result of post-conviction penalties, *medical* violence due to institutionalization of domestic abuse as a medical disease rather than a social problem, and *militarized* violence in borderland areas. Furthermore, Franz Fanon and W.E.B. DuBois describe the *psychic* violence that comes with internalized oppression, the insidious method by which white supremacy fractures the Black mind into one of double consciousness, through both the lens of the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>303</sup> Toni Morrison speaks of “*representational* violence,” the ways in which the loss of agency and power over how one or one’s community is portrayed in literature (or in the media, in art) constrains the collective imagination over what one can be and do.<sup>304</sup> Walter Mignolo, on the other hand, speaks to *epistemic* violence, the manner by which the ways of knowing practiced by indigenous peoples and groups, particularly in the non-Western contexts, has been systematically delegitimized, undercutting who counts as “expert” and what counts as valid “knowledge.”<sup>305</sup>

The claim that ‘words are not violence’ is a naïve stance that does not adequately grapple with the complexity of discourse and violence of many forms. Therefore, I want to make the very explicit case that safety, whether material or symbolic, is still an urgent goal

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<sup>301</sup> This focus shows up in chapter eight in the book, “Paranoid Parenting.”

<sup>302</sup><sup>302</sup> This is a reference to an anthology of essays about intersectional violence across the globe, authored by women of Color and collected together as a part of antiviolence social movements. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>303</sup> Black Skin, White Masks. The Souls of Black Folk.

<sup>304</sup> 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature speech. *Playing in the Dark*.

<sup>305</sup> Walter D Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto,” *Transmodernity* 1, no. 2 (2011): 44–66.

for many subaltern communities and therefore cannot be sidelined in the “safe space” debates.

### **Stay out of my playpen!**

Finally, the last assumption to debunk is what I call the “playpen” assumption, taking a cue from Rick McKee’s political cartoon which depicts safe space advocates as tantrum-prone infants unwilling to entertain any discomfort. Enclosed within a playpen, a binky-sucking adult holds the sign, “Stay out of my #safespace!”.<sup>306</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt argue that safe spaces serve as playpens, shielding students from any challenge or risk, essentially creating an echo chamber in which one’s beliefs or worldviews are not liable to challenge.

To rebut this assumption, I reprise my students’ insights about the normative BC campus geography from chapter three. In the previous chapter, all six subaltern students in the PDR study contributed to constructing the campus climate at BC as one that caters to a particular student archetype. In the focus group, Anita, a trans\*, low-income woman of Color, referenced the student culture as a whole:

I feel like the whole theme or the whole culture is just being like, living in a bubble and not realizing that there's different perspectives. Or realizing how, not ignorant, but problematic it is to be like, ‘Oh, I get my laundry done through a service, like I pay a service every week to get my laundry done.’ Like, that's not... Like most people do not do that.

Anita described the “whole culture” of BC as an insular “bubble” environment that was comprised mainly of students that were not exposed to class cultures different than their own. She referred to the insularity of BC as a place where students took an unquestioned, uncritical stance regarding their laundry habits, unable or unwilling to recognize the privilege

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<sup>306</sup> Rick McKee, *Political Cartoon U.S. College Safe Space*, November 13, 2015, Cartoon, November 13, 2015, <https://theweek.com/cartoons/588622/political-cartoon-college-safe-space>.

laced up in delegating this mundane task to hired workers for exorbitant fees. The problem, for Anita, did not seem to be the laundry service alone, but the ease by which BC students assumed that their privilege was the norm. Lucia, the queer, low-income, Mexican woman spotlighted in chapter two, supplemented Anita's commentary with an insight directed to me:

You can just tell we're living very different lives to a lot of the people on campus. And I feel like the differences for us, it's really visible to see them in the life that they're living, because we see it everywhere, in the media, and we're affected by it directly, but they get the option to just not see it. So they can go through their lives without seeing it, without feeling affected by it. Just little things, like just today, I was having conversation with someone about how if we all were just required to work for a couple of weeks in dining, how that would change your perspective dramatically. Dramatically.

Here, Lucia offered a stark juxtaposition between the lives of the students seated in this room and those of the majority on campus. From her standpoint, she could not ignore the lifestyle of the archetypal BC student because the preferences and choices of the dominant group were laden onto Lucia by default. She lamented that students like her were not given the option of vision, for they “see it everywhere, in the media, and [they’re] affected by it directly.” What she pointed out though was the extent to which privileged others do get the option of awareness. Lucia proposed that other students who fit the BC “mold” could “go through their lives without seeing it, without feeling affected by it,” where “it” referred not only to the differences in lifestyle between social classes or racial groups but to what those differences represented, and the people living out those differences.

This student conversation offers an empirical case to juxtapose with the playpen assumption—the notion that the subaltern students so often leading the pro-safe space charge desire a campus that is devoid of discomfort, risk, and perspectives that counter their own. The overarching sentiments of Anita, Lucia, and Patrick's dialogue indicate that in reality, minoritized students regularly navigate an environment that is characterized by

alienation, which certainly abets discomfort, and engagement with others who routinely challenge their ways of life, usually accompanied by the pressure to conform. Indeed, what Anita and Lucia propose instead is a reversal of roles—the students that they found most shielded and sheltered in a bubble are those who fit the archetype of a PWI, rather than the students with subaltern positions that so often champion safe space demands. As such, I argue that this assumption—to scrub campuses clean of any risky activity—is falsely attributed to the safe space debates and deceiving in placing this onus on safe space defenders. This places a target on alleged “self-infantilizing” students for being intolerant, when it is clear that most cases, the high-profile “triggers” for safe space controversies—whether it is a bigoted speaker given a prominent campus platform, like Milo Yiannopoulos or intimidation tactics from two White men in the Arizona State University “Multicultural Communities of Excellence” space—are far from students’ first encounters with hardship or antagonism. Instead, what ultimately registers as a “safe space” incident, publicly ridiculed as an overreaction, is often a response to a cumulative problem. This misreading of safe space lends itself to an unforgiving caricature of college students writ large, though its subtext is more targeted in criticizing students of Color, women, queer and trans\* students, and low-income students.

In contrast to Lukianoff and Haidt’s account, which covertly criticizes subaltern students’ demand for safety and risk reduction, conversations with subaltern students at BC reveals a need for distributed risk-taking, such that they are not the only students on campuses who must encounter ideas, practices, and traditions that run counter to their own. They gesture toward a different “bubble,” which is an insularity that comes with the privilege of falling into the dominant class, of being affirmed as “in place” at a PWI like BC. Students who fall into the hegemonic majority must also be subjected to the experience of having

their viewpoints challenged and tested, increasing their experience of educative risk. This is a worthwhile risk-taking endeavor that students with privileged and marginalized identities benefit from. However, those subaltern students encountering risks of dignity—what Eammon Callan defined as being made to feel as if one is of an inferior status—require risk alleviation. These are risks that are actually damaging to a students' ability to participate in their education and thus, miseducative. This play with risk will be engaged with in greater detail in the intervention section of this chapter, but until then, the key insight from disrupting this playpen assumption is the notion that safe spaces cannot and should not be devoid of risk for any student; but not all risks are equal nor are all educative. As such, I hope to advance a model that wrestles with the environmental conditions that make educative risk-taking possible for all students, particularly those with subaltern identities.

### **The takeaways**

Though I am still concerned with the consequences of Lukianoff and Haidt's account, their narrative offers a helpful contrast to what I hope to do with my students in this project. To summarize, I offer each of their problematic arguments with a corresponding principle to interweave into a more just model for transformative higher education.

Table 4.1. A summary table depicting how my model for higher education contrasts with Lukianoff and Haidt's problematic account	
Lukianoff & Haidt's Problematic Arguments	The Intervention
Toughen up! Pathologize the student, not the problem.	Prioritize a collective responsibility for mitigating the oppressive conditions that provoke righteous anger and indignation, rather than placing blame on individual subaltern students.
Words aren't violence.	The need for safety, even of the physical variety, is still an elusive and dire need for communities.
Stay out of my playpen!	Risk-taking is essential in higher education, but not all risks are equal nor distributed evenly amongst students.

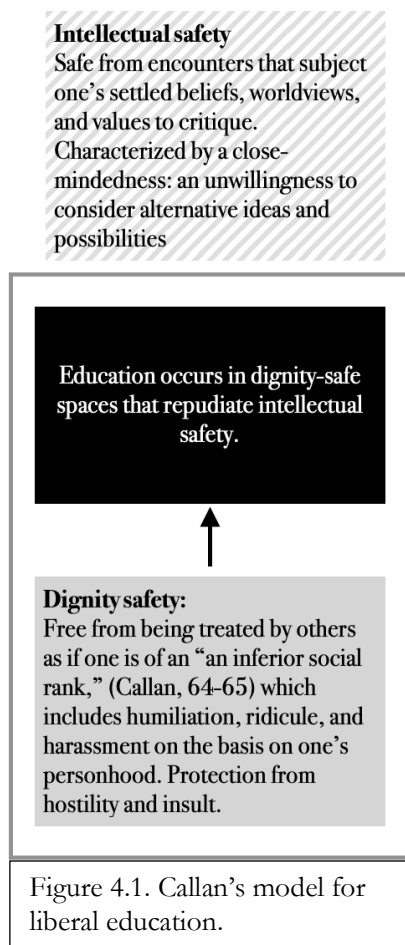
### Proposing a Risky Model for Higher Education

I hope to intervene in a way that avoids the pitfalls delineated in Lukianoff and Haidt's account. In what follows, I offer an account of safety as shared community responsibility, striving toward conditions that allow for risky learning to be possible for every student. Therefore, in my account, safety is not protection *from* risk, but the means to *opt into* risk. This involves both thresholds of negative (safety from) and positive safety (safety to) with the recognition that absolute safety is not possible. Furthermore, the safety threshold is not a finish line but a circle, always needing attention and reinvention from educational stakeholders. This process needs to involve subaltern students and be sensitive to their concerns, but its burden cannot be exclusively delegated. Educators and administrators also hold responsibility in the quest to make their campuses habitable for all students to take educative risks, especially minoritized students. Finally, one way to conceive of positive safety is to return to the place-based insights from chapter two and cultivate the embodied experience of a body-at-home.



### Threats to dignity, threats to intellectual comfort

In chapter one, I introduced Eamonn Callan's safe space remix as the account with the most resonance to my own. Now, I hope to delineate how my account scaffolds from his proposal about dignity and intellectual safety. He advocates for safe spaces insofar as they are characterized by "dignity safety," which is a social condition by which members of a given environment can participate "secure in the knowledge that others can be relied on to treat them as equals, even when disagreement or conflict arises."<sup>307</sup> Dignity safe spaces are to



be distinguished from those prioritizing "intellectual safety," which describe environments in which members can participate without fear of challenge to their core beliefs or worldviews. Callan claims that intellectually safe spaces are "repugnant to the education worth having,"<sup>308</sup> because they foster a settled, narrow-minded disposition in which students become vulnerable to a host of vices—intellectual arrogance, cowardice, self-righteousness, sloth, and indifference.<sup>309</sup> Therefore, Callan's safe space model situates education for intellectual virtue (such as open-mindedness) with reference to these two distinctive concepts: education occurs once the "threshold condition" of dignity safety is met and once

<sup>307</sup> Eamonn Callan, "Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24, no. 1 (2016): 68.

<sup>308</sup> Callan, 64.

<sup>309</sup> Callan, 74.

intellectual safety is repudiated.<sup>310</sup> As such, Callan's model might be depicted as such (fig. 4.1).

At first glance, it might seem that this model satisfies the problems identified in the previous assumption-busting section. It is a contextual model that recognizes the need for certain environmental conditions, such as dignity safety, to be met before education can commence.<sup>311</sup> The safety distinction that Callan offers also maps onto alternative allocations of risk. A student that prioritizes intellectual safety attempts to reduce the risk of sustaining blows to their pride and ego; they do not want to risk the judgment that comes with possibly being wrong or mistaken in their beliefs. Championing intellectual safety, though, runs the risk of stymied growth and blind loyalty to ungrounded claims because one's perspectives are never tested nor open to improvement. Certainly no education worth striving toward seeks to diminish a student's capacity to stretch their thinking in this way. As such, a reduction of these risks is not warranted for any student. Dignity threats, on the other hand, are risks to one's sense of personhood and worthiness as an equal member of the community. They threaten to demean and degrade others such that their inherent worth as a human being is questioned.

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<sup>310</sup> Callan, 68.

<sup>311</sup> However, there is an important side note about this account that bears mentioning. This distinction between one's "intellect" and one's "dignity" is not as clean as Callan suggests, as threats to one's intelligence and strongly held beliefs can take the form of attacking dignity. Consider the case of Charles Murray's talk at Middlebury College. In this flashpoint, Middlebury students claim threats to dignity in entertaining the premise of Charles Murray's thesis in *The Bell Curve*: They question whether "it is reasonable for students or community members to be asked to debate someone who has presented their intellectual inferiority as an irrefutable fact? When will minorities, low income students, and women no longer have to justify their presence in institutions of higher learning? Why do we not entertain similar conversations about the rest of our students?" This is an example of how an allegedly *intellectually* provoking debate asks students entertain an idea that threatens the *dignity* of nonwhite groups, blurring the distinction between what counts as a merely intellectual challenge, as compared to one that jeopardizes the equality of all members. As such, though Callan's distinction is helpful, more discussion of cases that lie at the intersection of these two categories is needed. A Middlebury student collective, "Broken Inquiry on Campus: A Response by a Collection of Middlebury Students," March 12, 2017, <https://brokeninquiryblog.wordpress.com>.

A recognition that intellectual safety holds no ground in an educational space reinforces the notion that a dignity safe space is not synonymous with comfort. What is certainly possible, however, in an intellectually risky space is the occasion for contention and precarious moments. These terms allude to aforementioned safe space accounts respectively recommended by feminist educators Jeannie Ludlow and Zoe Brigley-Thompson. Though both ultimately reject “safety” as a viable construct for a classroom characterized by risky learning, I argue that both of the constructs they offer in its stead, contention and precarity, are still compatible with a classroom that is dignity safe and intellectually challenging.

In order to theorize a framework that is viable to each of these concepts—safety, risk, contention, and precarity—it is worth contextualizing in greater detail about the educational end to which Callan only briefly references in his account. For if dignity safety does serve as a threshold condition, it raises the question, toward what aim? What does ameliorating risk to one’s dignity and rightful worth allow undergraduate students to access as a result? Callan’s answer would be ‘a liberal education,’ which is his placeholder to designate the process of cultivating Aristotelian virtues, specifically students’ capacity to practice intellectual virtues including open-mindedness. Though this virtue-centric education holds promise, I argue that the purpose of higher education needs to be more holistic and expansive in scope, nurturing not only students’ intellectual capacities but the cultivation of their whole identity, including their relational, vocational, physical, or emotional dimensions. Furthermore, this aim does not reckon with the root causes for why dignity harms proliferate, simply that they need to be curbed. Social critique provides the foundation for students to understand dehumanizing actions as a purposeful symptom of the larger matrix of oppression. As such, I contextualize a different vision for higher education that is

informed by Judith Butler's moral treatise, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, one in which social critique and mutual recognition play a crucial role in the project of self-making and world-making.

### **Toward the fruits of a transformative education: Self-making and world-making**

I am under no pretense that I will be able to offer a full-fledged account of a worthy ideal for (higher) education in this section. That enduring inquiry is one that animates an expansive field of educational philosophy, with books dedicated exclusively to one possibility at a time. Yet, I cannot build upon Callan's suggestion that safety is a threshold condition without offering at least a sketch of an educational endeavor and end that is worth pursuing. Here, I will defend one educational enterprise worth striving for, which is the transformative critical education resonant of many thinkers, though I will feature one version offered by feminist and gender-studies scholar Judith Butler.<sup>312</sup> Their depiction of education is an ethical project which prioritizes an exploration of the urgent questions: Who am I? What should/can I become? And what is my responsibility to others? Butler's framework for education can be classified as trans-formative in that it is intentional about charging students with the task of *forming* or *shaping* themselves: who they want to be, how they see themselves in relation to others, and their responsibility to a larger collective. Though the term "transformative" colloquially connotes a full metamorphosis, insofar as the subject becomes wholly different in the process, in Butler's account, the transformation is often more gradual in nature, tinkering and layering in response to educative encounters. Furthermore, Butler is explicit about the risk involved in this formative endeavor, relying on an assumption that

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<sup>312</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 1st ed (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

becoming educated—engaging in these existential, ethical deliberations—is inherently precarious. This telos makes for a very different kind of “safe space” than that espoused by free speech crusaders or safe space critics, one in which safety serves as a threshold condition to engage in educative risk-taking, rather than safety as a form of coddling or protection against risk.

Who should I be or become? What kind of life is worth pursuing? What kind of community/society is worth striving toward? These are ethical, existential questions that often feel like they are bounded to the philosophy classroom, as if the only time that questions about ‘the good’ arise are when we are seated in a circle, trying to decipher Socrates’ rebuttals to his smug interlocutors or debating about the trolley car. Instead, I echo John Dewey who rejects the narrowing of morality to “a separate department of life” and insists upon ethics as a distinctively practical and quotidian task.<sup>313</sup> All of our actions, Dewey argues, are imbued with ethical character because each choice—whether it is as seemingly trivial as to take the bus or as pregnant with morality as stealing or cheating—enacts some vision of a good person, how to live a meaningful life, and what is required to live together well. An ethical education sets as an ideal that every student is given the opportunity to wrestle with the ethical dilemmas of everyday life and charges them with the task of applying their provisional answers.<sup>314</sup> Judith Butler proposes a particular vision of ethical education that makes the relational and sociopolitical contours of formative education apparent.

In order to tackle the question, “Who am I?”, Butler explains that the self is inextricably enmeshed,

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<sup>313</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 279.

<sup>314</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 281.

within the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject. These are invested with power and recalcitrance, setting the limits to what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things. There is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take.<sup>315</sup>

This passage draws inspiration from critical French theorist and political activist Michel Foucault to emphasize how a project of self-formation can never be divorced from its historical and political context. The norms “invested with power and recalcitrance” are otherwise referred to as “regime[s] of truth” that constrain what forms one may become as well as who is even recognized as an agent of self-making.<sup>316</sup> These regimes of truth, as they have otherwise been referred to in this dissertation, denote the matrix of interlocking domination, a systemic model of power and oppression which explains how exploitation (particularly at the intersection of race, class, and gender) is reinforced at personal, interpersonal, organizational, institutional levels.<sup>317</sup> A subject, in the attempt to contemplate who she is and what she can be, must work within confines that are not of her own making, using existing discourses that both “precede and exceed” her. This inherent thrust of the subject *in media res* exposes the extent to which the ethical project of self-formation is interwoven with an application of existing social discourses. Adrienne Rich poses the paradox and complexity of this dynamic in poetic form when she declares, “this is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you”.<sup>318</sup> Writer and poet Ocean Vuong offers a similar sentiment in his novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, where the first lines begin with

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<sup>315</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

<sup>316</sup> Butler, 22.

<sup>317</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (June 1997): 465, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>; Collins, “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination.”

<sup>318</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*, 1989, Poem, 1989, <https://poetrysociety.org/poems/the-burning-of-paper-instead-of-children>.

reference to his Vietnamese mother: “Let me begin again. Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if every word I put down is one word further from where you are.”<sup>319</sup> These lines drive home the tender and devastating irony of Vuong’s position: a creative outlet that serves both a liberatory purpose and as assimilative entrapment. Rich and Vuong both illustrate Butler’s point; oppressive discourse becomes reinforced through usage, even if the intent of application is resistance. Therefore, any attempt to self-create, to answer the question, “Who am I?” is complicit in its use of the current regimes of truth. Indeed, “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms.”<sup>320</sup> As such, Butler asserts that any project of self-formation necessitates social critique as an essential accompanying practice; utilization of the regimes of truth demands that a person not do so unquestioningly.

Yet this inseparable pursuit of self-making and social critique produces a hazard, the first of many in this account of risky learning:

To call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectivation, is to call into question the truth of myself and, indeed, to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself... self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable.<sup>321</sup>

In other words, the task of social critique is risky not only for reasons that are already known—retaliation by those benefitting from the current norms or ostracism for disrupting the status quo—but also because it endangers the means by which one is able to be recognized as a subject at all. By questioning who or “what [the present regimes] leave out”

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<sup>319</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>320</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7.

<sup>321</sup> Butler, 22–23.

or “what they might be compelled to accommodate,” a subject imperils their own ability to be seen as a full human being. Though the stakes are high, the threat of unrecognizability is not enough to warrant mere self-defense. Echoing Hegel’s dialectic between the master and the slave, Butler argues that opting out of social critique will not guarantee self-preservation, for one’s ability to be recognized as a subject is relationally constituted. It is only through the mutual act of recognition between two equal subjects that the possibility for an ‘I’ truly emerges. Thus, “I” cannot be,

an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no ‘you’ to address, then I have lost ‘myself’... one can tell an autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an ‘I’ only in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you,’ my own story becomes impossible.<sup>322</sup>

One cannot engage in the ethical deliberation of self-making without being called upon by the address of an other. One is constituted by virtue of a “you,” who is rendered by the regimes of truth as full person, equal in position. If, as it often is the case, that the current social discourses dehumanize certain groups or communities such that they are less than equal to others, then that disparity makes recognition of the self impossible for all groups—the oppressor and the oppressed, the hegemonic and the subaltern. Though this analogy risks a bit of oversimplification, a parallel to this relational premise can be found in the axioms that mobilize social movements—the notion “our humanity and liberation is bound together”—which are inspired by longstanding indigenous traditions.<sup>323</sup> This is the guiding knowledge that also characterizes the South African term “Ubuntu,” which roughly translates to “I am because you are.” This relational adage pays homage to the notion of

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<sup>322</sup> Butler, 32.

<sup>323</sup> Lilla Watson, “Keynote Address” (A Contribution to Change: Cooperation out of Conflict Conference: Celebrating Difference, Embracing Equality, Hobart, Australia, September 21, 2004), <https://uniting.church/lilla-watson-let-us-work-together/>.



intrinsic relationality—that a person’s flourishing and suffering is innately tied to that of others in their kinship networks.<sup>324</sup> The point is that these ideas about relationality are not new, but one grounded in longstanding traditions and wisdom not limited to the West. In order to engage in forming and becoming a self, a subject relies both on the terms of existing social norms and being recognized by an equal other. When either of these conditions are not satisfied, as is the case when contemporary political discourses refer to Mexican migrants as “aliens” or when trans\* lives are threatened for defying rigid gender normativity, Butler argues that the possibility of self-creation becomes occluded. Therefore, social critique, defined as questioning social norms and discourses with the power to (de)humanize, must remain a crucial facet of any project of self formation, even when it risks losing my own recognizability. My quest to answer the question, “Who am I?” and “What can I become?” must also involve the simultaneous relational pursuit of “Who are you?” and “Who are we?” Said differently, the task of formation centers not only on *self*-making but also *world*-making: the project of social critique and transformation that makes it possible for all to participate as equals.

The second major source of risk in Butler’s account involves a closer look at this process of mutual recognition between equals. To be addressed by an other is to be “compelled and comported outside oneself,”<sup>325</sup> such that you are exposed to the possibility of transformation. Each encounter incites a change to the self whereby “recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was. There is, then, a constitutive loss in the process of recognition, since

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<sup>324</sup> Mohamed Chérif Diarra, “Ubuntu as Humanistic Education: Challenges and Perspectives for Africa?,” *Re-Visioning education in Africa: Ubuntu-inspired education for humanity* (2018): 119-134.

<sup>325</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 28.

the “I” is transformed through the act of recognition.”<sup>326</sup> What Butler contends, still applying ideas from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is the essential role that vulnerability plays in a critical, formative education. When a person opens themselves up to recognition, to truly see and be seen by another, they are admitting to provisionality, that their sense of identity is a work in progress rather than settled and sure. In embracing a socially constituted and changeable self, they accept the unpredictable nature of transformation.

