"It Was an Attack on Me Being Black:"
African American College Students
(Re-)Defining the Margin

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Abstract

A debate exists within higher education as to how “marginalization” should be conceived: some see it as an experience of alienation, while others focus on issues of resistance. This article seeks to bridge these two schools of thought. In this ethnographic study of one predominantly white college, I explore how black students interpret the margin as both a site of repression and a site of resistance and identify two properties associated with the margin: fluidity and reciprocity.
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I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression we know better the margin as site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance.

- bell hooks (1990: 151)

In *Yearning*, bell hooks (1990) speaks adeptly to an issue frequently raised in conversations about African American students in higher education. She describes how emphasis is often placed on African Americans’ experiences of racism and repression, while little attention is given to their resources and strategies for resistance. This critique is true of much research on African American students at predominantly white colleges and universities. Many researchers tend to concentrate on the persistence and severity of racism on American college campuses (Gossett, Cuyjet, and Cockriel 1996; Grant and Breese 1997; Feagin 1992; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Fleming 1984; McClelland and Auster 1990; Moffatt 1989). However, the consequence of this preoccupation is that the resilience and resistance of African American college students is overshadowed (Allen 1992; Tatum 1997; Willie 1978). More importantly, our conceptual models are more static than dynamic and more focused on the determinants rather than the interactive nature of social life. [H]ooks (1990) does well to distinguish between the margin as site of repression and the margin as site of resistance, highlighting the duality and complexity of this peripheral location.

Scholars who conceive of the margin as site of repression define marginalization as the alienation, social isolation, and estrangement experienced by African American students at predominantly white institutions (Gossett, Cuyjet and Cockriel 1996; Grant and Breese 1997; McClelland and Auster 1990). They rightly assert that racism plays a tremendous role in shaping
African American students’ relationships with the institution, with their white peers, and ultimately with themselves. Accordingly, marginalization is understood to be injurious to the social and psychological health of African American students, contributing to African American students’ diminished self-concept and poor social and academic adjustment (Fleming 1984; Oliver, Rodriguez, and Mickelson 1985; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993).

Another group of scholars constructs the margin as site of resistance. These scholars consider African American students who purposefully choose to form exclusive bonds with one another (Allen 1992; Tatum 1997; Willie 1978). Understanding these networks to be critical to the development of African American students, these researchers identify the significance of peripheral locations as a stage in students’ racial identity development (Tatum 1997), as well as a healthy response to the stressors associated with being a student of color at a predominantly white institution (Allen 1992; Bennett 1998; Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000; Willie 1978).

Thus, there is a debate within higher education as to the role of the margin in the college experiences of African American students at predominantly white colleges and universities. This article seeks to bridge the divide between competing conceptualizations of the margin. Contrary to studies that present one manifestation of the margin as its sole modus operandi, my research shows that the margin is a dynamic space. In this article, I will examine two properties of the margin: fluidity and reciprocity.

By introducing African American students’ interpretations of the margin into conversations about their occupation of this peripheral location, I explore the dynamism of this space. Using the cases of two African American students attending a predominantly white
college, Jason and Assata (all names and places are pseudonyms), I provide a springboard to reconsider how we define the margin and what it means to occupy a peripheral location.

Method

The two narratives highlighted in this paper are part of a larger study examining the role of the black campus community in the lives of African American students at Thayer College – a small, predominantly white, liberal arts college in the northeastern United States. Thayer is a highly selective college, recognized for its intellectual rigor and commitment to academic excellence. At the time of the study, Thayer College enrolled fewer than 2000 students. The student to faculty ratio was around 8:1. Students of African descent, including African Americans, Caribbean, African and bi-racial students with one parent of African descent, composed between 10 – 15% of the student population. There were close to ten faculty of African descent, and about the same number of black administrators; several were Thayer alumni.

Data were collected over a period of ten months, from August 2000 through June 2001 at Thayer College. Extensive participant observation data (approximately 250 hours) and relevant documents were collected. Observations were conducted at black student organizational meetings and at formal events and informal gatherings in the residence halls, dining hall, and Black Cultural Center. I am an African American woman, and at the time of the study I was in my late twenties. Black students permitted my presence in their lives over the course of the school year, allowing me to see and understand the black community and the college from their vantage point.

