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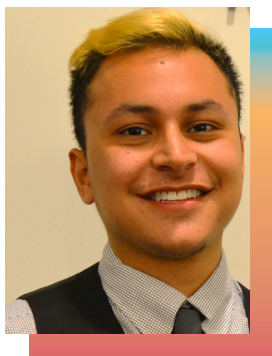
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Masculine Silence



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In November 2015, I had the privilege of attending a retreat at Loyola University Chicago's LUREC campus in Woodstock, Illinois. The retreat brought together LUC's men of color who are involved in the Brothers for Excellence (B4E) mentorship program. B4E is a peer mentorship program where upperclassmen provide academic and social support to first-year men of color. The students who participated in the retreat led discussions about what being men of color meant to them, followed by in-depth conversations around masculinity and stereotypes typically associated with being men of color. The student organizers followed these discussions with a screening of John Singleton's 1995 film, *Higher Learning*.

Higher Learning is a sensational film depicting issues of racism, homophobia, and White supremacy that are still prevalent on college campuses throughout the U.S. It was the first time I had ever seen the film, even though the movie was released 20 years ago. The conversation following the film echoed my own sentiments about how not much has changed since the release of the film, especially in the wake of protests

launched throughout the country that stemmed from the University of Missouri controversy. I saw a bit of my own struggle around masculinity, personal identity formation, and racism as an undergraduate within the personal narratives of the B4E participants.

This discussion became a radical space of empowerment and support that is not commonly provided to men of color. Dialogues around masculinity at my undergraduate institution were simply an affirmation of stereotypical topics such as sports, music, and heteronormative values. The conversations at this recent retreat did not feel this way. I sensed something unusual in this space compared to my previous experience with other men of color, which was a strong sense of community and solidarity.

The events outside of the discussion confirmed the necessity of establishing community and solidarity among young men of color. Young Black and brown men (and children) are being shot multiple times as a result of racial profiling by law enforcement officials. Most of these victims have never killed another person

in their lives. However, when a White 21-year old man opened fire at multiple churchgoers at a historically African American church he had the privilege of being escorted with a bullet-proof vest provided by law enforcement officials. Racism and injustice prevailed throughout this case. When people of color called for attention to these systems of injustice the media focused on the heinous act of violence itself, not the systems that perpetuate these acts.

Silence is the sole reason why change does not occur. A quiet community does not mean that it is a safe one. I have never felt so aggravated by the views, stereotypes, and discrimination that people of color face on a daily basis until now. To a certain degree, I feel like my own silence on issues of injustice, racism, and masculinity has prompted these events to escalate over the past couple of years. In order to change this silence I knew I had to use my voice. If there was any space I felt confident change could - and would - occur, I knew it would be in the retreat space with other men of color experiencing the same dilemmas.

As I reflect on the dialogues, discussions, and conversation that took place at this retreat, I think about

the resilience that the men of color exhibited in that space. I think about how radical it was to have men of color dismantle their own perception of masculinity, society, and racism. I realized why conversations such as the ones at the retreat are avoided at predominately White institutions across the country. These conversations have the potential to create substantial change by challenging systems and institutions that have maintained White supremacy for centuries.

The retreat also did something that Concerned Student 1950 was trying to seek from the administration at the University of Missouri: respect and acknowledgement. I find myself too often having to

explain why Black and brown bodies and lives should be valued just as much as society values European traditions and physical characteristics. This valorization is a trap that ultimately benefits White supremacy. However, if more spaces like the one at this retreat were to exist on all college campuses in the U.S., we might move in a positive direction towards social justice and equality for all racialized students.

In the 1980s, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) created a slogan that became the defining image of the AIDS crisis movement. *Silence = Death*. The men of color that participated in this retreat were not silent about racial and social injustices they struggle to overcome at a predominately White institution. They serve as a prime example of why spaces uniting young men of color are essential - not only to ensure their academic and personal success, but also to combat social injustices around the world. I carry this mentality as a young man of color knowing that my silence will no longer protect me. My silence never protected me. It only allowed me to perform masculinity by negating any passionate emotions related to social injustices. Thanks to this retreat, I have deconstructed my own silence and will encourage other young men of color to examine their role in the global fight against social injustices.

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