On one hand, this openness readies a student to grow virtuously—to become more empathetic, more critical, more aware; on the other hand, a student also risks pain and mourning for the parts of self that are relinquished in the journey to a new self. Poet and activist Audre Lorde speaks to the latter when she asks, “Am I to be cursed forever with becoming somebody else on the way to myself?”<sup>327</sup> One of the risks that comes with transformative learning is the danger of becoming somebody else or someone that you do not recognize. To return to Ocean Vuong’s haunting novel, one possible interpretation of his narrative is one of caution—warning readers about the price of assimilation and adopting the oppressor’s tongue as your own. As Vuong becomes more adept at bending English words and mastering prose, his transformation also begins to alienate him from communicating his newly accessible depth of thought with his mother and grandmother. All he has are the fragments of broken Vietnamese. It is a loss that can be masked by the accolades of being a decorated poet, which celebrate Vuong’s transformation. The point is that engaging in transformation involves the risk of uncertainty, of not knowing whether the changes that one undergoes will result in progress, but taking on the challenge nonetheless.

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<sup>326</sup> Butler, 27–28.

<sup>327</sup> Audre Lorde, “Change of Season,” in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay, First edition (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 220–21.

This is the risk of a critical, transformative education. Butler concludes *Giving an Account of Oneself* with the acknowledgement that “[e]thics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at the moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.”<sup>328</sup> Engaging in ethical questions about who we are and what we should do risks “becoming undone,” but this vulnerability and exposure is exactly what is shared amongst all participants—what makes us equals, what makes us human.

Butler’s account of education as ethical engagements of risk resonates with Ludlow and Brigley-Thompson’s accounts of the feminist classroom. Ludlow, in her proposal of “contested spaces,” actually advocates for the need to come “undone” with reference to oppression. She draws on a definition of contested space offered by Alice McIntyre and colleagues regarding cross-racial dialogue as a model for the classroom:

If ‘contested’ means both disputed and collaborative, then the contested classroom should include space for an identity politics that honors coalition-building. McIntyre has defined contested space as ‘a hyphenated place that consciously and unconsciously challenge[s] [a person] to rethink the multiple identities [she is] trying to create for [her]self’ (88), a space in which dominant discourses of oppression can be ‘undone’ through collaboration, coalition-building, and political education. She notes that in a contested space, institutional privilege can, and should, be used to ‘carve out spaces—however cramped they might be—where issues of racism can be intentionally and explicitly addressed and critiqued’ (89) and where analyses of privilege are ‘humbl[ing]’ (90).<sup>329</sup>

This passage reinforces the idea that learning spaces should offer robust opportunities for a student to re-think and interrogate their elusive and dynamic constellation of identities, a process that should not be a solitary endeavor. Instead, Ludlow’s envisioned classroom space cultivates the possibility of coalition-building, which like Butler, underlines the crucial need for others in the process of social critique and the consequent “un[doing]” of

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<sup>328</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

<sup>329</sup> Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” 47.

oppression. In a critical and relational space, Brigley-Thompson also suggests that students participate in as much in learning as “unlearning,” the often-protracted process of noticing settled beliefs and re-habituating oneself to a more critical and more just stance in light of new evidence and testimony. These moments of (un)learning cannot be anticipated nor can their influence on students. As such, Brigley-Thompson characterizes these encounters as “precarious moments,” risky because of their unpredictable intrusion and uncertain consequences, but also because they occur in a space of cohabitation, where students must be ready to face a diversity of responses to events that unfold in the classroom.

To summarize, a critical, transformative education inspired by Butler includes three pedagogical dimensions, each characterized by their own set of risks.

1. **Reflective inquiry and identity development.** A Butlerian education must nurture the conditions for students to open themselves up to deep interrogation and investigation, rather than remaining guarded and resistant to exploring their identities. Students undergo a process of inquiry about their own identity and who they want to be. The corresponding risks include uncertainty about the outcome and who they might become, as well as the uncertainty that comes with admitting to provisionality.
2. **Relational responsibility.** A Butlerian education is grounded in the recognition that forming oneself cannot be done in isolation, and thus students must be willing to take on the responsibility for others beyond the self. This includes investing oneself in world- and place-making, acting as a steward for community/place. The corresponding risks involve becoming “undone” in relation to others, making themselves vulnerable to misrecognition and relational harms.
3. **Social critique.** A Butlerian education charges students with mitigating threats to recognition for themselves and others. This necessitates a willingness to develop critical praxis—reflection and action related to the regimes of truth that constrain recognizability. The corresponding risks include imperiling the norms/means by which they are constituted and the risks of unsettling the hegemonic status quo (e.g. retaliation, suppression, sanctions).

Reconstructing ourselves, putting together a life worth living, and building a relational community where this is possible for everyone—these are transformations that require students lean into their shared vulnerability and the necessity of risk-taking. Yet attuning to

the risks involved also demonstrate what's at stake in this process. And when one risks unraveling one's sense of ethnic identity (as Lucia felt, when she first arrived at BC), when one has been burned by opening herself up to your peers (as Anita had in PULSE class), students have good reason to close themselves off from risks of this variety—ones with high stakes for who they are and the world as they see it. Nonetheless, I think there is equal reason for why the risks of becoming undone are necessary—they offer us the possibility of forging the most authentic and whole constellation of identities, of taking part in crafting a more just future, a more equitable world. These caveats offer a portrait of risky, transformative learning as one worthy purpose of education with high stakes.

Now we can return to the topic of safety and safe spaces. If I have convinced you that an education worth wanting is one that is Butlerian in scope, one which requires students to make themselves vulnerable in order to access crucial transformative goods, then we are ready to consider what conditions make it possible for all students to engage in this process. I therefore call for a spatial turn in discourse about safety and educative risk-taking, which reminds us that places do not simply exist but are made. They are actively negotiated and always a result of the “coexisting heterogeneity” at that given moment.<sup>330</sup> The upshot is twofold. First, attuning to place positions students as place-makers, who have the power and imagination to negotiate the contours of their environments, as students' resistant practices in chapter three illustrate. Second, a spatial turn recognizes that students' practices of self-making, place-making, and world-making are influenced by environmental conditions. Thus, it is an injustice for educators or administrators to blame students for not taking on the risks of a transformative education, when the campus climate can be hostile to such risk-taking.

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<sup>330</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 9.

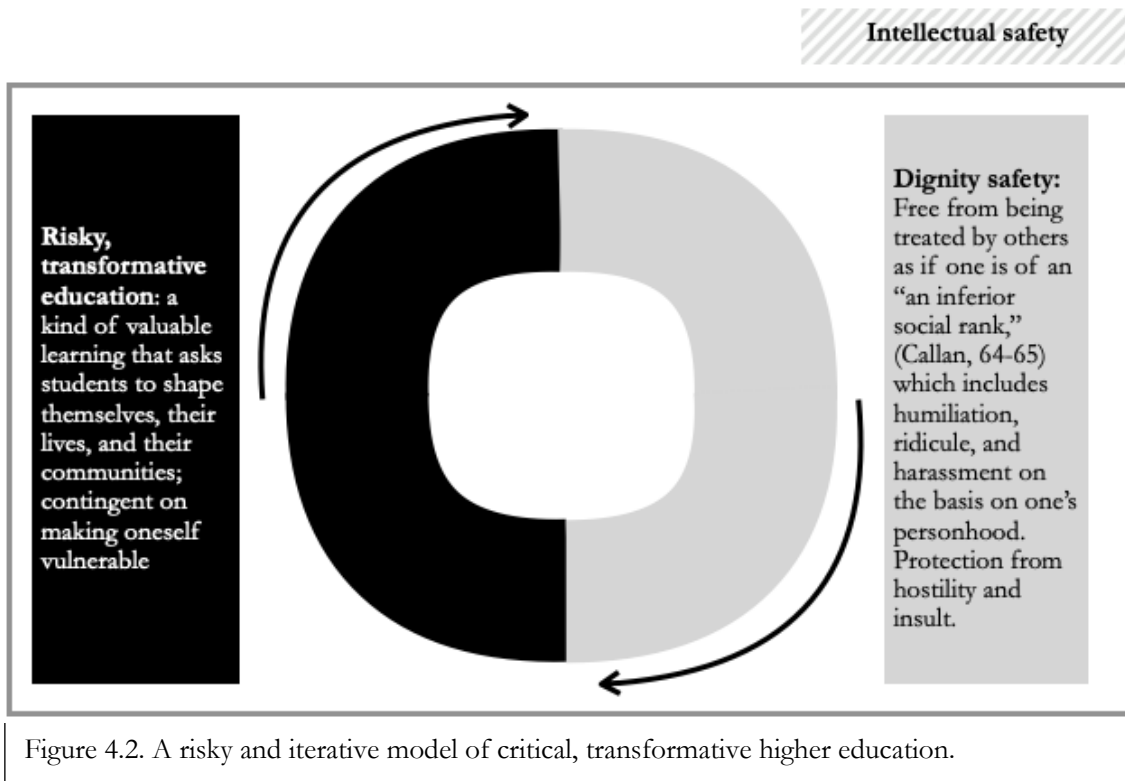
As such, the recognition that campuses are ongoing, dynamic negotiations means that dignity safety, as a threshold condition, is not a settled finish line—a campus, a classroom, or a collective cannot deem themselves “safe” once and for all. Instead, the pursuit of dignity safety, a process that is always already elusive and not absolute, must be understood as a joint construction that is renegotiated at each intersection of time and space, with each new configuration of relations.

These two contributions—a Butler-inspired aim of higher education that prioritizes risky, ethical deliberation and a reprisal of the simultaneity of place—revise the model of education originally associated with Callan. In Figure 4.2, I depict an iterative educational model with a more defined educational end, necessitating vulnerability and risk-taking.<sup>331</sup> Participating in this project still necessitates the threshold of dignity safety, but there is no question that this threshold is ever achieved permanently. Instead, the cyclical framework is meant to portray the extent to which this threshold must actively be reconstituted with each new configuration of time-space. However, it also leaves room for the possibility of change. If a Butlerian education involves taking responsibility for others and crafting better conditions for all to participate in ethical, formative work, then it also implies place-making toward a more just campus environment. One possible result then of transformative higher education is building a campus that is less hostile and more inclusive, altering the dignity

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<sup>331</sup> I am grateful to Chris Higgins for tinkering with early drafts of this figure with me, whose critical feedback helped me to improve my understanding and representation of an iterative threshold.

safety threshold for the next iteration and cohort of campus inhabitants. Intellectual safety still has no room in this model.



A spatial turn also ensures that responsibility and blame for risky learning is shared amongst members of a learning community, because the conditions of a given learning environment is the product of a collective. Therefore, if a place of learning is characterized as hostile and prohibitive to risky projects of formation, administrators and educators are held responsible, as well students, to explore the questions established on the normative geography cheat sheet: Who or what is positioned as “in place” vs. “out of place”? Whom does this benefit? By whose agency? Why and how? How is the space imprinting onto students’ bodies, particularly those whose bodies do not “fit” the existing contours of the space? Unlike Lukianoff and Haidt’s approach, which would cast the blame onto individual students, this spatial orientation stretches the responsibility for risky, transformative learning onto all members of the campus community.

### Nuancing safety as a threshold condition

To reprise the question at hand, I now hope to explore the question, “What spatial conditions make it possible for all students to practice formative risk-taking?” in conversation with Callan’s model of dignity safe spaces. What I hope this version of the question makes clear is a vision of transformative learning that includes *all* students, even though I deem it necessary to prioritize the perspectives of subaltern students in particular.<sup>332</sup> As I hoped to convey from my assessment of Lukianoff and Haidt’s argument, I think that there is a real tendency for aggregated or broad overarching accounts to reinforce a status quo that does not benefit marginalized groups. When the welfare and perspectives of subaltern communities are not explicitly named a concern, their narratives are typically the ones that are obscured while the negative consequences are often theirs to bear. A version of this pattern animated CRT scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw’s initial appeal for intersectionality—between race-based policies that did not explicitly address gender and gender-based concerns that did not overtly attend to race, the lives and livelihoods of Black women were disregarded.<sup>333</sup> Relatedly, I find that safe space accounts that do not explicitly and adequately center on subaltern students and interests often result in detrimental consequences for them.

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<sup>332</sup> I am grateful to a colleague, Holly Hoffman who challenged me at various points to be more precise in the ways that was drawing from the margins in my work, such that I do not essentialize those in the dominant group in return. As Holly put it, “there are often assumptions of comfort that subaltern people make about how the people who identify in the dominant group feel; however, this is not, in my experience of classroom teaching or pastoring, [or] the case universally. Few people feel as confident and competent from “go” as some from the margins assume... people are often so frail and struggling to cope in their lives in community for so many reasons (for example, a current family crisis or history of drug abuse or alcoholism in the family) that while they may appear to someone as being in the dominant and therefore should feel empowerment due to this way of thinking of privilege / in-group-ness, but really they don’t because of these other factors that no one would know. These issues, too, often do not get much attention either in our discourse on creating a sense of belonging in community or a safe space to learn and take risks.”

<sup>333</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” 1989, 31.



That is the approach that characterizes this research project. In striving toward a rehabilitated notion of safety as a threshold condition for risky, transformative learning for all, I prioritize subaltern perspectives in this quest.

So, does Callan's proposal of establishing dignity safety (but not intellectual safety) satisfy the spatial conditions that encourage subaltern student risk-taking? A dignity safe space is an environment whereby members are "to be free of any reasonable anxiety that others will treat one as having an inferior social rank to theirs" and the general confidence that one is not likely to be humiliated.<sup>334</sup> What this description suggests is an operationalization of *negative safety*, as adapted by Jessica Harless from the concepts of negative and positive freedom: *safety from* the use of disparaging, belittling terms (e.g. racial slurs), harassment on the basis of identity, or microaggressions that insinuate inferiority. This is certainly a worthwhile goal to strive toward even as it serves as an impossible standard to achieve. I agree with the critiques which posit that absolute safety is neither possible nor a fulfillable promise to students. Indeed, for some progressive scholars, the unattainability of safety in practice seems to warrant an abandonment of safety discourse altogether.<sup>335</sup> However, I propose that we conceive of negative safety not in absolute terms, but in terms of harm reduction. If the complete absence of microaggressions, for example, is unrealistic, should that hamper efforts to address and intervene in well-documented microaggressions when they occur? Economist and Nobel Laureate Robert Solow paraphrases a similar sentiment this way: "if we were to discover that it is impossible to render an operating-room

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<sup>334</sup> Callan, "Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces," 65.

<sup>335</sup> Referenced here are some examples of educators and scholars who fall into this category. Arao and Clemens, "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces"; Zoë Brigley Thompson, "From Safe Spaces to Precarious Moments: Teaching Sexuality and Violence in the American Higher Education Classroom," *Gender and Education* 32, no. 3 (April 2, 2020): 395–411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1458077>; Ludlow, "From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom"; John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), <https://bravespaces.org/>.

perfectly sterile,” should we “just do surgery in a sewer”?<sup>336</sup> In a similar vein, I vouch for a necessity of *reducing* dignity threats and risks as an educational priority, even if its complete removal is unachievable. Furthermore, the Butlerian model of risky learning necessitates reckoning with negative safety as key facet of social critique. Efforts to “confer or to receive a recognition that fails again and again” is an opening, Butler claims, for questioning the normative horizon that governs who is seen as a full human subject and deemed recognizable.<sup>337</sup> So it should be the case that a student not only critiques and resists the framework of recognition when they are not able to be recognized, but also when they want to recognize another who is not currently seen as a full “I”. Dignity threats fall exactly into this category, resulting from a *collective* failure to protect negative safety. A space where risks of dignity are commonplace reflect a negotiation in which no one questioned the operating norms. As such, the need to strive for negative safety is a spatial condition for a critical, transformative education.

However, Harless is clear in her distinction that negative safety is typically not enough on its own to facilitate and sustain the kind of risky, “danger-full endeavors” prioritized in this model.<sup>338</sup> Instead, she also prioritizes the related concept of “positive safety,” which is akin to the protective padding that American football players wear in anticipation of what could otherwise be dangerous contact with other players during a game. In her account, the padding makes it *safe to* fully engage in the interaction, thus serving as the

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<sup>336</sup> Robert M. Solow, “Science and Ideology in Economics,” in *The Economic Approach to Public Policy*, ed. Ryan Amacher, Robert D. Tollison, and Thomas D. Willett (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 67–79, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501741012-007>.

<sup>337</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 24.

<sup>338</sup> Jessica Harless, “Safe Space in the College Classroom: Contact, Dignity, and a Kind of Publicness,” *Ethics and Education* 13, no. 3 (June 27, 2018): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1490116>.

positive counterpart to safety as a threshold condition. She makes it clear that these two forms of safety are related:

Ultimately some minimal amount of *safety from* is needed to achieve *safety to*. The notions of negative and positive safety are thus related and not dichotomous, more nested within one another than neatly opposed. It seems that a positive *safety to* rests upon some already existing amount of understanding provided by *safety from*.<sup>339</sup>

What I take from this distinction is the recognition that negative safety alone is not satisfactory to make the conditions ripe for risk-taking. Engaging in formative endeavors that involve high stakes in terms of identity development, ethical action, and social responsibility entails more than just ameliorating insults or disparaging speech often laden onto subaltern students; it also necessitates proactive, affirming measures that ready students to wholly participate. A return to the empirical PDR study offers some context by which to contextualize what might serve as negative and positive safety threshold conditions in practice.

### **Place-based safety conditions**

In chapter three, I provided a sketch of the normative geography at BC, informed by the experiences of six subaltern students, and in turn, their place-making practices toward habitability in this hostile environment. This analysis explicated who and what is reinforced as “in place” as compared to “out of place” at BC, namely that their shared place of learning was designed for an archetypal student, one who is White, socioeconomically elite, and cisgender and hetero-normative. The everyday cues embedded in peer attire, the languages spoken, food offered, dormitory options, peer conversations, and classroom norms compounded into an uneven campus geography that did not allow for subaltern bodies to

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<sup>339</sup> Harless, 335.

easily dwell and establish a sense of “home.” This mismatch in the shape of the campus space and the contours of the subaltern body often left painful imprints on my students. Lucia, for example, spoke to the ways in which she needed to contort her tongue to “fit in” to this oppressive environment—speaking predominantly in English, or using an “academic” register for her heritage language in environments where Spanish was deemed appropriate (in her second major, focused on Spanish America). This comportment resulted in an experience of feeling like she “lost that part of [herself]” at BC as a Mexican, while also becoming an outsider to her Mexican community back home, given her ability to “make it out of the hood” and the perception that she’s now “too good for them.” As a result, Lucia became suspended in this disheartening and isolating in-between. Yet, despite these painful spatial impressions, most students were also able to establish the spatial conditions to participate in the project of risky formation. Here, I’ll offer a closer look at Anita’s undergraduate journey and her risky learning endeavors in relation to her patterns of place-making.

***Anita: “Maybe it’s good that I’m not a part of this culture”***

Anita chronicled a long and painful history seeking the experience of “fitting in,” even prior to her enrollment at BC. One major source of alienation was regarding her racial and ethnic identity, as a brown woman whose ethnic origins were “ambiguous” based on existing conventions. Anita recounted, with affective charge, the ways in which she was consistently misrecognized as Hispanic rather than as Asian, which thwarted her ability to find community with either Latinx or Asian groups.<sup>340</sup> She was often bullied by the Asian

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<sup>340</sup> There are very few trans students at BC, so I refer to Anita’s ethnic identity usually by Southeast Asian to prevent her identity from being outed and easily de-anonymized. However, in cases where she is more specific, I refer to her ethnicity as “Malaysian,” as a placeholder.

kids who would call her “fake Asian,” which led to a harmful practice of contorting to Asian stereotypes in the quest for belonging. When I asked what that embodiment meant, Anita shared,

I guess it was just enabling that generalization of Asians and the toxic stereotypes that come with it. Just like: Asians are smart. They know how to do math. They eat dog or whatever. And I enabled that. Now I feel ashamed for enabling that. I feel embarrassed. But yeah. Since I didn't really ‘look the part’ of being Asian, it just really hurt me. And just seeing, whenever you say ‘Asian representation,’ it will just be like East Asian, or just like Japanese, Chinese, Korean. And that really hurt me because I *want* to look like them, and I want to... Oh, my god. Sorry. I just wanted to be represented.

In painful technicolor, Anita was moved to tears describing the damaging cost of internalizing false racial stereotypes in order to “fit in” to this Asian community of peers. Her desire for belonging was powerful enough to reject her own embodied experience as an Asian person in light of her peers’ designated “authentic” portrayal and the socio-politically normative picture of an Asian person: a hard-working, smart “model minority” who engages in “foreign” cultural practices.<sup>341</sup> Furthermore, Anita rightly pointed out the antagonistic intragroup stratification that often mapped onto imperialism and colorism, where “light” East Asian colonizer countries (e.g. China, Japan, Taiwan) claimed superiority, however implicit, over “dark-skinned” developing nations (e.g. Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Bangladesh). This experience of exclusion traumatized Anita for many years, negatively

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<sup>341</sup> The “model minority” myth and intragroup Asian hierarchy are racialized phenomena well-researched in the AsianCrit literature, as is the shame that Anita describes, associated with seemingly self-directed racial assimilation. AsianCrit analyses demonstrate that these patterns are facets of a racialized system in which Asian groups are mobilized as pawns to uphold and reify Whiteness. As a fellow Asian who has struggled with shame (still today), cited here are a few articles that offer useful contextualization regarding the emergence and mobilization of the Asian (i.e. Asian American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, pan-Asian diaspora) racial identity: Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38; Michael Omi and Dana Y Takagi, “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action,” *Representations* 55 (1996): 155–62; Omi and Takagi; Mari Matsuda, “We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?,” in *Where Is Your Body? And Other Essays on Race, Gender, and the Law* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 149–60; OiYan Poon et al., “A Critical Review of the Model Minority Myth in Selected Literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 86, no. 2 (June 2016): 469–502, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315612205>.

impacting her sense of self, confidence, and relationships with others for many years. For example, in regard to self-esteem, Anita described her preoccupation with being dark skinned, insofar as she avoided wearing shorts and exposure to the sun for risk of not looking “fair or light.” She also expressed a deep “mistrust” of others, given the rejection she faced from both Asian and Latinx groups, which made her feel like she had “no where to fit in.” Anita understandably opted to avoid other East Asians as a result of her prior experiences. Furthermore, Anita also came out as trans\* in high school and began her gender transition prior to the start of her undergraduate studies. Facing ostracism for her gender identity and how she performed gender, in conjunction with these early experiences with racial/ethnic marginalization served as the context preceding Anita’s enrollment to Boston College, which she described as “a very complicated relationship with [her] identity.” This context explained some of Anita’s initial hesitance to participate in BC ethnic or cultural student organizations—her relational history with peers did little to foster trust in these spaces as affirming or welcoming environments.

However, despite her reservations, Anita did end up joining one of the Southeast Asian cultural clubs, which gave her an opportunity to “reclaim” her ethnic identity, through practicing cultural traditions (such as learning and performing traditional dance, building a community with students who shared the same ethnic identity, and developing the cultural dimensions of her relationship with her mother. The scope of ethnic kinship that Anita developed was not limited only to the campus environment, but also with the larger Malaysian community as a whole.<sup>342</sup> This more expansive connection resulted from Anita’s participation in a Boston-wide Malaysian culture show, which drew participation from

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<sup>342</sup> Again, Anita’s ethnic identity is masked with this placeholder, to preserve anonymity.

Malaysian clubs at multiple schools and universities in the area. She spent an entire day at this event, mingling in the presence of the largest gathering of Malaysians that she had ever seen “outside of Malaysia,” what she teasingly referred to as a “Malayasian convention!” This encounter imprinted her with positive emotions and associations—excitement, amazement, and fun—which left her with an encouraging impression of her Malaysian identity. In the community focus group, she described this involvement with the cultural club as “essential” for her growth as “a student and a person,” being able to regain this dimension of her identity that she previously associated only with pain and peer taunting.