In addition, the data are comprised of 40 tape-recorded interviews, each approximately 90 minutes, with students, faculty, and administrators of African descent. Interviews with 24
African American undergraduates took place from December 2000 through June 2001. These interviews focused on the participant’s backgrounds, perceptions of the racial climate at the College, perceptions of black people, in particular students at the College, perceptions of unity and black male-female relations, their definitions of community/black community, social network, involvement, and thoughts of leaving/transfering from the College. Interviews took place in participants’ residence hall rooms, the library, the radio station, and the Black Cultural Center.

Other members of the black community were also interviewed, including 12 students of African descent (including students who identified as biracial/multiethnic, Jamaican, Haitian, Barbadian and Ghanaian), two African American faculty and four African American administrators. These interviews included questions about their backgrounds, their perception of the racial climate at the College, their definition of the black community, their involvement with the black community, their opinion of the effect of the black community on African American students, and the effect of the black community on their experiences at the College. These interviews took place during the spring 2001 semester. Participants were selected based on their presence and prominence at black-identified events, in African American students’ social networks, or their position in black organizations and institutions at the College.

The interviews and field notes that make up the bulk of the data were transcribed and coded. The development of memos, the use of creative approaches to thinking about my data, and the construction of matrices, diagrams and other visual aids were used in the development of my coding scheme (Becker 1998; Merriam 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994). The theme of marginality was found across the data. These two cases, Jason and Assata, were selected to offer a closer exploration and analysis of the fluidity and reciprocity of the margin as both a site of
repression and a site of resistance.

Introducing Jason

Standing around 5'8" Jason is an attractive young man, slender and dark-skinned. He says of himself: “I am as dark as they come. I cannot assimilate, you know what I mean?” Jason has bright, dark brown eyes, and a crown of soft, kinky black hair that he either wears in professionally done twists or simply out in a style reminiscent of the neo-soul artist Musiq Soulchild. His everyday attire consists of a crisp white t-shirt and slightly baggy, dark blue jeans, with little to no jewelry. He has a high-pitched voice. Combined with a faint Southern accent and an animated style of communication often infused with laughter, Jason is a living melody.

Jason is the oldest son of a middle class, African American family in a major city in the Southeastern United States. He and his brother were raised in a middle class neighborhood composed of other families of color. His mother, a college graduate, is the head administrator for a county office and his father, a high school graduate, serves as a baggage crew chief for a major airline company. While his parents are middle class, his family is not without financial difficulties. Jason’s enrollment at Thayer is particularly taxing on his parents. He explains, “My parents don’t have a lot of money. … Because they fall like in the middle, they are like middle class, like to the T, we get no aid from any place.” Jason is especially sensitive to his family’s financial circumstance given the wealth and prominence of his college friends’ parents:

My dad works. Like he didn’t go to college, and so he works. Like, he’s a blue-collar guy, you know. He puts bags on planes. And he doesn’t like just put bags on planes, like he’s over like a group of five guys that does the baggage for the airplanes, but still he’s down there too, you know. … Like my roommate his father’s the president of like a pharmaceutical company and his mother’s a doctor. And then my other best friend, Thomas, like his dad’s a doctor and like his mother’s an artist. And to have my dad who like puts bags on planes. … Like he has to do it even more, because he can’t afford it....
Jason feels indebted to his parents. He is conscious of his family's sacrifices to send him to college: "My parents are going to do everything they can to get me here, but like if it doesn't work out, I won't be extremely shocked." His performance in college is a tribute to their sacrifice. He explains:

So like I have to make it. I have to be able to prove to my parents that like them doing this was worthwhile, because now there's a house in Martha's Vineyard, just for them; because now there's a house in Vail, for when they want to go skiing. I have to be able to pay them back like every dime. And not because they're telling me like you know you have to pay me back, but because I have to. And if I don't, if I don't graduate with Honors, and I just graduate here and leave with like an Econ degree, I will feel like I did not like do good.

