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Dear White People:
Let's Talk About Our Self-Segregation at Yale

In high school, we all hung out in the alcove. This was our place, our hangout spot. My friends and I would bring speakers to school just so we could dance here during breaks from class. We ate lunch in the alcove every day while blasting Reggaeton and Bollywood music. We'd roam the halls endlessly together with our laughs filling up the school. Everyone in high school knew my friends and me as the "diverse" group. However, we branded ourselves as "Friggin Do It:" a name we made up.

At first, the label of "diverse" was something that I had pride in. A label that I loved about my friend group. We were all together, sharing and partaking in one another's culture. However, it caused me to ignore the racial dynamics of our own friend group. Despite being "diverse," about half of my friends in "Friggin Do It" were white. There is nothing wrong with this at first glance. However, whether people knew it or not, there seemed to be a sense of white self-segregation within our friend group. Many of my friends who were white would hang out together more often, and they would unconsciously ignore the people of color in my friend group. This was not true for everyone, but the overall tendency was still there.

There were a lot of times when we did all hang out together. Our yearly trips to the Wilson County fairs, filled with stomach-turning rides and fried oreos. Our weekend hangouts at

Rachel's house, where we would munch on her mom's famous chocolate chip cookies. And, of course, our lunches in the alcove every school day. Despite all our time together, little groups formed, as a result of the self-segregation, within the overall friend group. I was oblivious at first because I always focused on how "diverse" we looked on the outside; it took me a while to see the racial dynamics underpinning our friend group.

My best friend, Aerial, pointed this out to me once she got left out of a trip to the Green Hills mall. She felt pushed to the side by some of the white members of our group, and I was not surprised. Actually, it was obvious when reflecting. Half of "Friggin Do It" spent weekends together, went to separate parties than the rest of the group, and hung out with other people as well. This half consisted mostly of white people, and not by coincidence. Sadly, I had to rely on Aerial to see these faults in our friend group; but, this is reality. Nonetheless, I opened my eyes to this form of self-segregation and how it operates all around us. This wasn't just happening in our own friend group; it was all over the school.

Yes, the University School of Nashville, my high school, is a predominantly white institution, and white people make up most of the school. However, that does not excuse the fact that most friend groups were all white. Scrolling through the Instagrams of so many of my high school peers, I would only see white people on their feed with maybe the occasional "token" person of color. Yet, these same white people put blame on the students of color for self-segregating. Everyone pointed towards the majority black friend group two grades below me as an example of self-segregation without looking upon themselves. We must break this narrative of blaming people of color for self-segregating when white people engage in this same trend on an even larger scale.

I see this practice of white self-segregation all too often. When I came to Yale, I was not surprised to encounter the same thing happening. Already, only a few months in, and there are what people call the “white girl squads” or the “Berkeley squad,” which all consist almost entirely of white people. This is common to see in the dining hall, on the street, and at parties.

Hema Patel, a first year in Saybrook College, sees this trend happening as well: “It happens for several reasons but the main one is that white people are always more comfortable with other white people, and honestly, people of color don’t always want to maintain white friendships.” White people typically don’t want to put themselves in settings that are predominantly for people of color due to the uncomfot they might feel finally being in a place where they aren’t considered the majority. It is as if many white people can only handle people of color in small doses or moderation. When surrounded by mostly other white people, we usually don’t have to address our own prejudices and can ignore the wide range of struggles for people of color in this university. Many white people fall into this trap of sticking to the comfort zones of their all white or majority white friend groups. You and I don’t have to follow this mold. We need to break the white solidarity all around us.

The formation of these white friend groups may be more complicated than white people simply sticking with other white people. Hema notes that the creation of white self-segregation also may be due to the fact that people of color don’t always want to maintain white friendships. White people tend to take friends of color for granted, and we think we can ignore our prejudice just because we are friends with people of different races and ethnicities. So, even if you want friends of color, you can’t instantly expect to form these relationships. White people will always need to learn, adapt, and grow from our racist tendencies, and people of color aren’t to be relied

on to guide this growth. You shouldn't expect your friends of color to stick with you through your racism; they have no obligation to sit and watch you unlearn prejudice.

Aerial did not have to point out to me the white self-segregation in the friend group: it was not her job to show me, especially since this self-segregation is the product of white people's actions. Yet, she still did anyway, and I'm grateful for that. However, I can't rely on her to point out every prejudice or flaw; I have to begin to spot these myself and address them. I can't expect Aerial to always stick with me through my blindness to racism and my own biases; yet, I can be grateful if she does. This goes the same for you. You must respect the decision of your friends of color if they don't want to point out issues to you, if they would rather just spend time in spaces of color, or if they need a break from you. The creation of spaces of color, at least partly, is due to people growing tired of constantly addressing the prejudice or blindness of their white peers. Although this may facilitate the formation of all white friend groups, you can't shame your friends of color for creating spaces without white people, for creating a place to feel free of this burden of constantly navigating racism.

Many people still blame these spaces as being sources of self-segregation, pressuring people of color to branch out into white spaces instead; however, this pressure should be pointed towards you and me. At Yale, the cultural centers are the main spaces of color within this predominantly white institution. These are important places because, like Hema said, being friends with white people can be taxing on people of color. Instead of blaming, we should self-reflect on the ways we promote self-segregation and on how we can counter this. It is not the responsibility of people of color to break up white friend groups and white space by actively working to be friends with white people. Rather, white people should look at themselves to tear

down the white space we create. We should be the ones reaching out and trying to make friends with people of color.

In a 2007 edition of the Yale Daily News, Niko Bowie, the past publicity chair for the Af-Am House, writes on self-segregation at Yale, emphasizing that white students “should be willing to join — or at least be familiar with — the cultural groups that they claim self-segregate.” This is where to begin breaking the mold of white self-segregation. A lot of white people don’t realize that many of these spaces are open to white people as well. However, people, who choose to go to events at the House, La Casa, the NACC, the AACCC, or other affinity groups, often expect to be welcomed by everyone just for stepping foot outside the comfort zone of their white friend groups. This is not the case, and it never will be, so you should not expect that. Yes, you should attempt to deviate from the inclination to self-segregate by putting yourself in new positions and environments, but you should not look to get a pat on the back by everyone for doing so.

Adrien, a student in Silliman College, expresses confusion about the cultural centers and events. He wants to partake in certain programs that are “open to all,” but he also understands and respects the need for spaces of color. As a result, Adrien is “against self-inviting himself to most cultural events and houses.” Being friends with mostly POC, he typically waits until being invited to attend. There is no single answer for how to respectfully engage with other cultures, so it is hard to know if you are overstepping. As a white person myself, I can’t tell you where you can go and where you can’t in terms of the cultural houses and events. However, there are certain places and events that you should probably not be at; these are where people of color convene over shared experiences and identity; for instance, events like PL meetings and clubs like BSAY

are not places to find yourself. Navigating these situations is something to constantly struggle with as a white person, and it's something to always learn and grow from. All you can do is be receptive to the people whose space you are in by acknowledging your presence as a white person and listening to their concerns.