One of the ways that this healing showed up was in Anita’s recent shift in self-perception:

But I just feel like, I've been reclaiming that identity. And I feel like, when I look at my skin now, like, in the summer, I was able to wear shorts, and they got super tan. And it was like, I was just happy about it. Because it was like, I did it. I didn't have to... I didn't feel the need to, I don't know, look fair or look light. I feel like sometimes it bothers me, but sometimes it's like, I really appreciate it.

Though this shift could seem minor—the newfound willingness to expose skin to sunlight—Anita’s ability to “appreciate” her dark, tanned skin was a practice of resistance and resilience, rejecting what her cruel high school peers dictated as “right,” “appropriate,” or “authentic” to the Asian identity. This testimony was a testament to Anita’s process of reworking her own identity and building her self-confidence such that she could be happy, literally, in her own skin. This was one example of how Anita’s participation in her cultural club liberated her from some of the distorted formative schemas foisted upon her, giving her

the foundation by which to reckon with who she wants to be and take the risk of enacting that vision for herself. Anita took up *social critique* as a lens to reframe and contextualize her ostracism from the Asian community as misrecognition and took on the risks of *reflective inquiry* into her own troubled relationship with her racial and ethnic identity with others on a similar journey. As such, Anita's engagement could be seen as an example of a Butlerian education in practice, buoyed by the support of this cultural club. This positive experience showed up in Anita's drawing, as a flag she proudly showcases in her self-portrait (as opposed to the trans\* flag, which is hidden behind her back) in Figure 4.3, and on her walk, where the practice room and storage space for her cultural club (fig. 4.4) served as one of only two places she identified as significant to visit.

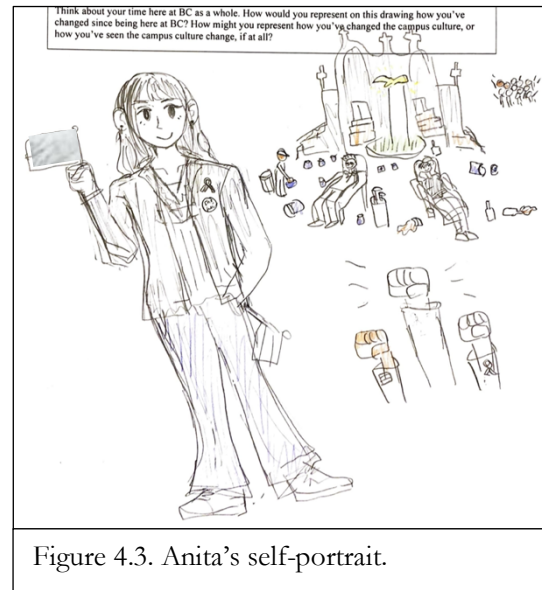


Figure 4.3. Anita's self-portrait.



Figure 4.4. A photo taken by Anita of traditional dance props in the Malaysian club practice room.

The other place in which Anita chose to dwell for over 31 minutes (little over half) during our walk was at the BAIC, which she described as a “safe space” to recover from being routinely “outnumbered” as a student of Color on campus. As such, it served as a



refuge from “White spaces” on campus, like her PULSE classroom, where she was regularly misunderstood, and therefore a place where she could be reminded that “there’s other people who are like me and who go through the same things as me.” In other words, it was a reminder that she was *not* out of place, despite being made to feel so elsewhere as a minoritized student on campus—in her classroom, her dorm room, and in the BC social scene.

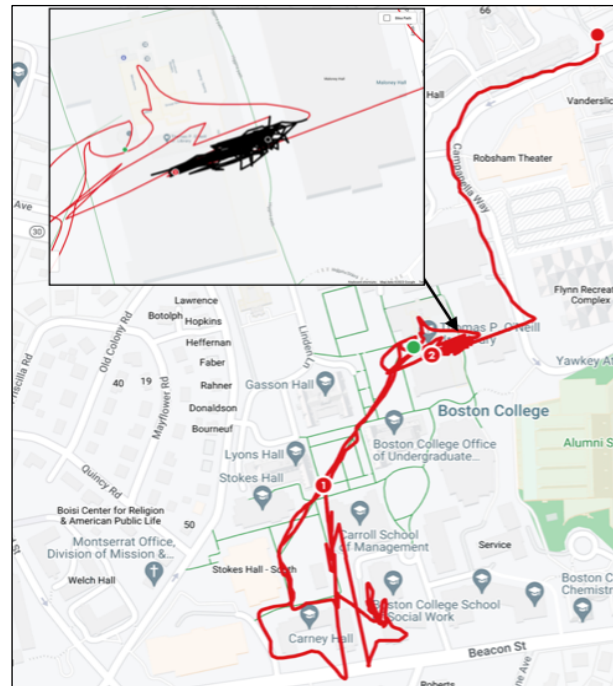


Figure 4.5. A GPS-generated map of Anita's walking interview (background), with close up image to indicate where she took a prolonged pause.

In Anita's description of the BAIC, she made it clear that it was not simply the physical location itself that made her feel this way, but also the people who inhabited it and hallmark activities like the Options Through Education (OTE) transitional program that made the space “safe.” One of the first things that Anita pointed out at the BAIC was the wall where they showcased photos of their most recent OTE cohort. When we approached, Anita bashfully divulged that last year, her photo was on this wall, and “it was kind of embarrassing, because the picture's bad.” However, she noted that though she might have felt self-conscious, “for the BAIC, it [was] more like a pride sort of thing, showing off their scholars.” Therefore, the BAIC was a place in which Anita was not only supported and part of a community, she was also recognized for her leadership qualities and promise as a burgeoning scholar. She was seen and showcased as a source of pride in the BAIC. These factors coalesced into Anita's evaluation of the BAIC as a kind of home, where she was able

to retreat from the microaggressions and the “out of placed-ness” she felt elsewhere on campus, experiencing the luxury of being able to linger and dwell, to the point that she even periodically took naps on the couches. However, the BAIC was not only a retreat, but also served as a space of affirmation—a place in which she was able to “express [herself] more than if [she was] in other spaces” and not feel the pressure to “hold back,” especially on topics regarding racism on campus. The BAIC, in this sense, served also as a skin-extending space for Anita, where she was given rein to unfurl the campus-repressed facets of herself freely.

A corollary for what the BAIC made possible in terms of Anita’s risky learning could be grasped in what she was willing to share and construct about herself and the kind of person that she wanted to be in this 31-minute window, lingering at the doors of the center. In the vicinity of this multifaceted safe space, Anita reflected on the approach to community work that aligned with her values, as opposed to what associates with PULSE—an ethos that was intentional about redistributing resources like volunteers’ labor and energy proportionately to the need of the organization and the members of the community they were serving. Her observations and critiques about “White space” at BC coalesced into a reckoning with who she wanted to be in response to her fellow BC peers. This could be seen as another example of Butlerian ethics, in which Anita drew on social critique as an essential facet of grappling with her responsibility to others and toward the making of a more just world. Though this upcoming sentiment came from her first interview rather than the walk, it contextualized some of Anita’s evolving insights about self-formation that she alluded to during this conversation:

maybe it's good that I'm not a part of this culture. Because it seems, from what I've seen, it seems very, I guess, self-destructive? With, I guess, alcoholism and all that stuff. I appreciate that I'm not partaking in it. I feel like, from what I've seen, white culture at BC is pretty much fitting in—not finding your people but fitting into what

everyone else is doing. Because I remember, a lot of people, or a lot of white students talk about, "FOMO," fear of missing out. But I never really resonated with that, because why would I fear missing out on something that I wouldn't enjoy, necessarily? So I guess at BC, even though it's really hard to go through it, day to day, it made me realize that maybe I'm more real. I have a little more realness.

Here, Anita embodied confidence in *not* fitting in at BC, because she realized the splintering consequences of contorting your body and experience to fit the contours of something not designed for you—whether that was the East Asian stereotype or the elite, gender-normative, White BC mold. Her critique of white space at BC certainly revealed an “always already existing normative geography,”<sup>343</sup> but it also sparked growing confidence in shaping her “real” self, such that it defied those exclusive and alienating campus norms. As compared to the intense desire to “fit in” and “fulfill the norms that society placed on [her]” as a younger person—whether that was to conform to Asian stereotypes, to be perceived as straight, as male—Anita described a shift in how she now understood her outsider identity. Whereas “never fitting in” used to be viewed negatively, now, Anita viewed this mismatch to be “an opportunity for self-exploration, liberation, and finding new meaning—I’m never going to fit in, so I’m allowed to do whatever the hell I want!” She showcased her resistance to the unidirectional power of place. The normative geography of BC still painfully imprinted unto Anita’s body and constrained her experience, and thus it was still “really hard to go through it, day to day.” Importantly though, she also took up her negotiating power to shape herself expansively and imaginatively and pressured BC into contorting to *her* body, as indexed by cues like a recent option on the BC portal to request one’s “preferred name.” As such, Anita’s projects of formation involved both self-making and BC place-making.

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<sup>343</sup> Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place*, 10.

*Applications for safety conditions*

One possible implication from this portrait of Anita's place-making journey is a clearer, more nuanced understanding of what negative and positive safety thresholds might be. On one hand, negative safety has been defined, up until this point, as the consistent undertaking of reducing risks to dignity. Another way to formulate this threshold condition, though, is to use spatial terms: negative safety is the effort taken by members of a space to reduce the extent certain communities/students are systemically made to feel out of place. In Anita's case, this would necessitate interventions to mitigate the spatial facets that continue to position her as an outsider, including intervening into policies that operate on an assumption of the gender binary and working toward diversifying the faculty, staff, and student body. It is to adequately wrestle with the implicit cues that signal to majoritarian students that "BC is for *you*" and not for Anita, such that there is a reduction in microaggressions, stereotype threat, and routine misrecognition. Without due attention to negative safety threats, subaltern students like Anita will continue to need refuges on campus where they can recover from rampant exposure to these harms. The BAIC served as an important dwelling space for Anita to rest, recover, and heal from an otherwise alienating environment. Other students' retreat spaces (covered in chapter three) included idyllic, shaded spots on the outskirts of campus or a special bench with sensorial deprivation. Without addressing the systemic forms of out-of-placedness, subaltern students like Patrick might not be willing to risk leaving their refuges, allowing the exclusionary campus geography to stymie their opportunities for critical, transformative education.

On the other hand, positive safety is the extent to which a student is *affirmed* as a valued member of this shared space, such that they can extend themselves more wholly than before. It is the felt sense that one belongs. The Malaysian cultural club served Anita in this

capacity because her participation gave her a chance to practice being Asian that did not give in to stereotypical caricatures and to reclaim a part of herself that was otherwise forced into hiding. Interestingly, the BAIC also served in this positive capacity as well, affirming her potential as a leader and a scholar who has overcome financial hardship and that her differences are something to be celebrated, rather than only cause for misrecognition. Both spaces served to fulfill the experience of a “body-at-home” or inhabitance, where a student has the luxury of security, able to extend one’s skin and dwell/linger. Therefore, positive safety is establishing a place that is livable for all students, recognizing that it is a universal need but one that is not proportionally accessible. Habitable space for subaltern bodies is limited in a hostile geography, and thus must be prioritized.

When a student can access both negative and positive safety in a given time-space (knowing still that it needs to be continuously renegotiated), it can serve as a foundation by which they feel safe enough to take on the risks of Butlerian transformation. One example comes in the form of Anita taking on the risk of reworking and integrating her racial and ethnic identity into her configuration of self. Being a member of an expansive and welcoming Malaysian culture club nurtured Anita’s willingness to reject the stereotype-informed images of “Asian” foisted upon her and plunge into the harrowing task of reworking a new self-understanding. Her fellow Malaysian peers provided the relational security and trust that aided in Anita’s process of becoming, despite the fear and trauma laced up in her racial identity development up until that point. Other student examples from the previous chapter also come to mind, including Lucia’s participation in MAS, which equipped her with the confidence by which to critique the white-washed curriculum in her class and engage in resistant place-making; or Tyler’s willingness to incite uncomfortable conversations with her majoritarian peers, sustained by her ability to discuss “Montserrat

problems” (or class critiques) with her low-income community of peers. Another comes from Nicolazzo’s study, where one of the trans\* collegians, Reagan, leaned on their friend, Ginnie, as a foundation by which to participate in commonly hostile spaces. If their ally friend was present, there was an established form of safety that made it possible for Reagan to navigate spaces prone to rampant misgendering. What these examples illustrate is the diversity of avenues toward establishing positive safety. Indeed, they are as wide in scope as the definition of space or place itself. Positive safety might be achieved through a trusted relationship, membership in a collective, a more-than-human or non-human connection (with benches, trees, mazes, room), or a physical location at a particular time (e.g. nighttime vs. daytime at the labyrinth is a completely different space for Mateo). This richness echoes Tuan’s claim that “place exists at different scales. At one extreme, a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth.”<sup>344</sup>

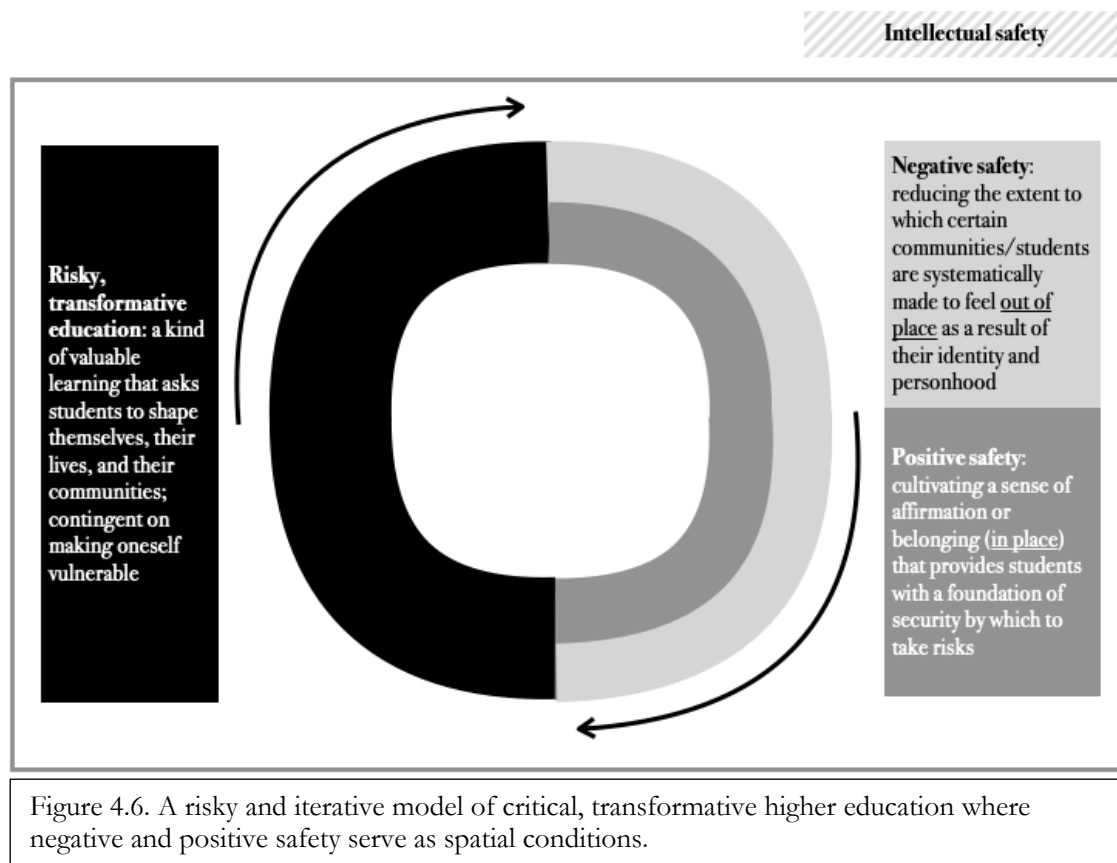
These examples demonstrate the expansive and imaginative ways that both negative and positive safety counterparts can be provisionally achieved, while also inviting nuance about the “nested” nature of safety that Jessica Harless originally proposed.<sup>345</sup> There are some spaces/procedures/policies whose primary purpose might lean toward either negative or positive safety. For example, spaces of retreat or withdrawal including a rest under Andromeda’s favorite tree primarily seek to be dignity threat-free; while other spaces are organized chiefly for affirmative purposes, such as a cultural dance show, which aim to cultivate belonging. However, most places, even those just listed, serve in both negative and positive directions, like the BAIC for Anita. Going to the BAIC served as a kind of refuge for Anita *from* racist remarks and microaggressions (i.e. negative safety, addressing out-of-

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<sup>344</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 149.

<sup>345</sup> Harless, “Safe Space in the College Classroom,” 335.

placedness) yet her involvement in BAIC programs also functioned as an affirmation she does belong at this institution (i.e. positive safety, fostering in-placedness). Some measure of safety from can enable safety to, which means that positive and negative safety can be nested within a space, with it serving both purposes, or a space can prioritize one or the other more. However, the important factor is not the exact proportions but simply that both forms are necessary and important. Taken together, a revised model is depicted in Figure 4.6 to account for these place-based interventions. In order for students to engage in educative risks, all members of a campus community need to actively negotiate the spatial conditions



of negative and positive safety, reducing out-of-placedness and fostering in-placedness.

One of the benefits of this revised model is that it draws on a notion of positive safety that is more universally applicable. The struggle with “imposter syndrome” is not one that is influenced by identity markers alone, even if marginalized groups are shown to face the

phenomenon more frequently across time.<sup>346</sup> Whether because of illness, familial tensions, self-esteem, generational trauma, or peer ostracism, students from all backgrounds have reasons why achieving belonging and establishing the security by which to plunge into risky, formative endeavors is elusive. Therefore, even if some privileged students are not regularly subjected to same forms of spatial and ideological conditioning that characterizes negative safety, this model recognizes that everyone, not only subaltern students, faces barriers to belonging. As such, positive safety is a condition that must be negotiated for all students in the quest toward risky, transformative learning. However, there is an important clarification that warrants explicit mention. This interpretation is not to say that so long as a campus has cultural clubs, a multicultural center, and places for refuge that positive safety is established. Those can be affirming places, but as Doreen Massey says, “It won’t be the same ‘here’ when it is no longer now.”<sup>347</sup> University inhabitants cannot take for granted that a culture club, for example, will be inviting, for it must constantly be renegotiated with each new configuration of relations and histories that knot together at a given time. Thus, the work of striving toward positive and negative safety is an enduring, perennial pursuit of collective negotiation.

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<sup>346</sup> There is extensive literature on this phenomenon, but here are three articles that speak specifically to “imposter syndrome” experienced by underrepresented groups in higher education. Anna Parkman, “The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact,” *The Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 16, no. 1 (2016): 51–60; Bridgette J. Peteet, LaTrice Montgomery, and Jerren C. Weekes, “Predictors of Imposter Phenomenon among Talented Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Students,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 84, no. 2 (2015): 175, <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.2.0175>; Elizabeth Ramsey and Deana Brown, “Feeling like a Fraud: Helping Students Renegotiate Their Academic Identities,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 86–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2017.1364080>.

<sup>347</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 139.



### Redistributing labor costs

If negative and positive safety together serve as a threshold condition for educative risk-taking, and these spatial conditions are collectively and iteratively negotiated by co-inhabitants, then I can assume that this process of campus place-making necessitates labor. And when it comes to the labor of diversity and inclusion, there is ample evidence to suggest that this labor is disproportionately distributed.<sup>348</sup> FACES, the antiracist student collective at BC, addresses this inequity directly in their statement responding to the Perspectives incident: “No student should ever feel unwelcome or unsafe on their own college campus. We have regularly seen that, due to the constant inaction on the administrative level, the burden of taking on this type of work unfortunately falls upon the backs of its students of color.”<sup>349</sup> What this organizing student body claims in their appraisal is that too often, the effort required to actualize negative and positive safety in practice defaults to the very communities and students who are most affected. I think that this problematic tendency is worth anticipating and incorporating into this model of risky, transformative higher education. I hope to do so from the standpoint of distributing labor costs.

I take philosopher Robbie McClintock’s thesis seriously when he argues that each person has a limited and precious number of resources that they must allocate amid infinite choices. He calls this process “formative justice,” adjudicating between how to devote one’s time, capacity, attention, and material resources such that the combination leads to a purposeful life.<sup>350</sup> His characterization seems particularly apt to a college student who, under

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<sup>348</sup> Socorro Morales, “Locating the ‘White’ in Critical Whiteness Studies: Considerations for White Scholars Seeking to Dismantle Whiteness within Educational Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 35, no. 7 (August 9, 2022): 703–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2061731>.

<sup>349</sup> FACES Council, “FACES Council Statement on Perspectives Incident,” Instagram, October 27, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CkPW3MCto40/?hl=en&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CkPW3MCto40/?hl=en&img_index=1).

<sup>350</sup> Robbie McClintock, “Formative Justice: The Regulative Principle of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 118 (2016): 1–38.

a framework of education as the project of self-making and world-making, is pressed with these questions regularly. However, subaltern students in particular are often forced to allot precious labor and energy toward efforts of combatting alienation and striving towards belonging, for they serve as the threshold by which to access the rich educational goods. Consider the emotional exhaustion that a subaltern student faces in navigating a hostile campus, to relentlessly rebound from addressing microaggressions, to battle stereotype threat, or to find belonging. This exhaustive work is captured by research on “racial battle fatigue,” which not only recognizes the real physical and emotional exertion but the negative consequences of this extended stress on the bodies and minds of the minoritized over time.<sup>351</sup> This is yet again another reminder of how Lukianoff and Haidt’s account on building antifragility fall short, for regular encounters with these stressors do not lead to growth. Instead, they are miseducative in that they detract from a student’s ability to fully participate in their own learning.

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<sup>351</sup> Chaunda Allen et al., eds., *Racial Battle Fatigue in Higher Education: Exposing the Myth of Post-Racial America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); Jeremy Franklin, “Racial Microaggressions, Racial Battle Fatigue, and Racism-Related Stress in Higher Education,” *Journal of Student Affairs at New York University* 12, no. 44 (2016): 44–55; William A Smith, Man Hung, and Jeremy D Franklin, “Racial Battle Fatigue and the MisEducation of Black Men: Racial Microaggressions, Societal Problems, and Environmental Stress,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 80, no. 1 (2011): 63–82.

As such, subaltern students might resemble “Student A” on the next iteration of the risky learning model (Figure 4.7), who is pushed into using much of their energy simply trying to satisfy the conditions for transformative and educative risk-taking. That leaves limited labor for the actual formative and ethical projects. In comparison, there might be other students, like Student B, who might not need to devote labor toward mitigating threats of dignity, but still needs to allot some of their energy toward overcoming barriers to belonging, like social anxiety or low self-esteem; or student C, whose safety thresholds are generally satisfied and can wholly participate in transformative education.