In addition to Jason's commitment to academic excellence as a way to "pay [his parents] back," he also expresses a desire to disprove naysayers at his high school. Jason was an honor student in predominantly black, magnet high school and among an elite group of students both teachers and staff expected to excel in their future endeavors. He describes his school as "the worst high school on earth! ... I look back on it now and I laugh. Awful place!" His poor opinion of his high school derives largely from the differences between his understanding of what it means to be black and the dominant ideology at his high school. Jason aspired to attend schools such as Harvard, Vassar, and Amherst. Students, faculty, and administrators at his high school discouraged him and accused him of being "white-washed" for not choosing one of the many historically black colleges and universities available to him. Many predicted that he would "tap for the white man" because he aspired to attend a predominantly white school above the Mason-Dixon line. Jason understood the argument for attending a historically black college and the value of "giving back," but his personal experiences led him to question the validity of these expectations:
We have this idea that as black people it’s our job to uplift black people, and to always give back, because you know we’re together and we’re like this Talented Tenth. But this was not a system that supported me at all, like at all. No support. When you have an advisor tell you that you’re white-washed, because you want to apply to Harvard, it’s not supportive.

Despite Jason’s negative high school experiences, he surrounds himself with black students in college. As a first year student, Jason develops friendships with most of the black students on campus. He often attends events with three first-year black women. It is common to see Jason laughing or making someone else smile. A quote from one African American junior sums up what many say about him: “Love him! Love him!”

In addition, Jason is close friends with two white first-year students in his residence hall – Peter, his roommate, and Thomas, one of his hall mates. For much of his first semester, Jason maintained two separate social circles: his white friends and his black friends. At the end of the fall, he decided to introduce his closest friends to one another. Jason organizes a movie night, featuring Love Jones, and invites his friends to attend:

So, idealistic person I am, I tried to get my white friends and my black friends like all to come together. My two hardcore white friends are Peter and Thomas. And then my hardcore black friends are like Kenya, Zora, and Lorena, but she’s not black she’s Hispanic. So I was trying to bring them together because these are like really close people, like I want them to all be friends. And it would be more comfortable for me, and it would be more comfortable for them.

As his “two hardcore white friends,” Peter and Thomas are especially dear to Jason. In fact, Jason refers to Peter and Thomas as his “best friends:”

I have two best friends. Like it’s a group of three boys: me, Peter and Thomas. Peter and Thomas are white, right? And, Peter’s my roommate and Thomas lives across the hall from me, but he practically lives in my room. We are like really close... Like we know everything about each other. It’s like we’re going to be friends for like the rest of our lives – period.

Jason describes Peter as “a jock.” Of Thomas, Jason says:
Thomas’s a really really...like he’s really spoiled. He just gets things, like everything his way. He’s the nicest person in the world though to me. Like if I needed anything, like he would give it to me. Like for instance, for housing like my parents hadn’t paid like some bill so he was ready to pay it for me. Like I mean like if I needed this boy for anything like he would be there.

As with many cross-cultural relationships, Peter, Thomas, and Jason are unfamiliar with certain things about one another. For example, Peter and Thomas are curious about black hair and black hair care products. Jason has no problem teaching his white friends about his hair. He explains:

Keep in mind that Peter and Thomas had not seen a pick [an instrument used to comb one’s hair] before. Thomas thought that it was a weapon. Cause I have one of the metal ones. (laughing) You have to understand, like they had never seen this before. When I came here, like I was bald, not bald but I had the low top fade. So, it had grown. And they were just like, “Wow! You know your hair grows in like this. It’s so soft. Like I don’t understand.” So like they had this whole little like fascination with my hair. And Peter would would pick my hair. And he just got accustomed, like he’d always pick my hair, like randomly. And I’d pick his hair, too, which was really funny.

Jason’s relationships with Peter and Thomas, as well as his friendships with black students indicate the quality of his social adjustment to college. Studies show that black students from predominantly black, urban public high schools generally have a very difficult first year, often concluding with their untimely departures (Graham, Baker, and Wapner 1985). Clearly, this is not Jason’s experience. Firmly situated in the black community and having formed strong bonds with white students, Jason constructs and cultivates a network of support among his college friends.