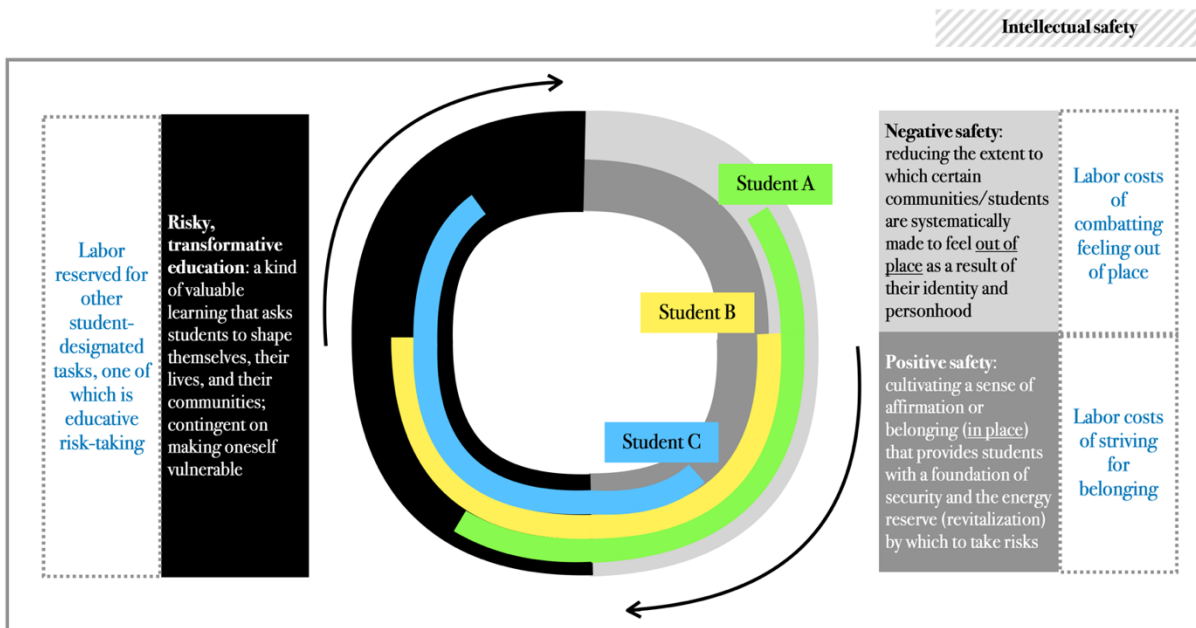


Figure 4.7. A labor-informed application of a risky and iterative model of critical, transformative higher education where negative and positive safety serve as spatial conditions that must be collectively negotiated and responsibility correspondingly distributed

These hypothetical students represent how the labor of placemaking toward positive and negative safety is unevenly distributed, leaving the students who are already most negatively affected by the normative campus geography with less energy to devote to the educational goods worth having: critical, formative endeavors. In the afterword to Nicolazzo’s book, Stephen John Quaye states this takeaway most clearly,

Seeing resilience as something one practices, Nicolazzo encourages readers to see how trans\* collegians' resilience might shift depending on their situational context. Framing resilience in this way also places the onus squarely on postsecondary educators for **creating contexts that enable trans\* students to live as their full selves so they need not spend so much energy responding to contexts that challenge their very existence.**<sup>352</sup>

Echoing Nicolazzo's findings, I too find ample reason to argue why subaltern students' ability to engage in learning is constrained by a campus geography that too often depletes their energy to simply navigate. As such, there is a pressing call to reckon with place-making toward labor distribution, such that all students can participate in the educative task at hand. This disparity in subaltern student access to risky, transformative higher education should be equally as pressing a DEI initiative as ensuring access, retention, and graduation. Therefore, I reassert the need for shared responsibility in labor, calling upon postsecondary educators and those who have the privilege to devote their energy largely to formative projects, to take up a greater share of place-making toward negative and positive safety conditions. I'll end with this poem by Andrea Ranae, a Black artist and leadership coach who poses the impetus in poetic terms:

A few questions I've been asking myself recently...  
 What rest would become available to me if my worth were no longer up for debate?  
 What love?  
 What time?  
 What energy?  
 What creativity?  
 Our culture(s) may enjoy negotiating and dictating my worth – I do not have to participate.  
 My worth is not a question. It's a fact.  
 My worthiness is not a question. It's a fact.<sup>353</sup>

Inspired by Ranae, I ask: what *transformation*, what *learning*, what *risks* would become available if subaltern students' worth and belonging were no longer up for debate?

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<sup>352</sup> Nicolazzo, 167. Emphasis mine.

<sup>353</sup> Andrea Ranae, "What Rest Would Become Available to Me If My Worth Were No Longer up for Debate?," Instagram, March 16, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp3KydYusn4/>.

## INTERLUDE FIVE

### **“Haunted Places are the Only Ones People can Live In”**

I try and make the case in this dissertation that engaging in shared movement, like walking or wandering, provides invaluable opportunities to explore spatiality and place-making. Many scholars theorize walking as a practice of everyday life, which means that the humble pedestrian movement can reveal rich insights about a given place, its history, and its inhabitants.<sup>354</sup> As Tim Ingold describes it, “pedestrian movements thread a tangled mesh of personalised trails through the landscape itself. Through walking... landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never ending.”<sup>355</sup> The walks I’ve taken with students have changed how I see and experience the BC campus., my own place of learning. They’ve textured the landscape with their stories and testimonies of significance. When I walk the same paths, the memory of our conversations saturates the air. I walk with their words as companions. As such, I wanted to find some way to express the live place-making that I have witnessed, that play out regularly in my own engagements with BC. This is one offering, inspired by de Certeau’s description of place as “haunted;” not in the vein of spook and fright, but in the invoking of spirits and personal memories.

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<sup>354</sup> A sample of these diverse thinkers include British anthropologist Tim Ingold, indigenous educator and learning scientist Ananda Marin, and Jesuit priest and French interdisciplinary writer Michel de Certeau—each of whom show up more prominently in the body of the dissertation.

<sup>355</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

*“Haunted places are the only ones people can live in”*<sup>356</sup>

Dribbling, the bounces echo  
each thump  
thump  
thump  
the sound of a burgeoning brotherhood.  
Track the score.  
Evaluate an education.

In the thundering roar  
can you still trace the r u n w a y illuminated only for you?  
When you are sitting still  
Throwing gratitude at the wind,  
Can you hear it responding,  
“No problem”?

The darkness envelops and obscures  
as thoughts meander and threaten to spill over.  
The feet crave direction  
around the crooks of paved stone  
in masculine silence.

Insulated from sound  
except the vibrations seeping under the door  
a private concert reverberating through the wall.  
A little squirrel finds a pocket of warmth  
there  
what is a piano but a glorified desk?

Linger  
thicken the lines  
entangle a knot  
where you feel safe enough to sleep.  
At home enough to have your school photo  
endearingly hung on the wall  
how(ever) embarrassing.

“Just feed them,” she says, “like Jesus”  
with food that nourishes  
more than the body.  
Sustenance for the tongue  
and who you were before  
here

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<sup>356</sup> The full passage reads, “Memories tie us to that place... it’s personal, not interesting to anyone else, but after all that’s what gives a neighborhood its character.” There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.” Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion: Applications and Future Directions

*“I really hope that BC realizes that justice, accountability, and authenticity is this generation's values...I'm hoping that maybe they'll change to be more inclusive, to have more accountability, to have more social justice. And instead of advertising it for a specific demographic, like advertising it as a good place for White, rich students, more as an institution where everyone is welcome here, and everyone has a place, and there's no specific demographic that they cater to.”*

*-Anita, Interview 1*

Across three chapters, I defended the need to *rehabilitate* safe spaces in higher education, rather than abandon the enterprise because of free speech infringement, the threat of coddling and nurturing “snowflakes,” or the unattainability of absolute safety. Instead, walking with my former students and interlocutors from across the disciplines culminated in this dissertation that insists on the dire need to intervene into power-laden, often invisible campus geographies for and with subaltern students. Without reckoning with how structures of space reinforce and transmit the ideological status quo, certain student communities will continue to be systematically positioned as out of place and prohibited from the felt sense of in-placedness that allows for equal access to a critical, transformative education. As Anita shares in the opening quote, PWIs like BC need to do better in crafting environments where “everyone has a place.” Thus, this final chapter closes out the dissertation by offering working recommendations that educators, administrators, and students can apply to their own places of learning and articulating possible openings for future lines of inquiry.

In chapter two, I reframed safe space controversies not as isolated campus flashpoints but as scenes of ongoing spatial struggle. Demands for “safe space” must be evaluated in the context of the broader campus environment and the ongoing contestations of space that occur on a daily basis. I called this a necessary “spatial turn” in the debate, offering a spatial intervention in three parts. First, I drew from Tim Ingold and Doreen

Massey's insights to posit that spaces are not settled containers but animate entanglements amongst inhabitants, characterized by active negotiation amongst place-makers. Second, I argued that without attuning to how places are made, the power-laden dimensions of geography are obscured. Contributions by Tim Cresswell, Louis Althusser, and Henri Lefebvre aided me in revealing the relationship between space and ideology, which interact and compound over time to shape an ever-present normative geography. Third, I applied Harper Keenan and Sara Ahmed's queer and trans\* theory to propose that the uneven terrain of a place, such as a college campus, is primarily experienced through the body. A normative geography is embedded with ideological cues as to whose bodies and ways of being "fit" the contours of the space and which bear the imprint of transgressing these spatial norms. This chapter resulted in a "cheat sheet" (table 2.2, reproduced below) to be used in appraising the normative geography of college campuses or other places of learning. By reframing a university campus as a normative, ideologically-laden geography, safe space controversies, like the targeted vandalism and taunting on the multicultural residential hall at BC, can be read as ongoing spatial struggles for in-placedness by subaltern place-makers.



Table 2.2. Making visible the normative campus geography and its impact [Reproduced]	
*Who or what is positioned as “in place” vs. “out of place” in [target space/place]?	
“In place”	“Out of place”
Normal	Transgressive
Good	Bad
Right	Wrong
Proper	Improper
Acceptable	Rejected
Commonsense	Divergent
Doxa	Rebellion
Dominant	Marginal
Hegemonic	Subordinated
Scripted	Improvised/Off-script
*Who benefits from this spatial configuration? Why and how is this positioning established or contested?	
*How is the space imprinting onto students’ bodies, particularly those subaltern students’ whose bodies do not “fit” the space?	
*How are subaltern students responding to a space that is not designed for their bodily inhabitation? How are subaltern students attempting to shift the habitability of their campus environment?	
What interventions must be taken in order to distribute the opportunity for bodily extension and inhabitation between students?	

In chapter three, I built upon the precedent of concretization within a campus context, offering a map of the normative campus geography at BC through the experiences of six subaltern students, whose bodies often endured the painful impressions of a space not designed for them. The first half of the chapter presented subaltern students’ interpretations of spatial cues at BC and what they learned about who and what were deemed “normal” as opposed to “deviant” as a result. This appraisal of the normative campus geography produced four identity-based characterizations: BC as a “White space” (race/ethnic origin) with “so much wealth” (socioeconomic class), no room for gender ambiguity (gender), and queer issues “take up just a little space” (sexual orientation). Despite the ways in which structures of space and place implicitly reinforced their alienation on campus, students still enacted resistant, place-making strategies to make their hostile environment more livable. Thus, the second half of the chapter amplified three of students’ quotidian resistance tactics,

which included seeking out affirming, skin-extending spaces for more holistic expression; withdrawing into largely private spaces to reconnect with self; and strategic refusal and disengagement with campus norms. However, these efforts to negotiate habitability were not always successful. In Patrick's case, his reliance on default institutional channels for building a sense of "home" or affirming, relational spaces largely failed, which served as a deterrent to future investment in place-making efforts. Taken together, students' narratives demonstrated the cost of systemic "out-of-placedness" on subaltern students' experience and the positive role that their place-making practices toward "in-placedness" generated.

Thus, in chapter four, I proposed a model for higher education that integrated these place-based insights with the existing, predominantly disparaging discourse about safety in education. I first debunked several problematic misconceptions about student fragility and risk-taking embedded within the prominent anti-safe space stance taken by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. Having made clear the negative consequences of allowing Lukianoff and Haidt's perspective to have the definitive final word on safe space, I developed a model of higher education inspired by Judith Butler's ethical framework for education, which is grounded in deep reflective interrogation of self, inalienable relational responsibility, and social critique and critical praxis. This educational project of self-, place-, and world-making cannot take place without vulnerability. However, given the stakes of Butlerian education, I joined Z Nicolazzo and Eamonn Callan in stipulating that campus leaders and educators cannot expect students to partake in risky projects of (trans)formation without establishing the conditions by which this activity is possible. As such, I rehabilitated safety as a threshold condition for a Butlerian transformative education, with two place-based dimensions: negative safety, as the process of mitigating systemic out-of-placedness and positive safety, as the process of fostering in-placedness. Though this educational framework serves all

students, it recognizes the labor that is disproportionately placed on subaltern students to access safety conditions and calls for collective responsibility in mitigating those problems and distributing the associated work involved.

In this concluding chapter, I return to Kris Gutierrez and Shirin Vossoughi's description of design as a remediating activity, offered as inspiration for this project in the introduction:

The object of university and community/school/teachers' work is to engage in joint activity to redesign the learning ecology so that ongoing opportunities for all participants to engage in robust learning practices are the norm; where interrogating historical, structural, institutional, and sociocultural contradictions is viewed as generative and as an expansive form of learning.<sup>357</sup>

My joint activity with subaltern students, as myself a subaltern graduate student, was intended to serve as fodder for remediating the learning ecology that we share—Boston College—and the possibility of informing the rehabilitation of other PWIs. This goal, however, was not only the focus of the empirical dimensions of the dissertation, constrained to a small sample size of six, risking critiques of limited generalizability and transferability. The goal of intervening into hostile campus cultures and “engag[ing] in joint activity to design the learning ecology” was the impetus for this entire project, welcoming voices from critical, feminist geography; educational social science; phenomenology; critical theory; and subaltern student communities at BC, Yale, Middlebury, and Brown to participate in the iterative process of place-making toward more just and imaginative educational contexts. I argue that given the diversity in interdisciplinary source material, cross-cutting methodologies, and range in narrative inclusion, this dissertation contributes well-grounded

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<sup>357</sup> Kris D. Gutiérrez and Shirin Vossoughi, “Lifting Off the Ground to Return Anew: Mediated Praxis, Transformative Learning, and Social Design Experiments,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 1–2 (January 2010): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347877>.

insights that are widely applicable and actionable. I am not so bold as to claim that the particular strategies used by students or the specific manifestation of spatial cues will be relevant to all; however, the broader inferences from this very specialized instantiation of place-based negotiation holds possibilities for other places of learning. Thus, this chapter closes the dissertation with five working design-based guidelines that should be considered in joint production of PWI places, like BC, for critical, transformative education, followed by a discussion of avenues for future research.

### **Adaptable Design-Based Guidelines for Transformative Higher Education**

Each of the suggestions below are oriented toward a target audience of campus administrators or educators. I see myself as falling within this purview as well, as I continue my journey at BC or in other learning spaces. This is the audience that is indexed in references to “they, them, and theirs” pronouns. Furthermore, these are intentionally broad suggestions, which are designed to be localized to your specific campus/learning environment.

#### **1) Make space to deliberate on a worthy ideal to animate higher education that exceeds safety.**

Though this dissertation largely seeks to rehabilitate “safe spaces” in higher education, it is important to be explicit that as important as positive or negative safety is, it cannot be the end of higher education. Place-based safety conditions serve the important role of readying and sustaining students to partake in a critical, transformative education that prioritizes reflective identity exploration, critical praxis, and deepening relations. That means that establishing belonging and mitigating harms serve as a *means* to a greater educational

end, even as noble as these means may sound and even as important as those goals are. Certainly, there are contexts in which the purpose is crafting a sense of unencumbered intimacy that characterizes a body at home, such as a residential dwelling or one's closest social circle. But in a specialized place of learning, like a college or university, the purpose of education must transcend affirmation and the mitigation of harms and arc towards a telos that can inspire a diverse constituency and mobilize a range of corresponding practices, programs, and activities.

In this dissertation, I offer one vision of higher education that might be a worthy candidate—a Butlerian framework for ethical formation of self, place, and community that necessitates vulnerability. However, campus leaders, educators, and inhabitants need not accept this ideal as their own. They can and should deliberate on alternatives, including aims that are more explicitly about shaping students' civic and democratic capacities, like former University of Pennsylvania President Amy Gutmann's treatise on *Democratic Education*,<sup>358</sup> or ones steeped in abolition, like Bettina Love's ode to education that nurtures Black joy,<sup>359</sup> or even aims that are more technocratic, preparing students with the skills to excel in a market economy. I certainly value these aims in varying proportions and would argue that some are more important than others, as evident in my selection of telos for this dissertation. The point, however, is not a definitive settling of the question regarding educational aims, but the recognition that making room for intentional, ongoing deliberation about the purpose of higher education is necessary. To turn back to the discussion of educational philosophy offered by Chris Higgins in the introduction, it is not a question *whether* their institution or

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<sup>358</sup> Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education - with a New Preface and Epilogue* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>359</sup> Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).

pedagogy is oriented toward educational telos, but whether or not they are *aware* of the implicit purpose already undergirding their actions and whether that aim is *worthy* of such a valorized position.<sup>360</sup> Conversations about the purpose of (higher) education reveal existing aims already at work. A campus collective that is serious about DEI and equitable access to higher education needs to ensure that the resulting education is worth accessing. In the guidelines that follow, I continue with the assumption that a Butlerian education is the animating purpose of higher education, but campus leaders can shift based on their own dialogue.

## **2) Develop a keen awareness about your own campus geography as a foundation for intervention and campus redesign.**

One of the major themes of this dissertation is the extent to which safe space controversies are instructive scenes of the mismatch between the inclusive university environment subaltern students are promised and the hostile campus culture that they often experience instead. Rather than interpreting controversial flashpoints as isolated, overblown events, I have argued for the necessity of closely evaluating the context by which these events emerge—the normative campus geography, which reinforces hidden ideologies about who/what is appropriate and acceptable through structures of space and place. If higher education administrators and educators are serious about cultivating an environment in which all students are invited to participate in the risky endeavor of critical, transformative learning, then one of their priorities must be to develop a sharp awareness of the power-

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<sup>360</sup> Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

laden contours of their university and importantly, to use that as the foundation for action and intervention to address the uneven terrain.

This is where the normative geography “cheat sheet” from chapter two (Table 2.2) comes in handy. This table provides prompts that can guide campus stakeholders through the process of revealing the often invisible, ahistorical, normalized ideologies that are encoded in place. Chapter three unpacks the normative geography of Boston College, as an illustration of what this campus appraisal might reveal. Mapping the normative campus geography requires practices that attune to the everyday lives of subaltern students (also relevant to faculty, staff, and administrators). Strategies in this vein include:

***2a) Finding ways to “walk with” (subaltern) students***

Administrators, faculty, and staff cannot become so far removed from students’ experience that they are unable to see the everyday reminders of exclusion and their tactics of habitability. Therefore, “walking *with*”<sup>361</sup> is a suggestion to become intimate with the campus geography by experiencing it alongside another person, particularly one whose background and experience differs from one’s own. It could be interpreted literally as incorporating more peripatetic exercises into the fabric of the university, where administrators and educators carve space to take a walk with students as a part of their advising and relation-building practice. This is already one of the hallmark features at Deep Springs College, a highly selective two-year institution set on an isolated cattle ranch in California, where a student and faculty member meet 1:1 on a stroll around their desert campus. This practice is also an informal feature of Outer Coast College, a new experiential institution of higher education in Sitka, Alaska inspired by Deep Springs College.<sup>362</sup> Though

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<sup>361</sup> Lee and Ingold, “Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing,” 67.

<sup>362</sup> Franklin Eccher, Personal correspondence, November 29, 2022.

there are many possible benefits to this kind of ambulatory practice, walking offers a unique opening for orienting toward place and the contours of the shared campus geography.

Indeed, this dissertation is an illustration of what might be possible when a teacher walks with her students, allowing them to take the lead in orienting her vision, habituating her to see the place through their embodied experience. My walks with students as a part of this project not only cultivated deeper relationships with each of them—itsself a form of nurturing trust and mutual recognition—but also refined my pedagogy in the classroom, my future research program and commitments, and my accountability in terms of addressing the facets of this campus environment that I have control over. The recommendation to “walk with” subaltern students can also be interpreted more metaphorically, as an effort towards accessing emic perspectives about students’ everyday experiences. As such, educators and administrators can consider situating the campus itself as a site of study through course assignments, such as PAR researcher Brinton Lyke’s strategy to assign a PhotoVoice project that targets unpacking a facet of BC student culture, like gender and hook ups. Whether literally or figuratively, I contend that “walking with” students, particularly those from the margins could help educators, administrators, and even other students fine-tune their perception to the uneven campus geography and identify campus-specific interventions as a result. It is not enough to have awareness of the problems without using that knowledge to inform actions.

***2b) Implement interventions that address both discrimination and more everyday spatial cues of alienation***

Campus leaders cannot stay silent on issues that reinforce dignity harms and contribute to subaltern student marginalization. The students in this study helped to illustrate the consequences of administrative silence on safe space controversies at BC,



including the Perspectives incident and the targeted MLE antagonism: the existing campus geography and its ideological underpinnings are simply reinforced. Furthermore, certain institutional policies in practice also sustain exclusion, including only binary-gendered housing and bathroom designations, or charged delegation of resources (or lack thereof), such as a refusal to create an LGBTQ center on campus or burdening one sole administrator as responsible all LGBTQ-related issues.

However, the campus geography is not only enforced through overt spatial signals but predominantly imposed through implicit cues. Therefore, campus interventions that take place-based safety conditions seriously must also respond to the quotidian nature of alienation, not just those acts of exclusion that rise to the level of blatant threat. As such, at BC, that might involve seemingly minute interventions that respond to the three categories of more covert spatial cues (as covered in chapter three, table 3.2): peer interactions, interactions with campus authority figures, and embodied signals. Regarding embodied spatial cues, BC could intervene by diversifying the cuisines that are offered in the dining hall and even the ways that food is presented. If poet Diamond Forde is right that “much of home is held in the mouth,” then whose bodies are nourished with food resembling “home” in the dining hall?<sup>363</sup> Which foods are normalized, without any ethnic label, and which foods are advertised as part of specialty dining, like “Mexican night” or “Tastes of Asia”? Other minute sensorial cues come in the form of music (whose ears the music intended for) or language (whose tongues need to be contorted to fit in)?

However, other implicit cues seem even harder to address, such as the forms of appropriate attire, based on a rigid gender binary or heteronormative standards; veiled

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<sup>363</sup> Diamond Forde, “Rememory,” *Poem-A-Day*, August 2, 2022, <https://poets.org/poem/rememory-0>.

assumptions of privilege that arise in conversations about school breaks; or the social hierarchy established by mainly service workers of color serving a largely white population. These modes of exclusion expose how the contours of the campus geography have molded over time to extend the body of an archetypal student, catering to a largely homogenous population. Therefore, the interventions on this front might involve larger-scale mediations, such as diversifying the student body through targeted outreach and partnerships with college access programs,<sup>364</sup> or taking the suggestions of subaltern students, like Lucia, who suggest how “dramatically” different the campus culture would be if every student were required to work in the dining hall for a semester. Indeed other schools, such as Berea College in Kentucky or Black Mountain College in North Carolina (while in operation between 1933-1957), use(d) a “labor” model where students are responsible for acting as stewards of their institution and share the work required to maintain a livable campus environment. At Black Mountain, for example, students were responsible for cooking meals, janitorial duties, farm work, and even construction of a new “studies” building on campus.<sup>365</sup> This intervention resonates with Ivy League-critic William Deresiewicz’s provocation about reforming elite higher education, where he asks, “Instead of service, how about service work?”<sup>366</sup> If PWIs like BC were invested in interventions that rupture the existing norms on campus, there are both small-scale and large-scale actions that administrators and educators could consider.

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<sup>364</sup> Something that is becoming harder to pursue, given the recent dismantling of affirmative action policies for college admissions.

<sup>365</sup> *Fully Awake: Black Mountain College* (Documentary Educational Resources, 2008), <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/fully-awake-black-mountain-college>.

<sup>366</sup> William Deresiewicz, “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League,” *New Republic*, July 21, 2014.

### **3) Resist static operationalizations of space and place.**

One of the contributions of this dissertation is a thicker definition of space and place, which operates on the assumption that space is dynamic, never neutral, and always being negotiated and re-made. As such, campus efforts intended to foster safety conditions for transformative learning must also apply these concepts and endeavor to work in iteration.

#### ***3a) As applied to affinity groups***

I want to begin this recommendation by clearly stating that creating affinity spaces is not the solution in and of itself, particularly in relation to satisfying positive safety pursuits. In this dissertation, it is true that the Malaysian cultural club, the Mexican Association of Students, and programs through the multicultural hub on campus played a significant role in fostering more holistic identity expression and enabling risky formative endeavors for subaltern students at BC. However, it would be reductive to conclude that those spaces will serve the same purpose for all students of that identity or that they are all that is necessary to establish a more inclusive campus. Each student comes to interact with a space from their own constellation of identities and experiences, while the space changes with each new configuration of members and from the place-making strategies of generations prior. As such, these spaces will always need continuous labor to maintain the possibility of serving as a foundation of positive safety and affirmation for students, even if there are certain dimensions of the space that remain consistent (e.g. same structure of leadership, annual traditions or practices). Inhabitants of the space are not reprieved from the labor of continuing to sustain its capacity for inclusion. That is an enduring pursuit, which should include regular checkpoints for members to reevaluate their own norms and consistently invite others into collaborative place-making. This kind of checkpoint, for example, might

serve as an opening for Anita to share the positive influence of participation in the Boston-wide “Malaysian convention,” which could shape the trajectory of what the Malaysian culture club might prioritize in future years.

***3b) As applied to identity-conscious campus centers or initiatives***

Furthermore, a campus environment is not made “safe” in either positive or negative terms by allocation of institutional resources alone, even if that includes a physical location, funding, staff, and programs. A more inclusive campus environment is *especially* not achieved when the formalization of an LGBTQ Center or multicultural institute serves as an excuse to absolve other members of the campus community from responsibility, as if it is only the task of the LGBTQ and/or women’s center to address issues concerning queer or trans\* students. Nonetheless, those material allocations from the institution serve as important steps toward subaltern habitability and should not be undervalued if they are taken up as invitations for *ongoing* negotiations of habitable space.

One important negotiation, in this respect, is *protective* administrative responses to spatial struggles on campus. In the context of BC, establishing a multicultural residential community (MLE) was a positive step toward safety conditions for students of Color on campus. In many ways, it gave subaltern students who shared that community sanctioned dormitory space to saturate and build a counter-culture to the otherwise hostile campus environment, one which normalized a multitude of different languages and for one’s nonwhite heritage to be celebrated, rather than hidden. However, without adequate attention by institutional stakeholders to maintaining and protecting the MLE hall as a counter-space, the negative and positive safety conditions that were so carefully cultivated became thwarted with the actions of antagonistic intruders and the threat was sustained for students on that hall (and subaltern students more broadly) long afterwards. As such, building affinity spaces

without due attention to protecting and defending their crucial role allows the normative geography to pervade any possible spaces of resistance and destroy the scaffolding necessary to partake in risky projects of formation. Educators and administrators must continue to do their part in fortifying structures of place-making possibility, for the work is far from over once an affinity space becomes formalized. Indeed, it is simply one action in the iterative cycle of place-making toward transformative education.

### ***3c) As applied to “brave spaces”***

One of the popular safe space renditions is the distinction between “safe space” and “brave space” popularized by John Palfrey and Brian Arao/Kristi Clemens. They concede that “safe spaces” are not always desirable or possible to achieve, thus some campus spaces will be considered “safe,” such as an extracurricular affinity space or students’ dormitory, while other spaces are deemed “brave,” such as a classroom or other public space like the campus quad or dining hall. Though I too previously held a view relying on this locational model, this dissertation revealed how this spatial arrangement operates, however loosely, on unidimensional definition of space as static, reliant on distinguishing physical boundaries. Yet this locational model obscures the other dimensions of space, such as time and relationality. Massey reminds us that, “it won’t be the same ‘here’ when it is no longer now.”<sup>367</sup> Thus, spaces can’t be deemed “safe” or “brave” once and for all, but each space, whether it is the campus as a whole or nested spaces within the campus, needs to be (re)negotiated at each juncture of time-space.

A classroom, for example, is deemed a “brave” space in both Palfrey’s and Arao and Clemens’ frameworks because it necessitates courage to engage in the project of

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<sup>367</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 139.

multicultural education. However, what I advanced in this dissertation is that the courage necessary to take risks of reworking one's identity or undoing oppressive structures and tendencies necessitates conditions of in-placedness and reducing systematic out-of-placedness. In the classroom, that might involve making room to address bias-motivated incidents in class and reminding students that we must resist those norms here; establishing collective classroom ground rules and gently enforcing transgressions; using texts that affirm different epistemological registers or offer counter-narratives that signal to students that "you belong here;" or not punishing students who might at times need to retreat within themselves to cope with the risks of misrecognition. What all of these suggestions have in common is a commitment to ongoing negotiation of place, such that place-based safety conditions are collectively crafted and maintained, not assumed by virtue of sharing a material space. Just as teachers and classroom communities cannot assume that safety conditions are not guaranteed, neither can other campus spaces or collectives. The inhabitants of each space must tinker toward a place where critical, transformative learning is possible.

#### **4) Experiment and toggle between spaces of varying scope.**

A Butlerian education is a kind of learning that is not limited to the classroom, or even to higher education, though a university context can serve as a particularly fruitful and intentional environment for such an experience to take place. A transformative education that challenges students to risk themselves in the process of self-making, place-making, and world-making is possible anywhere on campus, from a classroom dialogue to an interaction between service workers in the dining hall to a ride on the subway from campus to an off-campus service site. All of these spaces, then, could be seen as "curricular" in this sense,

which acknowledges the educative dimensions of “extra” or “co”-curricular activities and reckons with the possibly miseducative dimensions of “curricular” sanctioned activities when it comes to transformation. My former students have shared stories that illustrate the formative risk-taking they’ve taken on via cultural clubs and roommate conversations, while delineating the ways in which certain classroom environments have stymied opportunities for Butlerian social critique or mutual recognition. As such, efforts to rehabilitate hostile campus environments must operate at level of the campus geography as a whole, contending with the campus geography as a composite of all its nested spaces and seeing the ways all of these endeavors work together to inform students’ education. Yet, at the same time, it is also just as important to pursue transformative education at a smaller scale within a nested space, like within the confines of a classroom, a multicultural center, or a cultural club dance practice. What are the norms and ideological assumptions that guide the culture of this particular space, and how might this space serve students’ capacity to engage in transformative education—to engage in deep self-inquiry, to build strong relational ties, and to participate in social critique and action? Attention to place-making and habitability at varying scales can hold campus stakeholders accountable to the dynamism and simultaneity of space.

**5) Establish collective place-making responsibility, such that labor is more evenly distributed.**

Place-making toward risky, transformative learning must be a shared responsibility, but too often the labor of habitability falls upon the shoulders of subaltern students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Any attempt to rehabilitate a hostile campus environment must invite and provoke accountability from all campus inhabitants, since places are negotiated.

Those who do not see themselves as place-makers, who attempt to absolve themselves from any active participation in shaping their campus geography—that is itself a contribution. It is a decision to allow the existing normative ideologies to persist and become sedimented over time. As such, the decision is not whether or not to participate in the ongoing spatial struggle on campus; it is simply what part inhabitants seek to play.

***5a) Take inspiration from subaltern place-making***

What this dissertation demonstrated is the extent to which subaltern students already engage in quotidian acts of place-making in order to survive in a hostile campus environment. As such, attuning to their current place-making practices can serve as a starting point for what campus interventions might be needed. What avenues are subaltern students currently using to more wholly express their identities? What are the characteristics that make those spaces “fit” subaltern bodies too? Taking a closer look at students’ place-making strategies of resistance, like Anita’s use of strategic disengagement in her PULSE class, offers cues about where interventions are needed. In this case, it raises the need for an appraisal of the PULSE curriculum and the underlying assumptions of faculty’s pedagogical approach at BC, to ensure that these classes are not only beneficial for a privileged student gaining exposure for the first time, but also a subaltern student who aims to serve communities like her own. As a program that has been operating for over 25 years at BC, attuning to Anita’s experience, for example, also demonstrates a commitment to ongoing negotiation of PULSE as a space safe to engage in Butlerian education, not falling back on static conceptualizations of a space from a different configuration of history, leadership, student demographic, teachers, texts, and community partners. Furthermore, if this is Anita’s experience in a course that is explicit about its commitment to social justice, then it also raises concerns about other courses in which equity and justice are not overtly prioritized.



To be clear, however, taking subaltern students' lead involves looking to their actions for *inspiration*, not delegating the *labor* of improving a campus environment to them. Given the stakes of an alienating campus geography on their lives and education, minoritized students should be invited to participate in each stage of developing corresponding campus interventions, such as disciplinary hearings when it relates to them and the creation of relevant programs or centers. That commitment to involving students must be sustained even or especially as the campus hosts a population always in flux. Nonetheless, privileged students and those with institutional power (administrators, staff, faculty) need to take on more labor and responsibility as well.

***5b) Invite majoritarian students to enact place-making in solidarity***

The culminating educational model proposed in chapter four was informed by the experiences of six subaltern students and research that takes a critical, marginal stance to ensure that minoritized students are not excluded from participation in a Butlerian transformative education. However, the benefits of this framework are not limited to subaltern students—all students, including those from hegemonic groups, stand to gain. Participating in a Butlerian education necessitates that all students to engage in social critique, appraising one's constellation of identities, unique experiences, and the extent to which is made to feel "out of place" or "out of line." For majoritarian students, this requires that they open themselves up to seeing how the current structures of recognition benefit them at the expense of others, a facet of their experience that can be easily hidden by regularly occupying spaces that are form-fitted to their body as the archetype. In a context of higher education, it is a disservice to allow a student to continuously fit in, to rarely feel the dissonance of being in a place that is not designed for them and wrestle with the formative questions that become raised in the process.

Again, this is not to sideline the many ways in which all students, especially those in emerging adulthood, struggle with heightened vulnerability to peer perceptions or universal hardships, like illness, accidents, transitions, or rejection. It is, however, a recognition that if most (if not all) college students are in a particularly harrowing period of life, then it becomes even more important to ameliorate the added factor of identity-based, intersectional discrimination. As such, without inviting majoritarian students into shared place-making toward inclusive bodily inhabitance, the labor of transgressive place-making remains another invisible labor that becomes subsumed in a largely privileged, homogeneous environment. A Butlerian education should habituate majoritarian students to more finely perceive spatial cues, especially ones that disadvantage their subaltern peers, and be committed to enacting their place-making powers in solidarity. Thus, there is a justified need for campus rehabilitation efforts to unsettle White, wealthy, cisgender, heterosexual students' "bubble" and consistent "fit" with the environment, even if that leads privileged students to claim "reverse discrimination." When a student is conditioned to see their "fit" with an uneven normative geography as standard, the experience of dissonance is bound to feel unfair. A critical, transformative education, however, should support students in grappling with how to rework their own identities, take up responsibility, and re-make their campus place/community in light of these uncomfortable experiences.

Up until this point, my reference to "subaltern" and "majoritarian" students was with relation to structural analyses of power and the corresponding social stratification. However, I also recognize that each person is a complex constellation of identities, the configuration of which seldom falls exclusively onto advantageous or marginalized axes of difference. A student is rarely *only* minoritized or privileged, and therefore, the application of recommendation #3 thus far can be nuanced in three ways. First, it is still context-

dependent, which means that certain axes of subalternity might become more pressing given the particular time-space configuration. For example, in spaces of organized student protest that could provoke police involvement, a student's citizenship status or racial identity might become more salient. In a discussion about reproductive healthcare, one's gender, biological sex, and religious affiliations might come to the fore. As such, who might be considered minoritized or privileged, and thus their corresponding responsibility, could shift based on the unique negotiation of a given space. Second, almost all college students could be described as majoritarian by virtue of their educational and colonialist privilege, as participants of institutions situated on contested, often unceded lands. Therefore, a part of shared responsibility for place is dependent on taking up the Butlerian invitation to ongoing reflective inquiry, to "positioning," which might teeter toward subaltern or majoritarian based on the particularized context/community.<sup>368</sup>

***5c) Hold campus leadership, administrators, staff, and faculty accountable to action.***

Though this point might seem redundant, returning to the responsibilities of the target audience seems an apt place to conclude the working guidelines. Sub-recommendations 5a and 5b centered on the role that subaltern and majoritarian students alike play in the process of campus rehabilitation, but as much as students should be empowered, campus administrators and educators cannot be pardoned from their responsibility to student learning. What that might involve in practice is an insistence from those with authority to address campus bias-based incidents, rather than operate on a default stance of silence and allow the implicit spatial/ideological norms to remain intact. This

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<sup>368</sup> This use of "positioning" as compared to "positionality" echoes Boveda and Annamma's distinction, the former meant to denote an expansive, ongoing process of reckoning with one's power and influence amid changing contexts. Boveda and Annamma, "Beyond Making a Statement."

happens when faculty adhere so strictly to the syllabus that there is no room to address live concerns on students' minds; or when campus administrators become preoccupied with their external reputation that discriminatory incidents are more often "swept under the rug" (to use Lucia's characterization) than addressed as live problems.

Even further, however, is the need for campus leaders to recognize the need for proactive actions rather than reactive responses. At BC, that included the instantiation of DiversityEDU, for example, which was an educational program that sought to establish a shared language and understanding of identity-based oppression with all first-year undergraduates. However, mere implementation of this program is still not enough. Echoing recommendation #3, campus educators and leaders must take responsibility for the ongoing negotiation of that program to meet the needs of a student community always in flux and to be responsive to the contemporary context. In other words, even well-intentioned, proactive campus programs, centers, and initiatives must not be seen as static solutions, but ongoing negotiations to a live problem of exclusion.

Finally, campus educators themselves must continue their own Butlerian education. It requires educators to continue practicing reflexivity about their pedagogy, grappling with how the wording of discussion questions and one's facilitation style can affect a student's ability to participate in risky educative projects in one's classroom. It means regularly practicing social critique, attuning oneself to often invisible spatial cues of exclusion students face and taking action to disrupt those norms in the spaces where one has leverage. Indeed, taking up responsibility might mean to enact these guidelines in one's own localized context.

### Questioning Even Further

I close out this dissertation with new openings and questions, for as Gadamer proposes, “the art of questioning is the art of questioning even further.”<sup>369</sup> It is the hope that each of these topics serve as a reservoir for future, expansive lines of inquiry.

### Walking

One of the most generative reservoirs of inspiration throughout the dissertation were the possibilities afforded by walking and movement. Walking was, to be sure, a promising method of data collection. As delineated in the introduction, walking as a pedestrian activity holds the possibility of enriching relations between ambulators and between a walker and their surroundings (including more-than-humans and non-humans). “Walking with” can also serve as a commitment to solidarity and willingness to accompany those positioned at the margins on their journeys. These enriched relations imbue oral or written data with embodied insights, and it also invites spatial cues into the interaction. In chapter three, I gestured toward some surprising insights that resulted from the walking interviews, such as the importance of stillness that emerged as compared to anticipated promise of movement. Nonetheless, I think that there is more to explore in future avenues for research related to the affordances, surprises, and challenges of a peripatetic method.

A future line of inquiry could be to conduct a comparative analysis with the same participants over multiple modalities of engagement to reveal any potential divergences and affordances of each method for the goal of the project. Conducting this dissertation raised some methodological hunches that I would like to investigate more systematically, such as

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<sup>369</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed ed., Continuum Impacts (London ; New York: Continuum, 1975), 360.

how walking shifted the locutionary form of dialogue between me and my students and oriented toward content that might not otherwise have been raised. Regarding the former, for example, I noticed that there was more back-and-forth dialogue during the walk, where my contributions were not always explicit questions, as they were in the first face-to-face interview, but comments that served to extend the conversation nonetheless. This noticing raised questions for me as a researcher, such as: Is the walking interview helpful in facilitating more dialogic conversations overall, or specifically with regard to inquiries about campus climate or issues? Would the conversation have been just as organic and free-flowing if we had started the protocol with walking, or was the potential of walk catalyzed by familiarity established within the first interview? These methodological insights might further refine initial inquiries, such as those made by James Evans and Phil Jones in environmental sciences, into what contexts a walking interview might be particularly conducive.<sup>370</sup> With regard to content-informed shifts, I also plan to analyze more closely the extent to which the spatial invoked response, attuning to occurrences that were prompted by an environmental cue such as something in our line of vision (e.g. a poster, display) or another student/inhabitant who crossed our path, even the impact of the weather. These inferences, as compared to the topics raised during the traditional interview, might reveal the distinctive affordances (or lack thereof) of walking as a method of attuning to relations with place.

Walking, however, was not only a method of data collection in this dissertation but also served as a central guiding metaphor. If George Lakoff and Mark Johnson were right to claim the influential role that metaphors play in shaping our lives, beliefs, and actions, then my decision to orient toward walking, lines, and paths is also meaning-laden.<sup>371</sup> The nudge to

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<sup>370</sup> Evans and Jones, "The Walking Interview."

<sup>371</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

“walk with” others as opposed to “walk into” others’ lives indicates a difference in positioning—the former is a commitment to accompanying others on their journey, “heading the same way, sharing the same vistas, and perhaps retreating from the same threats behind,” while the latter could be associated with an ‘outside-looking-in’ stance, that takes a more distanced, observational approach.<sup>372</sup> Thus, walking as a metaphor shaped how I framed my relationship with my participants and interlocutors, an openness to accompanying them for a while, even if I ended up diverging significantly from their path. How might this metaphor for my role as researcher and the process of inquiry differ from one that primarily frames research as confrontation, debate, trial, observation?

The recommendation to walk alongside another emphasized the need to trace each other’s and our own meandering lifelines in order to reckon with the impoverished way that ours or others’ lives are forced to get “in line” with prescriptive ways of being.<sup>373</sup> Attuning to the existing, dominant lines (existing paths, existing modes of understanding, acceptable ideologies) of a normative geography helps us to see what it means to be “out of line” or “out of place.” Furthermore, as artists and walking scholars Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman apply the concept, “walking-with” is a politics of response-ability where one must engage with disavowed histories and the more-than-human world in the process of queering existing lines of thought.<sup>374</sup> As such, walking helps to showcase practices of resistance, which refuse to follow existing lines and are committed to reprioritized lines otherwise buried. Thus, there is more work to do in the politics of walking, whether from a methodological,

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<sup>372</sup> Lee and Ingold, “Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing,” 67.

<sup>373</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

<sup>374</sup> Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: Walking Lab: By Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman*, London, Routledge, 2019 (New York: Routledge, 2019), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2019.1700877>.

metaphorical, or decolonial and critical standpoint.<sup>375</sup> Beyond academia, composer and pianist Ludovico Einaudi's series of "Seven Days Walking" albums, each inspired by musings gleaned from retracing the same wintry walk over seven days, or Kerri Andrews' anthologies of walking by women writers which feature poetry, diary entries, and excerpts from literature also gesture toward the arts and senses as a resource for this endeavor.<sup>376</sup>

### Mixed methods

A focus on method also highlights the promise of hybrid studies that bridge the humanities and social sciences, specifically philosophy and PDR in this case. In this dissertation, the mixing of methods took varying form in each chapter. In chapter two, "In/Out of Place," I argued for a spatial turn in the safe space debates which culminated in a three-part theoretical framework paired with an empirical case centered on Lucia as a previous resident of the multicultural residential dorm. This chapter demonstrated the ways in which "philosophy [can] make the complexity of educational experience more

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<sup>375</sup> In addition to the texts drawn upon in this dissertation, a good starting place might include Shirin Vossoughi and colleagues' emphasis on tracing "ethical trails" from the Learning Sciences, ethnographer Sara Pink and colleagues' interdisciplinary exploration of "walking," philosophical investigations of walking offered by Jan Masschelein and Lee Ann Holland, explorations of "learning on the move" explored in a 2020 special issue of *Cognition and Instruction*, and indigenous teachings about walking as a resistance practice of reclaiming land and place by Megan Bang and colleagues. Megan Bang et al., "Muskrat Theories, Tobacco in the Streets, and Living Chicago as Indigenous Land," *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 37–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.865113>; LeAnn M. Holland, "Reconsidering the 'Ped' in Pedagogy: A Walking Education," *Philosophy of Education* 72 (2016): 64–73, <https://doi.org/10.47925/2016.064>; Tim Ingold, "Ways of Mind-Walking: Reading, Writing, Painting," *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 23, 2010): 15–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725861003606712>; Jan Masschelein, "The World 'Once More': Walking Lines," *Teachers College Record*, 2009, 1–3; Sarah Pink et al., "Walking across Disciplines: From Ethnography to Arts Practice," *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 23, 2010): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725861003606670>; Katie Headrick Taylor, "Learning Along Lines: Locative Literacies for Reading and Writing the City," *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 26, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 533–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2017.1307198>; Vossoughi et al., "Embodied Pathways and Ethical Trails"; Ananda Marin et al., "Why Learning on the Move: Intersecting Research Pathways for Mobility, Learning and Teaching," *Cognition and Instruction* 38, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2020.1769100>.

<sup>376</sup> Kerri Andrews, *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020); Kerri Andrews, ed., *Way Makers: An Anthology of Women's Writing about Walking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2023); Ludovico Einaudi, *Seven Days Walking*, Compilation Album, 7 vols., Seven Days Walking (Decca Records, 2019).



comprehensible and meaningful.”<sup>377</sup> In other words, applied spatial theory helped to illuminate salient dimensions of Lucia’s embodied, experiential experience and thus, led to a different reading of the MLE safe space controversy at BC than one of innocuous, drunken vandalism.

Meanwhile, in the third chapter, “Subaltern Place-Making,” engagement with diverse interlocutors and interdisciplinary texts about safety and place-making helped me to clarify and refine my research questions to analyze the empirical PDR artifacts. Though this process resembled the use of a conceptual framework in the social sciences—proposing a theoretical frame by which to analyze data—I insist on not flattening the philosophical contributions of this project to a means. This chapter illuminated how *one* possible application of philosophy was to guide empirical research design and analysis, but it was not the *only* purpose nor the only way that I drew on theory. Furthermore, one of the reasons I chose PDR (as a branch of DBR) was because I was inspired by how the Design-Based Research Collective described research as iterative cycles between theory and application.<sup>378</sup> Theory informs empirical investigations so much as empirical engagements enhance and build theory.

Finally, in chapter four, I responded to a question of normative educational philosophy, “What should a risky model of education involve?” using diverse sources of evidence from the humanities, social sciences, and art. For example, the place-making strategies of resistance practiced by my students featured in chapter three, helped me to clarify the Jessica Harless’ proposed adaptation of “negative” and “positive safety” in spatial terms. This approach extends upon Rachel Wahl’s strategy to use fieldwork in responding to

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<sup>377</sup> Terri S. Wilson and Doris A. Santoro, “Philosophy Pursued Through Empirical Research: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (March 2015): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-015-9460-9>.

<sup>378</sup> The Design-Based Research Collective, “Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 1 (January 2003): 5–8, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032001005>.

normative philosophy questions, for I not only draw on engagements with my former students but put their narratives and artifacts into conversation with other social science researchers, like Z Nicolazzo and her study with trans\* collegians, scholars who have commented on safety, such as Eammon Callan and Jeannie Ludlow, and public safe space critics, like Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt.<sup>379</sup> Taken together, I mixed methods in my selection of interdisciplinary interlocutors in response to a philosophical question.

Each chapter, thus, offers a different configuration of method that can serve as a potential model of future research in this burgeoning domain of empirically-informed philosophy of education and philosophically-grounded qualitative, educational research. What seems most important, however, is the recognition that the method for this dissertation was informed by my desire to answer research questions that could not be answered with either theory or empirical data alone. The research questions, “What about “safe space” efforts are worth rehabilitating in higher education, given its controversial usage and backlash? Informed by the experiences of six minoritized undergraduate students, how can PWIs, like Boston College, foster the conditions for risky, transformative education?”, necessitated an interdisciplinary dialogue and an openness to often messy iteration, refining the questions themselves in light of provisional responses.