“It was like I was some experiment?”: Jason’s critical incident

However, Jason’s friendships are not without problems. Jason describes a particular incident involving his friends and his hair. One evening, Jason, Peter, and Thomas are in his room. Nia, one of Jason’s black female friends, is also with them. Jason is sitting in a chair in
the middle of his dorm room. Peter and Thomas are taking turns playing in Jason’s hair, when Thomas notices that the pick sticks in Jason’s hair. Within the context of his dorm room, Jason suddenly feels demoralized and marginalized:

Peter was picking my hair. He stopped. Then Thomas started playing in my hair. And he started picking and he was like “Oh my God! Like the pick sticks!” And I was like, “Okay. Whatever.” And he gets the pick and he’s like, “You know, I’ve always wondered if I threw this at you, if it would stick in your hair.” He reaches his hand back and he launches my pick at my head. Hard. I’m talking about like hard. Like really… Do you understand? And he threw the pick at me.

Jason expresses pain and anger:

It really freaked me out. And I like, I got out of the chair. I just cursed really bad. And I was like, “Get out of my room!” And then, and he was laughing. But you have to understand Thomas. Like, he was laughing because he was like first of all, “Oh my God! I can’t believe I did that,” and then he was just like and then – just in case you’re wondering it did not stick. But, anyway, so, he’s like, “Oh my God! Like Oh my God! Like Oh my!” That’s just all he started saying. And I’m like I like reach up to hit him and then I stopped. And I was just like, you know, “Get out of my room.” … So I kicked him out of the room and I slammed the door.

Peter’s and Nia’s responses to what has happened differ:

And like Nia’s on the bed. And Nia is like, laughing. But she’s not like laughing like she’s like, “Oh my God! I can’t believe he did that!” You know what I mean? And Peter turned red. Like he was just like, you know well, and you have to understand like I really went off on Thomas, like really really. And Nia was just like, “I can’t believe he did that, like I can’t believe.”

Thomas misunderstands Jason’s reaction to having his pick launched at his head. It is interesting to note that Jason left with Nia; he did not invite Peter to come, nor did he seek his support or understanding at this time:

And I was like Nia, “Let’s go. Like Nia, we have to leave now.” And I hear him like at my door. “I’m like Thomas, when I open my door you better not be there. And I’m like dead serious.” I mean you have to understand how hurt I was. Like I was really, really, really hurt. And so I’m like you know, “Thomas I really don’t want to see you when I walk through this door.” And I open the door and he was there like making a funny face, like trying to like laugh this thing off. And I
reached to like hit him, and then he just like jumps back and he’s just like, “Whoa” and he walks into the room. I walk with Nia to [her residence hall].

Jason explains the myriad emotions he experienced immediately following this event:

Like it, it hurt. That was the first thing. It was really painful. Second part was, he threw it at me and he said, “I’d always wanted to do this.” Which was just like, what and like why would you say, like you’ve always wanted to throw something at me? You know what I mean? Third of all, it was a pick and to me, like picks are a symbol of blackness to me. Like it’s something that only I can use, because I am black and because my hair grows a certain way. And for him to like throw that symbolic object at me, like I’m nothing you know and then, because of the way we were seated, and the way I was sitting lower than everyone else, like and everybody was just looking at me, it was like I was like some experiment. Like he could of just like got a knife and sliced my arm to see if I was going to bleed, and like I would have felt the exact same way. You don’t understand how hurt I was.

By Jason’s account, he feels objectified by Thomas. At the least, Jason can be said to feel marginalized. It may be more accurate to say that Jason simultaneously felt humiliated and infuriated, and ultimately wounded emotionally and spiritually that someone he calls a friend could inflict such pain. Although Thomas will later explain that it was not his intention to hurt Jason, nor did he ever consider that his actions would be interpreted as racist, it is Jason’s perception of the situation that transforms his dorm room into a margin as site of repression. The margin as a site of repression is not a space where black students choose to locate themselves but a place where students are situated when they feel socially isolated by and from their white peers and faculty. Countless numbers of black students have similar stories to tell. Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1998) describe the experiences of Black students at white schools as “agony.” This “agony” is familiar to those who reside in the margin as site of repression.