### **Thin skin**

“Thin skin” is a characteristic that many critics use pejoratively to describe those who desire safe spaces. Lukianoff and Haidt, for example, are notorious in their usage of the term in their Atlantic article, where they ask with rhetorical flourish, “What are we doing to

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<sup>379</sup> Rachel Wahl, “Risky Receptivity in the Time of Trump: The Political Significance of Ethical Formation,” *Philosophy of Education* 74 (2018): 651–63, <https://doi.org/10.47925/74.651>.

our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce?<sup>380</sup> As a vice, “extra-thin skin” signifies students’ unreasonable hypersensitivity, enabled by cocooning safe space efforts that replace their capacity to develop the corresponding virtue, “thick skin,” for themselves. In chapter four, I problematized the assumption that “thin skin” is 1) a character flaw, dependent only on an individual person’s abilities, and 2) that is not worthy or harmful as an educational priority. Instead, I offered a brief portrait of a Butlerian invitation to education, in which proposes that the capacity to engage in ethical, transformative education is dependent precisely on one’s recognition of shared vulnerability, our mutual condition of thin skin. Thus, this line of inquiry about “thin skin” as not a vice but an educational virtue could be fruitful.

For instance, I am interested in further developing a pedagogy of “thin skin,” exploring various accounts about the virtues and risk of educating for vulnerability, tenderness, and exposure. I might start with Butler’s provocations about thin skin as the capacity to be “wounded” by the other. They posit that, “If I am wounded, I find that the wound testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control.”<sup>381</sup> This inherent impressionability is valuable because it acts as an equalizer, charging each subject with the responsibility to care for the other as they would for themselves. Butler’s account also references feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s book, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, which expands upon “thin skin” as a distinctively embodied experience of exposure, in which encountering “the fact of this other as fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a

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<sup>380</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” 2015.

<sup>381</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 84.

domain of appearance... constitutes, as it were, my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life.”<sup>382</sup> In this read, attuning toward thin skin as an educational prerogative shapes students’ ability to see each other’s bodies more clearly. Queer writer and archivist Jenn Shapland, in her book of essays entitled *Thin Skin*, explores a similar sentiment in her first titular essay. She proposes a definition of thin skin as *permeability*, understood as the body’s porous boundary to environmental toxins such as nuclear contaminants in New Mexico or wasteland pollutants disproportionately affecting poor Black and indigenous communities. She condemns the tendency to ridicule hypersensitivity, for “to be sensitive is to be aware.”<sup>383</sup> As such, she asks, “Why should I toughen up when I know we are all tender, we are all sponges?”<sup>384</sup> What might it look like to explore cultivating tenderness and permeability as educational goals, rather than circulating the stern command to “toughen up”? What are the consequences of an educational system that prioritizes “grit” or “thick skin”—is it synonymous with dulling one’s sensitivity to the harmful consequences of our environmental actions? “To see the hurt and gloss over it, dismiss it, laugh it off?”<sup>385</sup> I hope that this brief gloss gesture toward the possible contributions of “thin skin” research to the ongoing dialogue about educational aims and educative risk.

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<sup>382</sup> Butler, 33; Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>383</sup> Jenn Shapland, *Thin Skin* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2023), 51.

<sup>384</sup> Shapland, 51.

<sup>385</sup> Shapland, 51.

**Amid swells in anti-DEI legislation**

James Baldwin started his famous 1998 essay, “A talk to teachers” with the claim that “we are living through a very dangerous time.”<sup>386</sup> Though he was referring to a different historical context, his words still ring true today amid our “post-racial,” “post-truth” society, still recovering from global pandemics and increasingly embroiled in violent clashes of power such as those in Ukraine and in Palestine. With regard to education, there is an increasing swell in legislation that seeks to suppress practices of DEI in higher education, a stance that is in alignment with broader attacks on education through anti-CRT laws and sentiments, the dismantling of affirmative action, and anti-trans\* and queer policies in the U.S. Consider one such policy, Arizona Senate Bill 1005, which bans any “public entities,” including public universities and community colleges from requiring employees to participate in DEI programs; spending public money on these programs including hiring staff or allocating centers related to DEI; and hiring initiatives designed to diversify the employee demographics on the basis of “race, sex, or color.”<sup>387</sup> The closest definition this bill gives for DEI is the promulgation of any institutional practice related to concepts such as unconscious or implicit bias, microaggressions, anti-racism, heteronormativity, systemic oppression, or intersectionality. This bill allows any employee to sue the university if any of these policies are breached. This legislation was passed by the Senate on January 31, 2024.<sup>388</sup>

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education’s DEI Legislation dashboard, 76 anti-DEI bills like Arizona Senate Bill 1005 have been introduced in 26 states in the U.S. since 2023.<sup>389</sup> Eight have been approved in seven states as of February 2024, ranging in

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<sup>386</sup> James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *Collected Essays* (The Library of America, 1998), 678.

<sup>387</sup> “Arizona Bill 1005” (2023).

<sup>388</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education, “DEI Legislation Tracker.”

<sup>389</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education.

severity from nullifying recommendations to use students' personal pronouns to full prohibition of public funds applied toward any singular community of students as related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. It is within this context that Baldwin's assertion seems particularly apt. These contemporary factors cohere to create a dangerous time and space for subaltern students and their allies, who dare to disrupt current norms about "in/out-of-placedness." In light of this context, Baldwin continues,

any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to 'go for broke.' Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending this won't happen.<sup>390</sup>

What I hear in Baldwin's prescient call is a recognition that any effort to dismantle a problem that is generations in the making, including the systemic concerns of racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia and how those dominant ideologies are indexed in the contemporary university, will rally enormous and inevitable resistance. Thus, educators embedded within this hostile context must be steadfast in their commitment to "go for broke"—to risk everything on the possibility of forging a more just future.

Thus, 'going for broke' in this context of higher education requires grappling with and combatting the legislation that seeks to reify the existing ideological status quo on college campuses. Many of the interventions offered in this study, ones that seek to provide educators with the tools to evaluate their normative campus geography, to build skin-extending affirmative spaces, to address spatial cues of systemic exclusion, fall exactly into the umbrella of what anti-DEI legislation targets. Future inquiries might consider how to

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<sup>390</sup> Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 678.

protect and promote these place-making strategies from a legislative angle. For example, though I am now a proud advocate of safe spaces and how they might be used critically, I am also willing to concede the term “safe space” if it becomes too easily weaponized by conservative senators or organizations. How might university leaders, educators, and students in anti-DEI states (such as Texas, Florida, and North Dakota) continue to practice resistant place-making and risky, transformative learning despite explicit policies that prohibit DEI? Another possible line of inquiry is to target the influential “model state legislation” and “Freedom from Indoctrination Act” that was drafted and circulated by conservative think-tanks, Manhattan and Goldwater Institutes respectively, as a starting point for consideration.<sup>391</sup> Who is being targeted and swayed by these proposals? How might their terminology (e.g. “illiberal takeover”) and arguments (e.g. prioritizing DEI is divisive) be put into context? Though my research reinforces de Certeau’s claim that subaltern communities find creative tactics to “make do” despite the violent laws imposed on them, I cannot ignore the consequences of allowing such laws to proliferate. I hope that the rehabilitation of safe spaces offered in this dissertation, however, can be helpful in unpacking the harmful consequences embedded within these legislative packages and making a critical, transformative higher education possible for all students.

### Coda

My way into this inquiry was as a safe space practitioner, who was troubled enough by the controversy and backlash to suspend my unquestioned endorsement of the concept.

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<sup>391</sup> Goldwater Institute and Speech First, “Freedom from Indoctrination Act,” 2023, 1–4; Christopher F Rufo, Ilya Shapiro, and Matt Beienburg, “Abolish DEI Bureaucracies and Restore Colorblind Equality in Public Universities,” *Manhattan Institute Issue Brief*, January 2023, 1–13.

Now, I proudly put my safe space sticker up again, ready to defend and honor the commitments interwoven into the term as a result of this work. I invite you to join me.



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## APPENDIX

### Part 1: Initial 1:1 Interview

Thank you so much for being willing to be a part of this project. I know I mentioned a bit about the project when we last spoke, but this research revolves around exploring what makes it possible for students at BC to feel a sense of belonging and to thrive on campus and in the classroom. Together, I'd like to learn more about your experience and what we can do together to make BC more inclusive.

Today is our first "interview," though I hope that it is more of an informal conversation to start getting to know one another. I hope it is the beginning of many ongoing conversations. So please feel free to ask your own questions about me and the project as well. My dreams for this research include constructing it together with you and other students, so all of this is open to evolving.

Do you have any questions before we begin? *[pause]* Are you comfortable being in this space for the interview? *[pause]* Do I have your permission to record this conversation?

*[start audio/video recording]*

#### **Opening perceptions of campus climate**

6. What is your name? What is a pseudonym name you'd like to use?
7. Here at BC, what year are you?
  - What are you studying?
  - How do you spend your time here at BC (e.g. activities, athletics, extracurricular, leadership, etc.)?
8. In this project, I am intentional about involving students at BC who are traditionally underrepresented at BC and in higher education. How would you describe your own identity and background?
9. What's the story about what brings you to BC or to college?
10. What is your overall perception of BC as a place of learning? How would you describe BC or the culture of BC to a loved one that is considering coming here?
  - Follow up: Could you elaborate on your description? Why would you describe it that way?

#### **Representing ties to place**

*Share a large piece of paper, pens, and colored pencils.*

11. I'd like to ask you to think about your relationship to BC. In other words, what ties or connections do you feel to this place? Together, I wanted to try and map yourself and your relationships to this place.

#### **Centering on self**

12. To start, can you draw a representation of yourself on this paper? Who are you here at BC?
  - Are there facets of your identities or backgrounds you particularly aware of here at BC?
    - Probe: Are there parts of you that feel like you have to hide away or don't feel comfortable sharing?
    - Probe: Are there parts of you that you feel are celebrated or affirmed?
  - Do you feel like you're able to be your full self here at BC? What might that look like?

### **Reflecting on affective ties to place**

13. What are some of your strongest emotional responses when you think about BC? What [people, places, memories] are associated with those feelings? How might you represent them on this map?
  - Do you ever feel "at home" here at BC? That you belong? What people, places, or memories prompt that kind of feeling?
    - What would it look like for you to feel a (stronger) sense of belonging? What might make that possible?
  - Do you ever feel "out of place"? Where, when, and why?
    - What do you usually do in those situations? How do you usually respond?
    - Is there anything that might make it possible to feel less alienated? Or anything that has helped to reduce that feeling of being 'out of place'?
  - What places do you feel attached to? Where on campus makes you feel the most and least welcome?
  - When, where, and with whom you do you feel a strong sense of community and kinship?

### **Documenting change to self and place**

14. Since being here at BC, are there ways in which you feel like you've made your mark on this place? Are there ways that you feel like you have facilitated or witnessed the work of others in prompting change here at BC?
  - How might you document that change?
  - What would you still like to see changed at BC?
15. Do you think you have changed since being here at BC?
  - If yes—in what ways have you transformed? How do you feel about those changes?
  - If no—did you ever feel pressure to change? From what forces? How did you resist those pressures to change?

### **Summative reflections**

16. Looking at the map you've created so far, is there anything about you and your relationship to BC that is missing?
17. What about this "finished" map captures your attention? What do you notice?
18. Is there a place on your map where you'd like to begin our walking interview next time?

**Preparations to walk**

Thanks so much for your participation in this first interview. So now I just want to confirm logistics.

19. What does your schedule look like in the next few weeks? We are hoping to schedule a walking interview and then bring everyone together for a group workshop to discuss.
20. Would you prefer to walk 1:1 or with another student who is part of the project?
21. Is there anyone else you might recommend to be a part of this study?

**A self-portrait, in relation to BC**

On this paper, represent who you are here at BC. What parts of yourself are you particularly aware of? Are there facets of yourself that you feel you need to hide away or are invisible, or dimensions that you feel like are affirmed?

Think about the emotions that you associate with BC or the feelings thinking about BC evokes in you – whether positive, negative, or otherwise. How would you represent what people, places, or histories are associated with those emotions?

Think about your time here at BC as a whole. How would you represent on this drawing how you've changed since being here at BC? How might you represent how you've changed the campus culture, or how you've seen the campus culture change, if at all?

## Part 2: Walking Interview with 1-2 participants

*This second interview uses a format of walking and “learning on the move” (Marin et al., 2020) to explore students’ understanding of space on campus.*

Thank you so much for meeting with me today and for letting me walk alongside you. Building from our previous conversation, we are planning on walking together today, guided by a motivation to unpack the relationships you hold and are developing with certain places and spaces on campus and in the community.

Before we begin, I’d also like to ask for your permission to record this conversation, as a means of documenting our walk together.

*[start audio recording using lapel microphones. Map my run to capture the GPS route]*

The broad idea is to explore your relationship with BC as a place of learning. What places or spaces are meaningful and important to your experience here? As a reminder, here are some prompts that we discussed last time.

22. A feeling of being “at home” or like you belong”
23. A feeling of being “out of place”
24. A feeling of attachment, welcoming, or non-welcoming
25. A sense of community or kinship

At any point throughout our walk today, I’d encourage you to pause at salient spaces and places to your experience to reflect and to capture a photograph. One of the times that I will ask you if you’d like to take a photograph is when we “arrive” at a space that someone led us to. You can choose to take a photograph, or not, and you can also take a photograph unprompted at any time. If there are other identifiable people in the photograph, we will need to pause to ask them for consent to be photographed prior to capturing the image. I have “Acknowledgement and Release” consent forms and pens if we encounter that scenario.

### **SPACE 1**

[directed towards student who chose this place]

1. Why did you choose this place to start today? What makes this place important to you?
  - a. *Consider the relational aspects:* Are there particular people, occurrences, or things here (real, remembered, imagined) that make you feel a certain way?
  - b. *Consider time:* Are there particular times that this space feels a certain way and times when it changes? Why? Are there particular histories or memories or hopes that this space invokes?
2. Is there anything about this space that you wish were different? Why or why not?

[directed toward other students on the walk]

3. How are you feeling in this space?
4. What thoughts, memories, or feelings are evoked for you, if any, as we stand in this space together?



- a. Can you share a memory you have about this space?
  - b. Can you tell a story about this place in your experience?
5. Are you all familiar with this space?
  - a. If student(s) are familiar with this space: Do your feelings or associations with the space differ from or resonate with [student who chose this space]?
  - b. If student(s) are not familiar with this space: What is it like being here with others who are familiar with the space?
6. What questions do you have for [student who chose this place]?
7. Would either/any of you like to capture a photograph of this space [if they haven't already]? I can also take a photo for my own reference at this time.

### **SPACE 2, AND ONWARDS**

Allow the participant to take lead in guiding us around campus. When we arrive at another location, cycle back through questions 1-7. Remind participants of possible prompts to guide the walk if they request.

*Along the way, as we move together, notice and take note of. Capture these observations in a field note immediately following the walk.*

- Social and relational encounters (with people, more-than-humans, lands/waters, creatures)
- What the participant(s) notices and why (objects, people, aspects, architecture, etc.)
- How the participant incorporates past events and memories and future anticipations or hopes
- How the participant(s) invoke real + imagined spaces and places
- Where the participant(s) stops and starts, and why

*As we are walking, take note of participants' engagement and cues in order to determine when to start wrapping up the interview.*

### **CLOSING**

Thank you to (all of you) for this experience. I am grateful for your generosity in sharing your reflections and for the time we shared together today. I will reach out again in the upcoming weeks to invite you to a follow up workshop, where we will hopefully bring together all of the student participants for a group debrief and reflection. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to reach out with additional reflections, ideas, or questions.

### Part 3: Focus Group

*This workshop will gather a significant number of student participants together for a group debrief. I hope to facilitate this “focus group” as a 60 minute, interactive reflection, which will include food and drinks to share.*

#### To prepare beforehand:

- Supplies
  - ☐ Chart paper
  - ☐ Markers
  - ☐ Red, yellow, green post its
  - ☐ Pens
  - ☐ Gift cards
  - ☐ Printed handouts
  - ☐ Note cards for name tags
- To do
  - ☐ Finalize themes to guide discussion
  - ☐ Print one theme per sheet of paper
  - ☐ Prepare student portfolios
    - Bring each student’s visual maps (Interview 1)
    - Prepare GPS maps for each student to engage with online (Walking Interview 2)
    - Print out the photographs that students took during their walk together (Walking Interview 2)
  - ☐ Print 5 handouts for each student to accompany their portfolio
  - ☐ Order food (avoid nuts, seafood, shellfish) for delivery
  - ☐ Order 6 \$25 gift cards
  - ☐ Set up room with video and audio – ensure it is oriented such that we can see each student and the table (the documents they are working with)
  - ☐ Send each student a link to their individual artifact portfolio (schedule send)

#### **INTRODUCTIONS (10 minutes)**

##### **Framing the session**

Thank you so much for attending today’s workshop. The purpose of today’s gathering is to bring us all together to reflect on the experiences, to learn from one another, and to consider what insights about campus space and place we can generate individually and/or as a collective. In order to document our conversation and thoughts, I would like to record audio and video this session. May I record this workshop?

*[With permission, hit record on video + audio recording. If only some students are willing to have video/audio, then position those with permission on one side of the room facing the camera. The others with their backs to the camera.]*

I know that some of you know each other already, but I’d like to kick off our session today with some introductions. Please write your name and pronouns on a name tag.

I’d like to go one by one around the room, and ask everyone to:

1. Share your name and pronouns
2. Major/school here at BC
3. First, respond to the person who shared before you (me for the first person). How did your story make you feel or what is a connection you make to their story?
4. Then, tell your own story about something that you have with you today (e.g. something in your backpack, something you're wearing). What is its significance in reference to who you are and your BC experience?

### **REFAMILIARIZING WITH ARTIFACTS (10-15 minutes)**

In your folder (and email inbox), you will find artifacts that you generated as a part of this project so far: your self-portrait, photographs from the walk, map of your walk, and a transcript from your first interview. Take a few minutes to refamiliarize yourself with these artifacts and individually reflect on these questions:

- What do you notice about your artifacts or remember from your interviews, having had some time away from participation? Can you think of one or two themes/observations that resonate with your BC experience?
- How do you feel revisiting these themes? What emotions come up for you?
- Are there facets of your identity here at BC or your relationship to BC that are missing from this portfolio (e.g. "I can't believe I didn't mention \_\_\_\_\_") or misrepresented (e.g. "\_\_\_\_\_ plays too prominent of a role. It's actually not as important as it seems")?

To share out with the group, if you choose to do so:

- Choose a theme from your portfolio that you think strongly represents how you feel about BC. Why did you choose this?
- Is there anything you're curious to know about others' experience?

Then, each person who wants to do so shares out, one at time, then we engage in discussion about their generated questions, and some pre-scripted discussion questions (next)

- As each person who is willing to share out talks, I can jot down their themes onto another chart paper, and add them to the themes I generated from the transcripts.

### **ENGAGING WITH PATTERNS AND THEMES (20-25 min)**

Engage with some collective, tentative patterns & themes from the interviews. Put major themes on chart paper at the front of the room, or on the table.

Possible themes from preliminary read:

- Social segregation
- Culture club participation
- BAIC/AHANA Office
- The culture of your academic school (CSOM, LSEHD, MCAS)
- Intersectionality [multiple axes of difference (race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, etc) play a role]
- Housing/Roommates

First react with post-its. You have three stacks of post-its with varying colors. They represent:

- Yes – Green
- Somewhat – Yellow
- No -- Red

For each of these themes, I'd like to ask you to reflect upon it based on your own experience. Then you'll write your response on the corresponding post it, with your name at the top.

- Does this theme resonate with your experience at BC?
- Do you notice any emotional responses to these themes? Do any of these themes accurately capture a feeling for you?

Then use as a resource for conversation:

- This theme looks quite mixed in effect. Could I ask one person from either +/- to speak about why they described it as so? Why do we think \_\_\_\_\_ can elicit such different/varied experiences?
- This is a theme that seems really salient to everyone. Do you think that this could be a fluke, or do you think it can be explained by shared experiences or characteristics?
- Is there anything that you feel like might be missing from this list that we might discuss together?
- Are there any themes here that you disagree with, have concerns about, or want to nuance? (i.e. any that need more clarification/context)

### **NEXT STEPS (5-10 minutes)**

- What might be some of your hopes and dreams moving forward, given what we discussed here together?
- How would you like what we learned and discussed together to be used, if at all?
- Do you have suggestions on what you might like to do with what you have learned from these experiences individually and together?
- Do you have any suggestions on what you'd like me to do with this knowledge?

I want to be mindful of your time, so I am going to start wrapping up this workshop. Does anyone have any thoughts they want to share before we close up for today?

---

Thank you so much for your participation, your honesty, and your generosity. I feel so much gratitude to each of you.

I may reach out periodically after today to share relevant artifacts related to your participation, so that you can ensure that it actually represents your perspectives and experience. There is also an open invitation to engage in other facets of this project, like analyzing data and writing, if that is something that interests you.

As a token of gratitude and compensation for your time and efforts, please accept this \$25 gift card, already on the right pocket of your folder. Thank you again. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

### Codebook

My codebook below depicts a more holistic portrait of the empirical data analysis, given that there was not room in this dissertation to present the entirety of the collected data as a part of the PDR protocol. Each code group includes a list of codes and sub-codes (if relevant), a description of criteria for inclusion in that category, and an example of that code category referenced in this dissertation.

Code Group	Codes and Sub-codes	Description	Example
BC Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrimination               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Classism</li> <li>○ Racism</li> <li>○ Heteronormativity</li> <li>○ Gender Binary</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Competitive/overinvolved</li> <li>• Drinking/tailgating culture</li> <li>• Hypocrisy/Lack of accountability</li> <li>• Passive/rule following/docile attitudes</li> <li>• School-specific (within the university)</li> <li>• Social segregation</li> </ul>	<p>These codes were applied to students' perceptions of the overarching campus culture—what they understood to be normal assumptions, patterns of behaviors, and ordinary interactions at Boston College.</p> <p>The “discrimination” code was by far the most prevalent code in this category (160 out of 319, 50.2%), which was applied to instances of microaggressions, hostile interactions, and felt experiences of exclusion experienced by students. This code was further split into four categories of discrimination along axes of socioeconomic class, race/ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and gender.</p>	<p>Regarding incidents of racism on campus: “It doesn't surprise me in the sense that it has happened before, like comments like that. And there have been different incidents on campus that's not respectful. And I don't know, especially for POC students, it's hearing about that happening every year. It just doesn't feel safe? Like it can happen to me next time.”</p> <p>--<i>Andromeda, Interview 1</i></p>
Embodied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food/dining/taste</li> <li>• Light/dark</li> <li>• Movement</li> <li>• Sound</li> <li>• Touch/temperature</li> <li>• Distance/proximity</li> <li>• Sight (fashion, attire, makeup, brand names, hairstyle)</li> </ul>	<p>These codes were applied to students' references to how their body came to interact with the space. Coded excerpts indexed sensorial interactions and how students used their body for expression (whether by external presentation or how they chose to contort parts of their body).</p>	<p>About the sensorial features of a particular campus location: “this sunken section of St. Mary's—so under used, so underrated...despite the construction going on in the background right now, it's gonna all zip out, because</p>

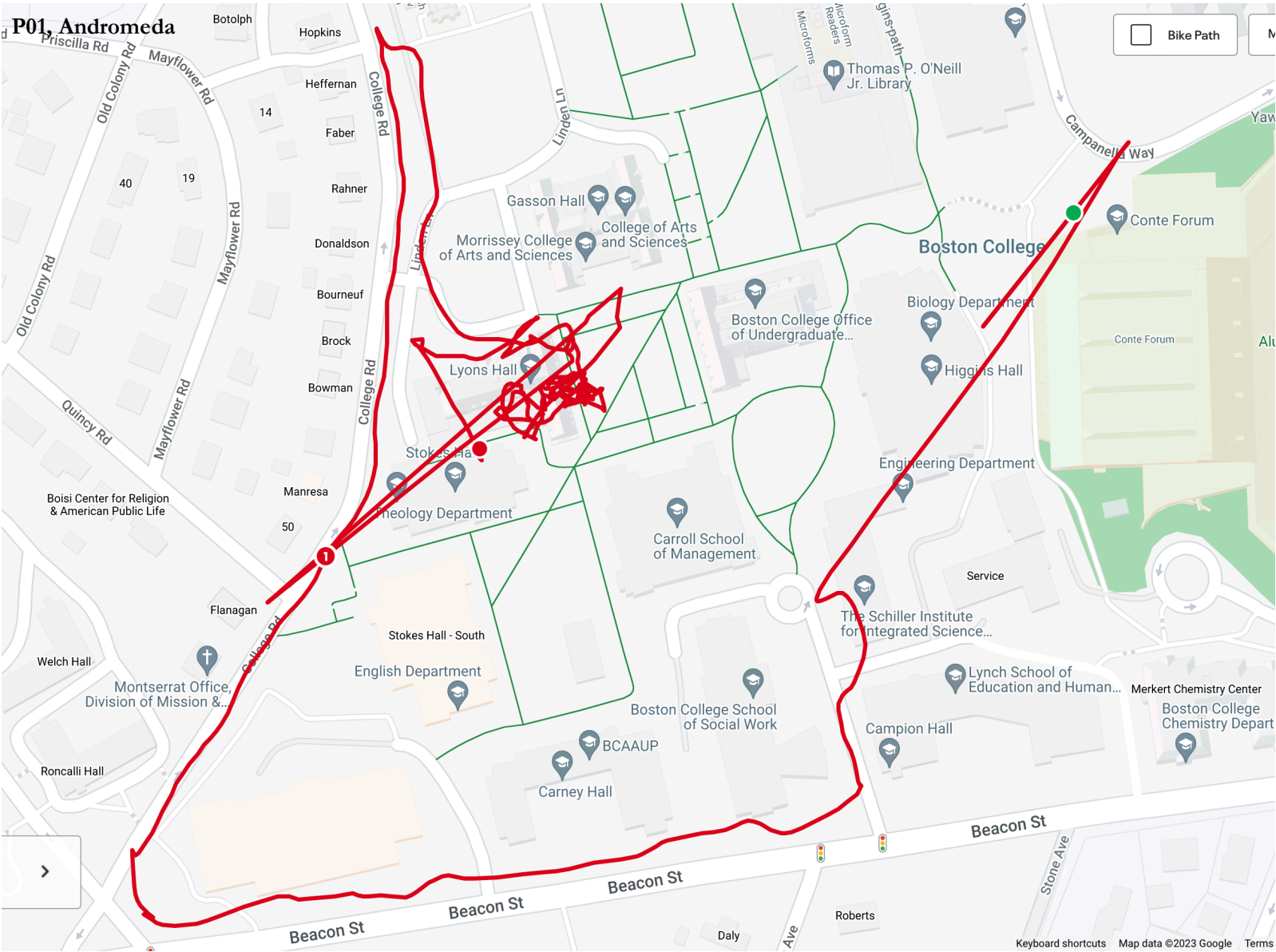
			once you sink in, there's no wind." --Tyler, <i>Walking Interview</i>
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to self</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• Campus authority figures</li> <li>• More-than-human/non-human</li> <li>• Institution as a whole</li> </ul>	These codes were applied to students' relationship with themselves and the connections they had with others in their shared environment, including human (e.g. peers, teachers) and more-than-human/non-human inhabitants (e.g. benches, trees, buildings). A relationship was coded whether it was a positive or negative in impact.	In relation to peers: "one of the workers, she's like Asian, right? She came up and she says, "Five people per table" because there's too many people at the table. And then right after she said that, one of the other kids is mocking her like, "Five potato" or something like that. Yeah, everyone laughed and like, I didn't even say anything, maybe I should have, but I wasn't gonna say anything." --Patrick, <i>Interview 1</i>
Institutional policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic</li> <li>• Housing/dorms</li> <li>• Work/employment</li> <li>• Administrative rejections or dearth of response</li> <li>• Student programs and staff</li> <li>• Formal documentation</li> </ul>	These codes were applied to explicit procedures and rules instated, enforced, or ignored by the institution. These policies covered a wide range of campus domains including how resources were distributed to particular academic programs, to housing or bathroom gender designations, to the speed and severity of punitive measures.	Regarding housing and bathroom policies: "I wasn't allowed to have this ambiguous identity, because I was just figuring out my gender identity. Because you were either male or female. So, what happened was my first year, I was put on a male floor. And the first-year housing is all communal, so it was kind of awkward. It was very uncomfortable for me to use the communal bathrooms." --Anita, <i>Interview 1</i>

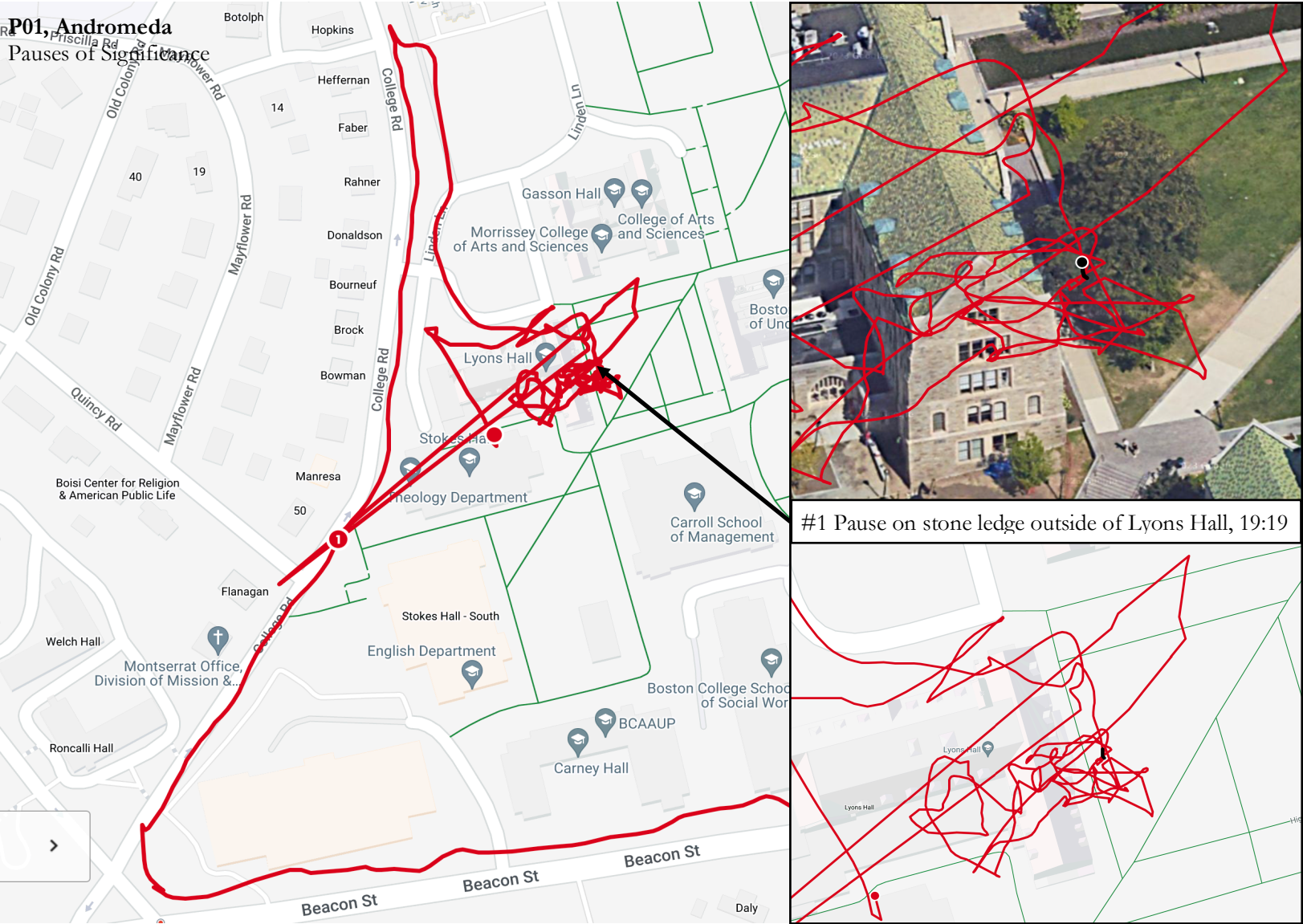
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home</li> <li>• Sheltered/protected</li> <li>• Free/unrestrained</li> <li>• Belonging</li> </ul>	These codes were first applied to students' explicit use of the term "safety," "safe," or "safe space," and then divided into what that expression denoted for the participant. Then the data was re-coded by the sub-codes.	About the Mexican Association of Students (MAS): "I speak Spanish way less now. Most of time, when speaking Spanish here, it's also in academic settings, so I feel like I have to change in some sort of way the way I speak too. So I feel like [MAS]' the only safe space I have to really connect to that part of me and honestly be who I was back home because that was like my everyday." -- <i>Lucia, Interview 1</i>
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Intellectual</li> <li>• Physical ability/body</li> <li>• Racial/ethnic</li> <li>• Religion/spiritual influences</li> <li>• Self-critique</li> <li>• Sexuality</li> <li>• Vocational discernment</li> <li>• Who-ness (catch all)</li> <li>• Intersectionality</li> </ul>	These codes were applied to students' description of themselves, who they were, and how they were changing/have changed. Most of the students' references to self cleaved along social axes of difference (i.e. class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.), however students also described themselves in intersectional terms, by their congeniality toward a particular form of work, and with distinctive attributes not shared by others (e.g. confidence, commitments, independence).	Something I think I talked a little bit my interview was, I was kind of felt like I was uninvolved at BC. This year, especially like, I just kind of go to classes and not much else. So I don't know what to do on the BC campus or in Boston. -- <i>Patrick, Focus Group</i>
Resistance /Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping mechanisms</li> <li>• Student activism and organizing</li> <li>• Student services-led programs</li> </ul>	These codes were applied to students' practices of navigating their campus context, which included strategies to cope and tolerate certain harms, to simply survive from a day to day basis, to resist and	About the positive impact of a transitional program for promising prospective low-income students of Color: "I just had never been with that many students that were also



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Culture clubs/ethnic and racial affinity groups</li><li>• Retreats/disengagement</li><li>• Refusals/questioning authority</li></ul>	question authority, and to find belonging and joy.	<p>low-income and came from different backgrounds. And then our sophomore year, we all roomed together. And there's nine of us, and I think we could speak like 12 languages, all put together. I was like, 'That is amazing.' Amazing. I learned so much about my friends' culture through them. All the different cultures. I think it's so cool. Just like to be in a space like that. And I think OTE provided that, honestly."</p> <p><i>--Mateo, Walking Interview</i></p>
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SPATIAL ANALYSIS

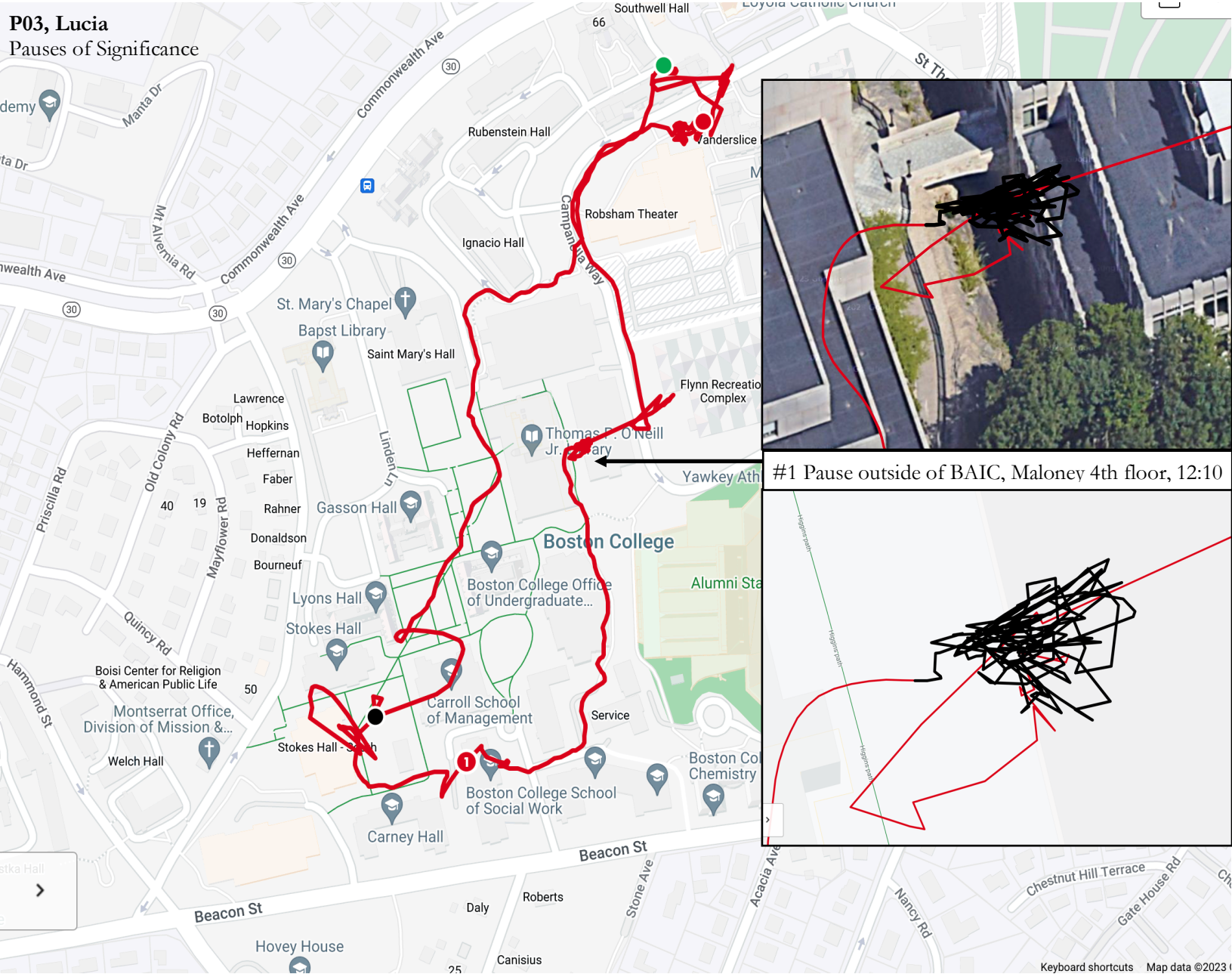




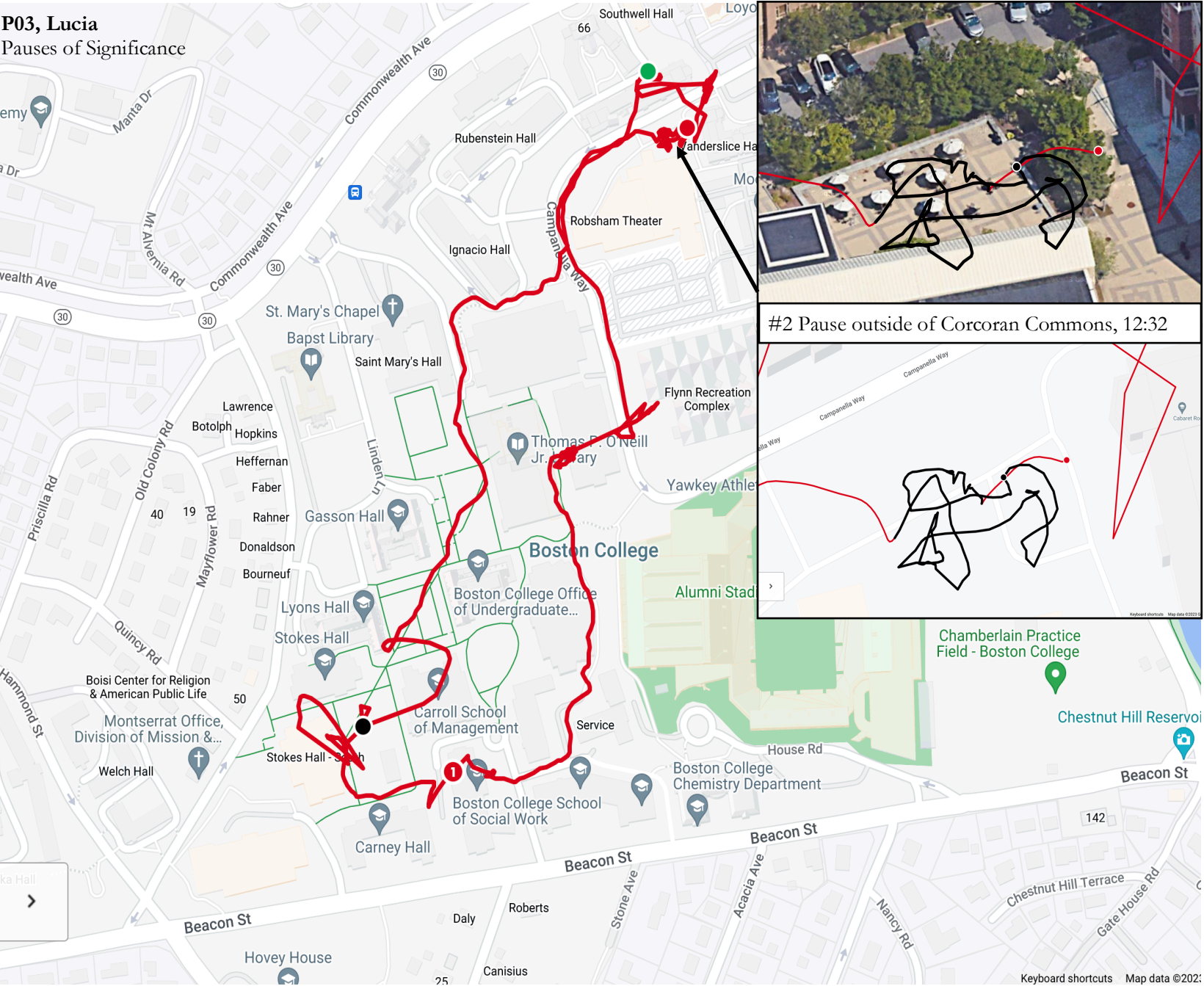




**P03, Lucia**  
Pauses of Significance



**P03, Lucia**  
Pauses of Significance





P04, Patrick



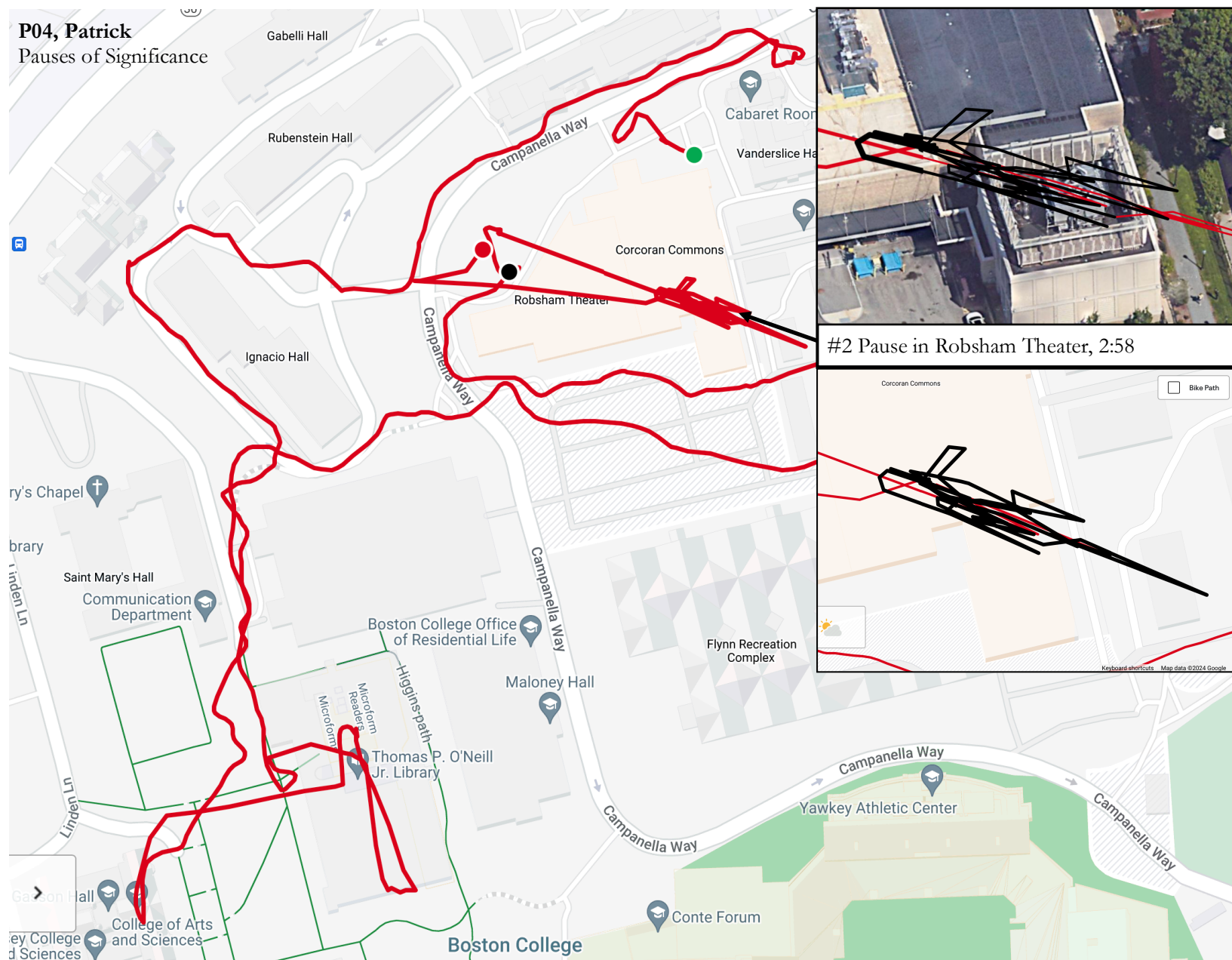
**P04, Patrick**  
Pauses of Significance

Map showing the route of P04, Patrick, with a red line indicating the path. The route starts near the Cabaret Room, goes through the Modularity building, and ends near the Margo Recreation Center. A black dot marks a pause on a bench outside the recreational center. An inset map shows a zoomed-in view of the area around the bench, with a red line indicating the route and a black dot marking the pause. The inset map also shows a legend for 'Bike Path' and 'Map V'.