The fluidity of the margin can be further seen in Jason’s response. Within his residence hall room, Jason experienced the margin as a site of repression – that is Jason felt dehumanized, or in his own words, “like I’m nothing,” when Thomas threw the pick at him. However, his
interpretation of the margin shifts to that of a site of resistance when he leaves his dorm room
and embarks on the walk with Nia. In other words, when Jason chooses to leave his dorm room
and create a space with Nia where he can confide his initial reactions, he redefines the margin as
a space for his own purpose and his own design. The manifestation of the margin changes as the
meaning that Jason assigns to the margin changes.

During this walk, Jason confides in Nia. Nia listens and offers words of encouragement.
She helps him to process, as well as affirm his response to what has transpired. She offers:
“Well, you know what? I guarantee you like if you would have hit him or if this would have
carried on any further, like they would have said that you overreacted, you know?” In addition
to predicting that a white person would accuse Jason of overreacting, she validates Jason’s
feelings:

The thing I liked about Nia, like she didn’t give me just like, you know, “Oh he
sucks! Blah, blah, blah.” But she was like, “You have to understand like where
he’s coming from and although like yeah he was wrong, like we can’t doubt that,
but he just he didn’t, like he’s, he just didn’t know, you know?”

When Jason turns to someone for validation of his feelings and affirmation of his humanity, Nia
offers her support and advice. It is within the margin as a site of resistance that students need
and receive the balm of a confidante’s understanding and encouragement. For Jason, Nia
provides this balm.

The movement from margin as site of repression to margin as site of resistance not only
illustrates the fluidity of the margin, it also demonstrates the influence of one space upon the
other. Jason retreats to the margin as site of resistance, because he feels wounded by what has
transpired in the margin as site of repression. The conversation that takes place allows Jason to
think and speak aloud about how he feels. What transpires within and the properties assigned to
each manifestation of the margin is quite different. This account begins to underscore the importance of recognizing and distinguishing between the two.

Jason later returns to his dorm room:

I get back to my room. Peter’s asleep. I wake up in the morning, and we’re talking. And then Peter was like, “You know you really overreacted last night.” (tense pause) And so (high pitched laugh) the first thing that comes to my head is Nia, cause Nia said this. I mean, I’m just like you know somebody throws something at me. Hits me in my head. I don’t hit them back. Basically all I say is like get out of my room and I add some words, you know what I’m saying? But I overreact.

Peter’s comment, “You know you really overreacted last night,” marks Jason’s return to the margin as site of repression. Peter does not understand how Jason could read Thomas’ behavior as a racial affront, and therefore concludes that Jason “really overreacted.” In turn, Jason feels further alienated by a friend who he hoped would understand.

On their way to class that morning, Jason talks with Peter: “I was like you know, ‘How can you tell me that I overreacted when somebody threw something at me that like is a symbol of like who I am and then told me that that they always wanted to do it?’” Jason’s ability to clearly articulate his thoughts and emotions to Peter illustrates clear transference of what transpired in the margin as site of resistance to the margin as site of repression. Previous research reports a variety of black student responses to racism (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, and Bylsm 2003; Willie 1978). Jason could have responded to Peter’s comment by withdrawing, becoming angry, or deciding to move out of the room he shared with Peter. Instead, he draws on the strength garnered from his conversation with Nia, within the margin as site of resistance. He confronts a situation where he could have felt victimized for a second time. Nia forewarned Jason that someone would say that he overreacted. Remembering Nia’s caution, Jason is capable of having a civil and productive conversation with Peter. He addresses Peter’s inability to grasp the
culturally-symbolic import of the pick and the racism perceived by him to be inherent in Thomas’s actions. This represents the first of a series of conversations between Jason and Peter; eventually, they are able to reconcile their friendship.

Later that day, Jason has lunch with other black students in the dining hall. The black table in this dining hall represents an established margin as a site of resistance. Tatum (1997) explains that African American students often turn to the “black table” because here they find “the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else,” particularly when one’s white peers are “unprepared to respond in supportive ways” (p. 60). Jason describes what happened the night before. He remembers other black students’ responses to him:

When we had the big table discussion like everybody was there for me. And the fact that you did have a few radicals like Kenya who won’t talk to me to this to this day, because she thinks that I take up for those two white boys way too much. ... It’s just overall support. And you get like the radical views, and you get like the more realistic views, and it helps. And like overall during that time period, I got all the support that was needed for sure.

No matter what the student’s perspective, Jason knows that his feelings and experiences will not be discounted. In this space, students counsel him on his response to the incident, not whether his interpretation of the incident is accurate. To Jason’s mind, Kenya represents “the radical views” of what happened. Recall that Kenya was one of Jason’s “hardcore black friends” invited to attend the Love Jones movie night. After learning that Jason remained friends with Peter and Thomas, Kenya stops talking to Jason. Although Jason is hurt that Kenya no longer speaks to him, he understands the thinking behind her actions. Despite her “radical” take on what happened, Jason still says that her viewpoint “helps.”

Conversations within the margin as site of resistance enable Jason to restore his friendship with Thomas. Jason and Thomas did not speak for a week following the incident.
Finally, Thomas called Jason and they talked about what happened. Jason recalls this conversation:

So he calls me, and I’m just like, “What do you want?” And he was like, “Like I really didn’t know... I didn’t.” He honestly, and I know this might sound weird, but he did not intend to hurt me with the pick, number one. He didn’t understand that like that was like racial. He really didn’t understand that. And for me, that was like the dumbest thing (laughing) I’d ever heard in my entire life. ... I still think that what he did was wrong, and I’m still pissed at him for throwing this pick at me, but like I do understand. He shouldn’t have thrown anything at me, but he honestly didn’t understand that that was an attack on me being black.

Others, like Kenya, might see Jason’s response as one of capitulation, and thereby describe Jason’s actions as examples of acquiescence instead of resistance. Acquiescence would mean that Jason doubts the validity and recants his own interpretation of what happened, agreeing that maybe he did “overreact.” Acquiescence would mean that Jason never presents and defends his interpretation of what happened to either Peter or Thomas. Acquiescence would mean that Jason does not challenge Peter and Thomas to see the event through his eyes. Clearly, Jason does all these things. It is because he asserts himself and his interpretation of the event in a way that yields actual results that Jason’s response can be characterized as resistance.

Conversations within the margin as site of resistance inform Jason’s response to Thomas’ failure to understand that throwing the pick at Jason was “an attack on me being black.” Where the pain and anger generated by such an incident could have consumed Jason, he is able to make sense of what happened. Jason takes conclusions reached in the margin as site of resistance and transfers them to the margin as site of repression. He resists within the context of the margin as site of repression by voicing his position to Thomas and asserting himself. Jason could have become stagnant, assuming a victimized status and holding onto the hurt of what happened. However, because of transactions in the margin as site of resistance, Jason is able to reconstruct his friendship with Thomas.
Jason’s account allows for a close examination of the margin. At several critical moments in Jason’s account we observe movement between the transformation of the margin from site of repression to site of resistance. Jason is located in the margin as site of repression when Thomas launches the pick at him. He then enters the margin as site of resistance on the walk with Nia to her residence hall. He returns to the margin as site of repression when he speaks with Peter the following morning and Peter tells him that he “really overreacted last night.” Jason then locates himself within the margin as site of resistance during lunch when he recounts what has happened with students at the black table. These instances illustrate fluid movement between both manifestations of the margin.

As we observe the fluidity of the margin, it is important to note the influence each manifestation of the margin has on the other. Jason brings the pain he incurs in the margin as site of repression to the margin as site of resistance. Within the margin as site of resistance, Nia and others affirm Jason’s interpretation of what has happened to him, and advise him on how to proceed. Jason draws on the strength garnered in the margin as site of resistance to then speak with Peter and Thomas. In this example, what transpires in the margin as site of resistance helps to diffuse what takes place in margin as site of repression. It is because of the space to talk and make sense of what has transpired that Jason can communicate with Peter and Thomas and ultimately reconcile their friendships. This it is not sufficient to not that there are dimensions of repression and resistance within the margin, but it is also critical to show that these dimensions are in dynamic interaction with one another, influencing one another. These separate dynamics and the interplay between them have not been sufficiently acknowledged in the literature on race and higher education.
Introducing Assata

Assata, a sophomore at the time of the study, is the subject of the second account. An examination of her experiences at Thayer allows for further exploration of the dynamism of the margin. Through her account, we consider variations in the fluidity and reciprocity of students’ experiences in the margin.