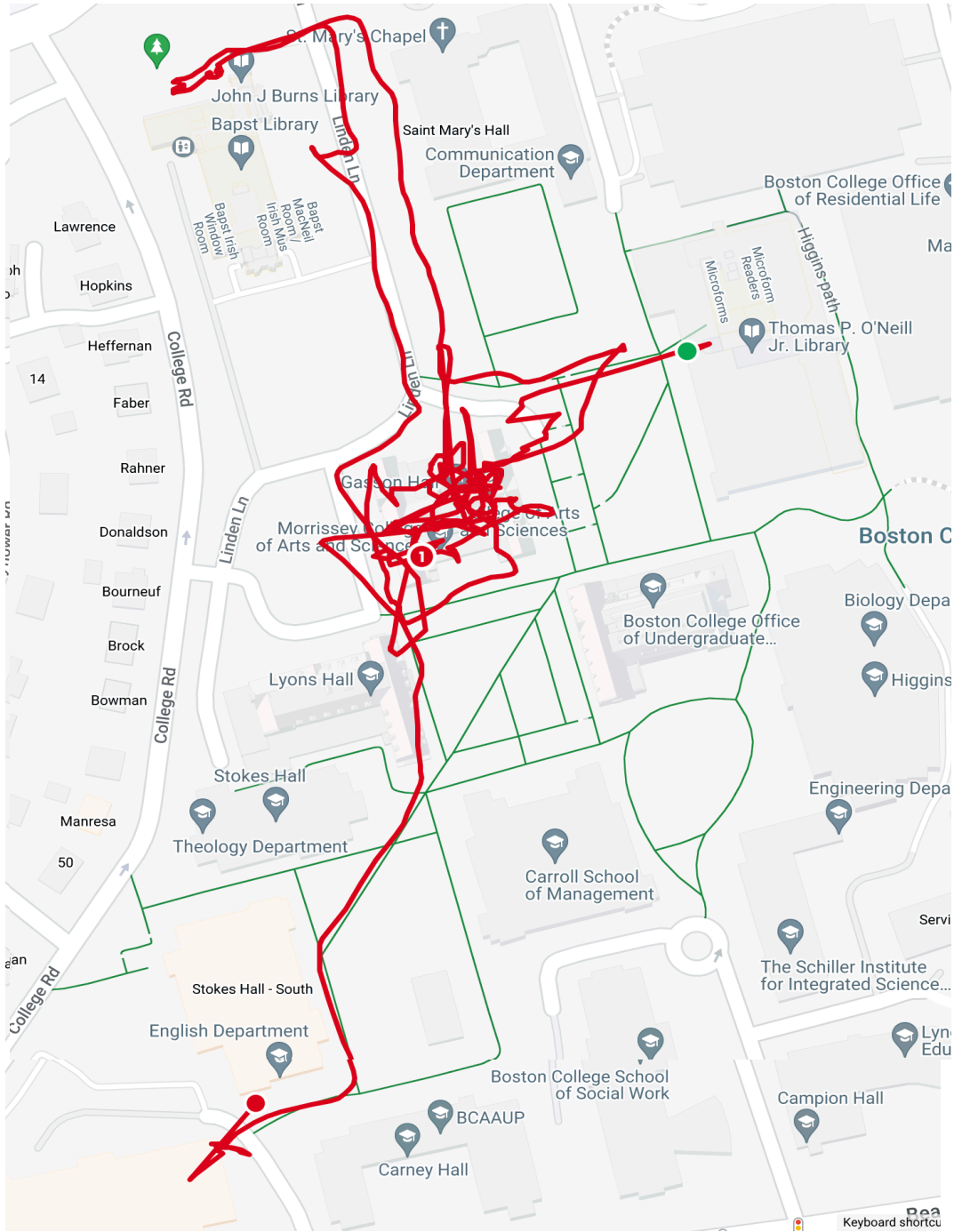
**#1: Pause on a bench outside of the recreational center, 6:30**

#1: Pause on a bench outside of the recreational center, 6:30

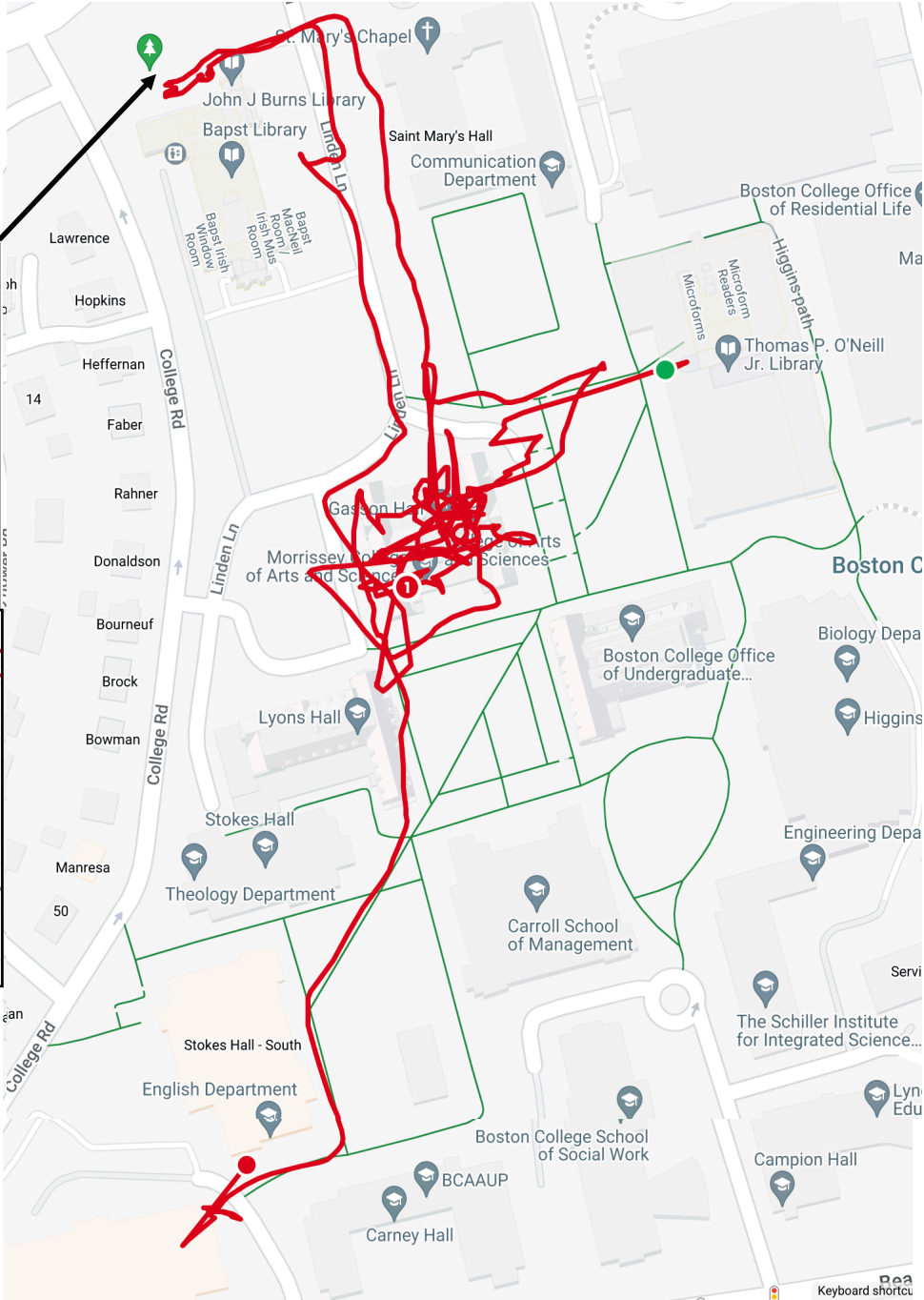
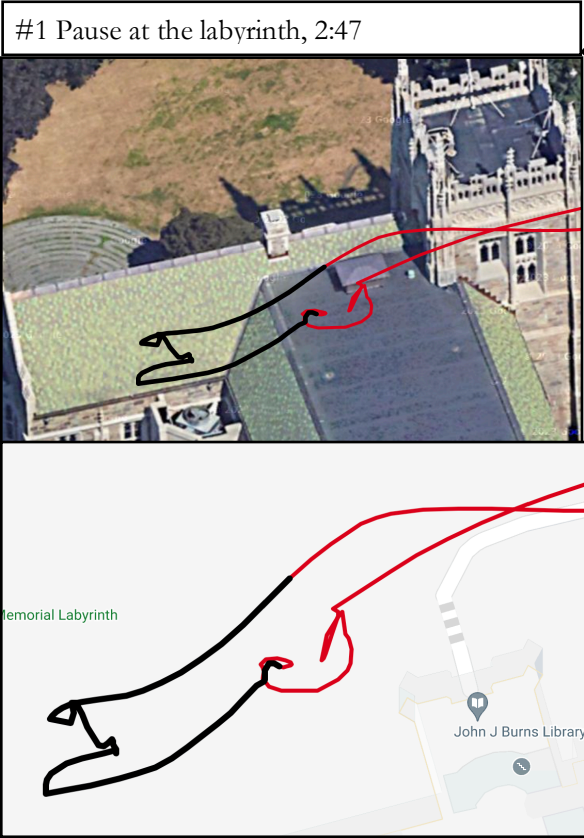


**P04, Patrick**  
Pauses of Significance

P05, Mateo



**P05, Mateo**  
Pauses of Significance

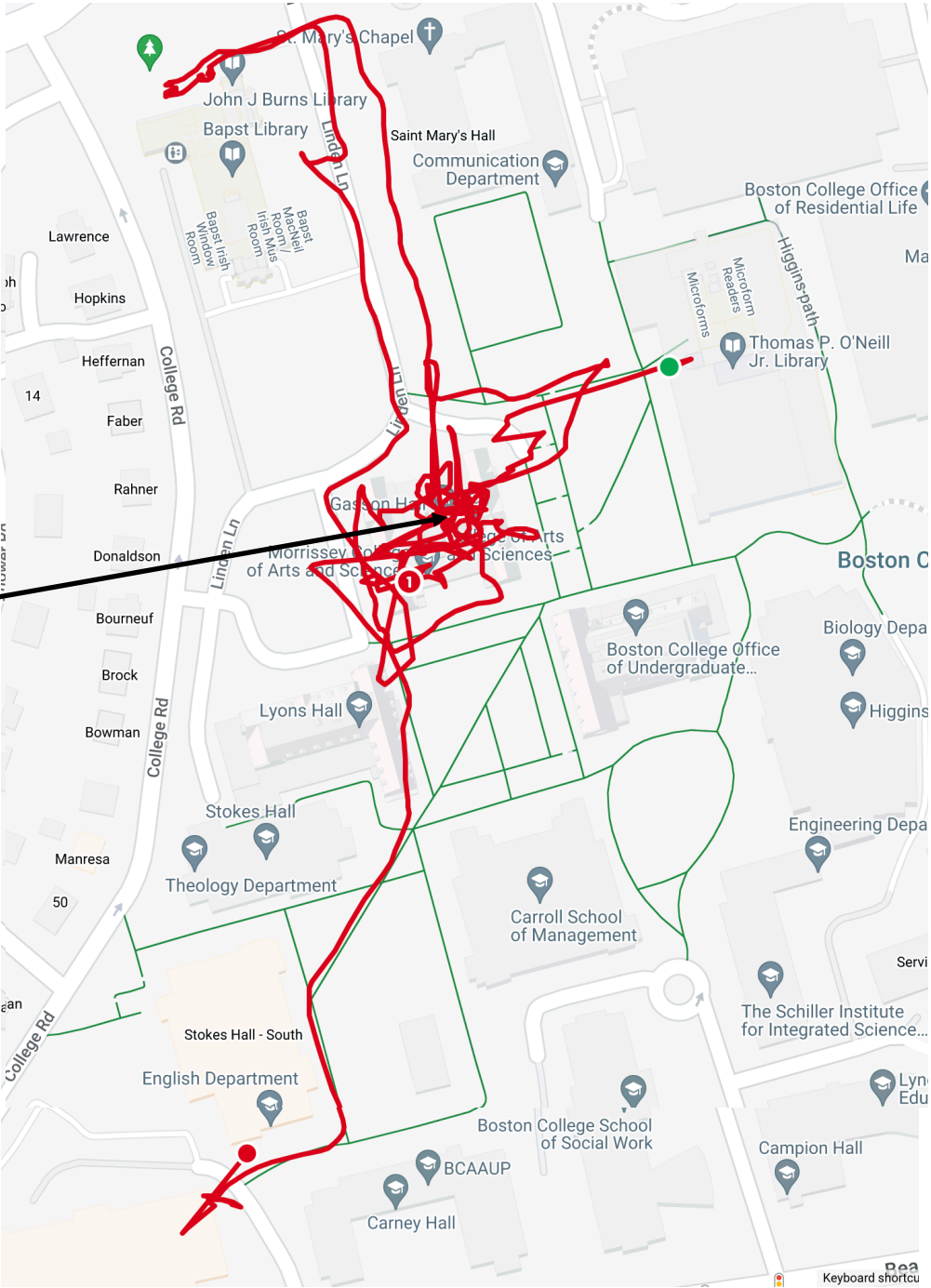
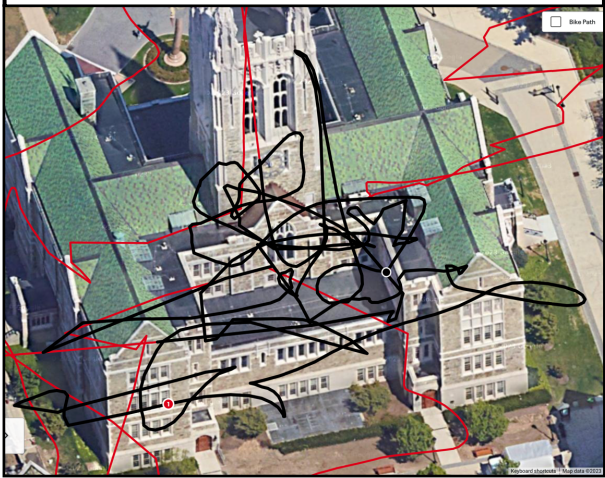




**P05, Mateo**  
Pauses of Significance

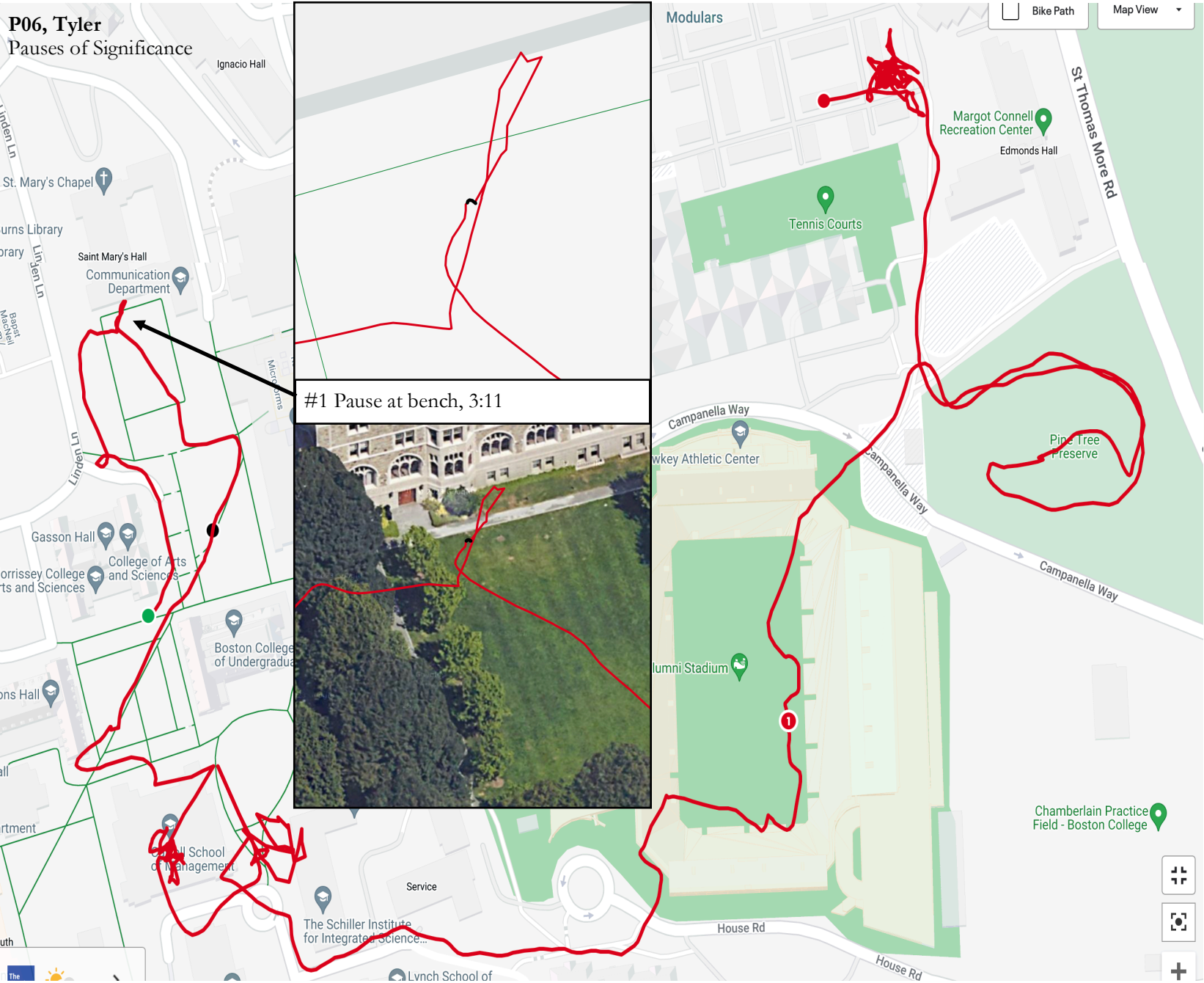


#2 Pause in Gasson, 23:18

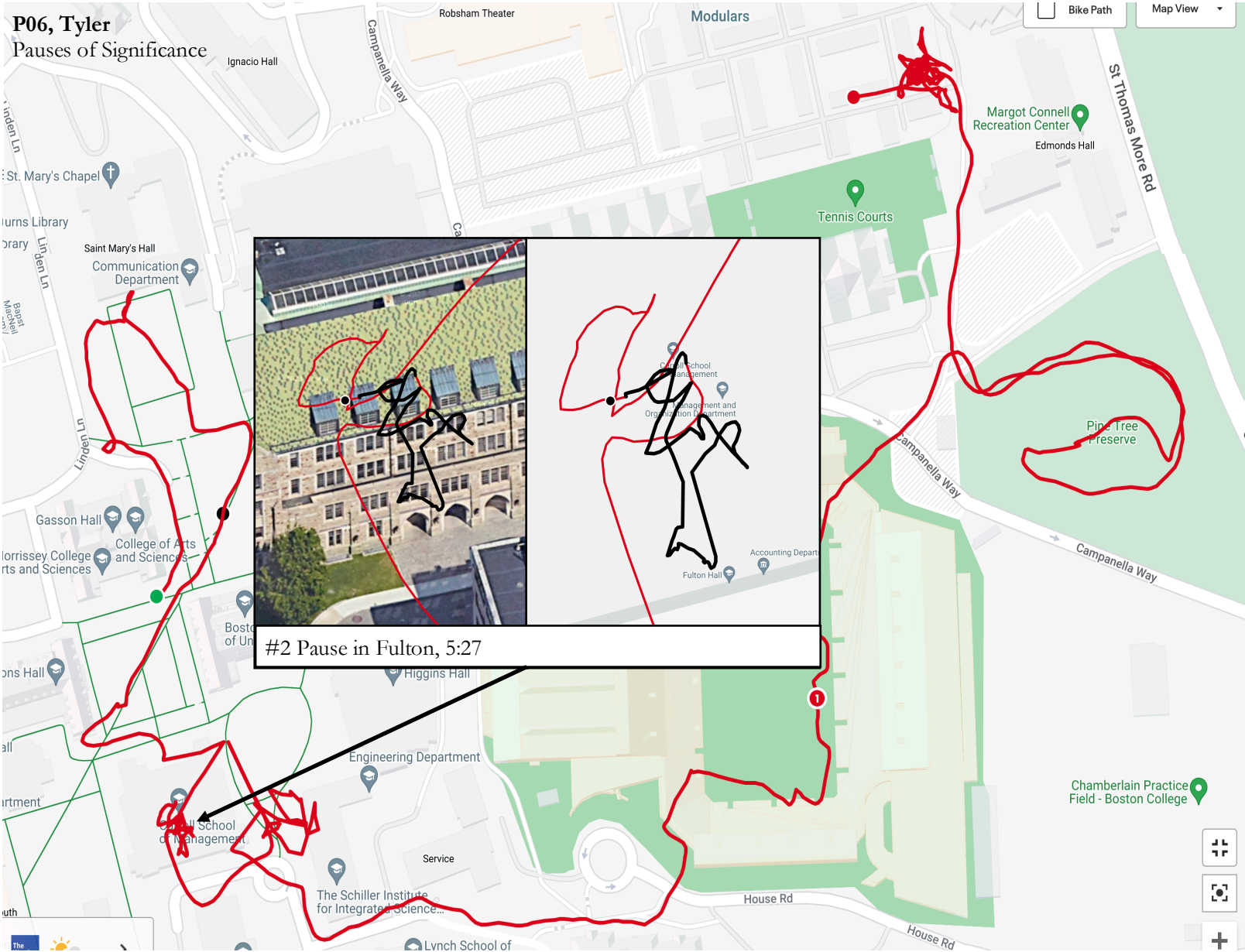




**P06, Tyler**  
Pauses of Significance



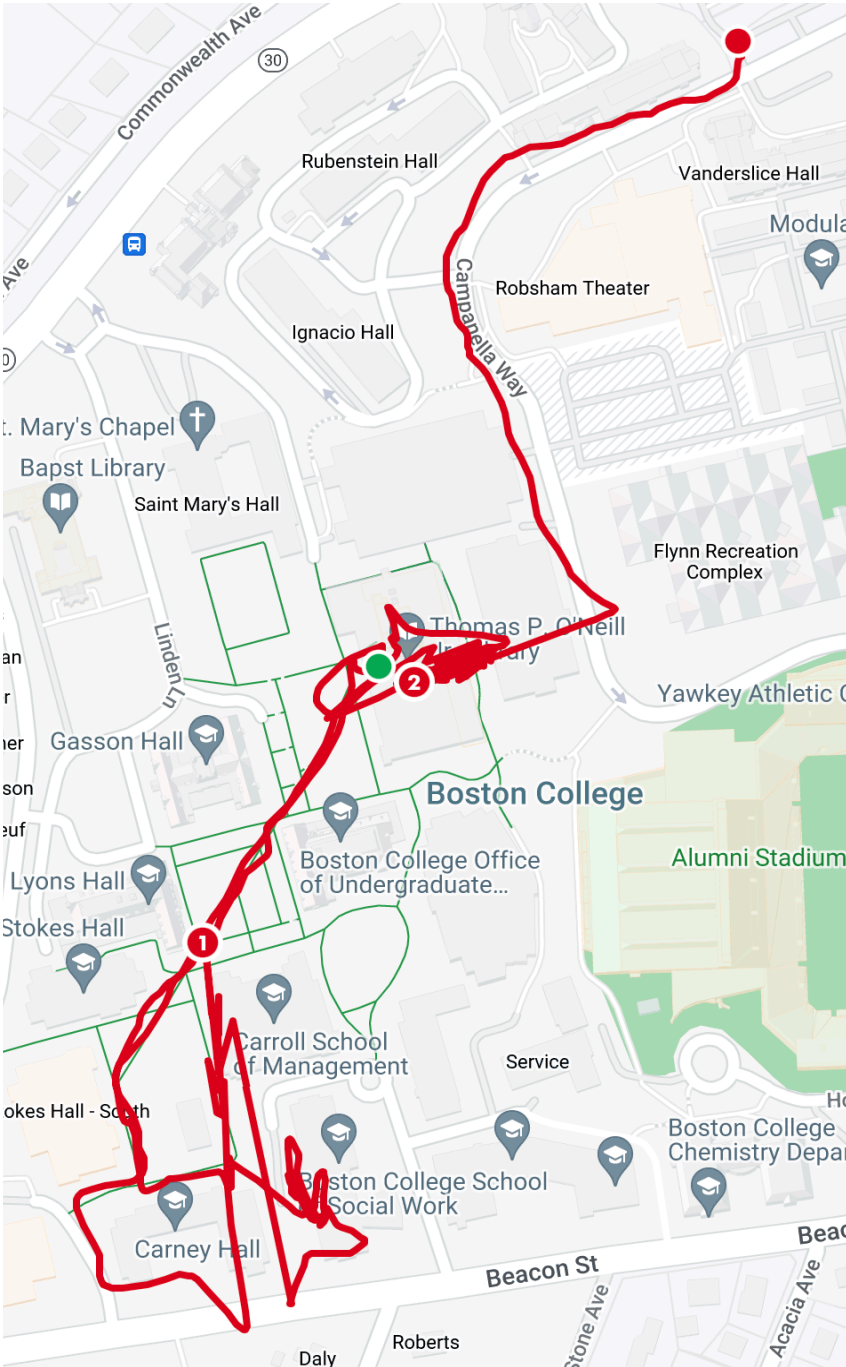








P07, Anita



**P07, Anita**

Pauses of Significance



#1 Pause in BAIC, 31:39