Depending on whether she’s coming from swim practice or just studying, Assata can be found in everything from athletic gear to jeans and a flattering shirt. Oftentimes, this sophomore wears her hair pulled back in a ponytail, revealing her round, honest face. Her skin is the color of caramel, her eyes slightly darker with green flecks. Standing around 5’7”, she has a shapely physique. By all accounts, Assata is a physically attractive young woman.

Growing up, Assata enjoyed family life with her parents and three sisters. Together, they resided in a predominantly black, working class neighborhood located in a major urban center near Thayer College. Both of her parents are college educated at Ivy League schools. Her mother is a teacher. Her father has an MBA and works as an accountant.

Assata’s parents emphasized the importance of education. They sent each of their four daughters to private school, often going without modern conveniences and household necessities to do so. Assata recounts:

First of all, education was the number one priority in the house. So we would go without things for long periods of time but we’d still be going to private school. There would be days when we got back to the house, there would be no electricity, no water, no heat, no oil, no gas. But we still went to the best private school in the city.

Assata’s family made tremendous sacrifices to secure the best education for their children.

Assata learned to appreciate and endorse her parents’ sacrifices. However, people outside of her family did not understand:
And people would say, “Your dad went to [an Ivy League school]. Your mom went to [an Ivy League school]. Don’t you guys make a lot of money?” Well, we do but we have different priorities. And it was hard because I was expected to be at the same level as a lot of kids in my class and to say, “Oh you know what? I’m not going on that ski trip,” “I’m not going to buy a class ring,” or “I’m not going to apply to twenty schools because I can’t afford to apply to twenty schools like you can” — that was never easy.

Assata talks about the values she learned from moving between the worlds of her home and school:

It was kind of like my parents exposed us to the good life and taught us how this is how you are going to compete in an elitist world and this is how you are going to treat your colleagues and this is how you are going to compose yourself. But we come back home and it was a totally different story. We were in a working class neighborhood and we also had to be street-smart. We had to learn okay when we step out of this little white neighborhood where I go to school you got to come home.

Navigating the spaces between her school and home, Assata learned to code-switch. She notes:

“You have to deal with both sides and that was definitely beneficial. I can do it now.”

At both her secondary school and in college, Assata observes black students who do not possess this ability:

I don’t want to force a stereotype on [black students at her high school and in college] but I’ve noticed that if a black student, regardless what neighborhood he comes from, they go to these elite white institutes, for prep school, boarding school, whatever, they get back to the black community and they are totally lost. They don’t know where they came from anymore.

For Assata, knowing where one comes from is very important. A budding political activist, she believes that if one does not know where he/she comes from, then one cannot give back to the black community. Assata laments: “You wonder if this is the same generation that will learn to give back to the black community and that’s what bothers me.” She fears that some of the black students at her high school and Thayer “will end up like Clarence Thomas,” and in her estimation be of little use to “uplift black people” and “work with people who don’t have the
opportunity.” Assata believes that because of the conditions of her upbringing she can draw on her ability to navigate both settings and use this knowledge in the best interests of black people.

Assata describes herself: “I’m witty. I can respond to little things with a bit of humor and I have a way of getting my way so I love it. I can bounce back on things too.” She continues:

I’m ambitious. I want to do everything. I want to make money. I want to have a lot of kids. I want to save the world. I want to save my black community. You know all that. I want to be part of the uplift as Du Bois says or used to say. I think I’m in the position to, and I have every right to be.

Like many students of color attending predominantly white colleges and universities, Assata contends with questions about her presence at a school as selective and rigorous as Thayer. She sees a sea of jurors and feels that she’s been found guilty of “trespassing.” Particularly deleterious are the questions she asks of herself. Assata is aware of how self-conscious she can be:

I think that people for some reason are always judging me and looking at me and trying to figure out who I am and where I come from and what I’m doing in this situation whatever situation I am in while I’m in it.

Many students of color in predominantly white settings are sensitive to cues about their qualifications and competence (Willie 2003). Hints that she was only admitted because of affirmative action nibble at Assata’s confidence. Half-joking and half-serious, she states, “I know I’m smart or else I wouldn’t be here, right? Unless they have really been mistaken in the Admissions Office and I am not afraid to admit it.” In another comment about her academic performance, Assata offers:

Most of my classes the majority are white male. I find that in a lot of my classes it’s hard for me to speak up at first. But once I find the level where I’m aware of what’s going on in the room then I know what kind of response I’m going to get from different types of people.
Assata evaluates the racial climate of all of her classes. She assesses her classmates as well as her professors before she feels comfortable sharing her thoughts in class.

Although Thayer is a liberal arts college, Assata does not take this to mean that nothing racist ever happens at the school. She notes that racism, though oftentimes subtle, is nevertheless present at Thayer:

People think [that] Thayer is like this liberal, wonderful place and there’s never like any confrontation about race. I don’t think it’s so much about blatant disrespect or racism. Sometimes the subtle things are blatant. Like a professor said to me, “I was worried about you last year because it’s really hard for local people to adapt.” And then, I was like, “Is she referring to…?” I wasn’t sure what she was talking about. And she said, “You know, a lot of local students don’t have the opportunity to recreate themselves or reestablish themselves as individuals.” And that made sense to me. But at first I said, “Is she talking about black inner-city kids?” And I think that she probably was, but she wasn’t going to say that to me.

The African American Student Union (AASU) provides a space for Assata to develop her awareness and skills as a political activist. She joined the AASU during her first year of college and remains an energetic member as a sophomore. She spearheads and assists with the organization of various activities sponsored by the AASU, including social events as well as working closely with the Admissions office to plan a weekend for prospective black students. However, Assata does not always feel that her efforts are appreciated:

I invested all this energy and time [in the AASU] and I was kind of spread thin at the same time, but I was doing well academically. And that didn’t bother me as much, but what did bother me was that I planned events for students, and people didn’t even show up. That’s to me a kind of reflection of the type of person they are. If they don’t find it important enough to go to these events and chill and be sincere or just be around black people. Like that’s important to me. ... That really upset me because no one understood how dedicated I was at the beginning of the year and people didn’t care to me.
In Assata’s opinion, low attendance at AASU events signifies the level of racial consciousness among her black peers. Assata served as AASU secretary during the fall semester of my study. She relinquished her role and responsibilities during the spring.

Assata’s behavior is consistent with characteristics of the immersion stage of Cross’ Nigrescence model. During this stage, “the struggle to destroy all vestiges of the ‘old’ perspective occurs simultaneously with an equally intense concern to clarify the personal implications of the ‘new’ frame of reference” (Cross, Parham, and Helms, 1991: p. 324). Assata is attempting to redefine her identity as a person of African descent. She is particularly critical of black people who demonstrate behaviors that, in her opinion, do not reflect a black perspective. Recall her comments about Black students who “do not know where they come from” and black students who do not attend events sponsored by the AASU. Assata is also critical when she sees this reflected in her own behaviors. When asked to describe herself, Assata did not make mention of her race or ethnicity. She notes that if she were looking at her own interview transcript she might think that she was someone who was not in touch with her blackness:

I know that if - and this goes back to my self-consciousness - that if I were looking back at someone or back at myself and saying she didn’t even say she was African American! Do you know what I mean? She went to private school and she didn’t even say anything [about being black]. And that would make me feel like now I have to say, “Oh I’m black. I’m here, I’m trying to do good for all blacks.”

Assata’s first two years at Thayer are periods of transition and growth. She dedicates considerable time to serving the black community through her involvement with the AASU. This facilitates her political activism and increasing racial awareness. Admittedly self-conscious, Assata’s critical incident illustrates that her sensitivity to issues involving race is not exaggerated.
“That Afro-American girl”: Assata’s critical incident

In addition to being an active member of the AASU, Assata is also a member of the swim team. Assata swam in high school. She knew that this would be an asset when she applied to college: “I knew swimming was going to help me get into these schools. I’m not a good swimmer, but I’m okay, you know. I’m good enough. I’ll get the team some points. And that’s the extent of my swim life.” The coach of Thayer’s swim team recruited Assata. Assata joined the team her first year and remained a member during the time of the study.

Unfortunately, her experiences with the swim team have not been entirely positive. During her first year at Thayer, Assata endured the racism of her team members and coach:

[L]ast year when I was a freshman on a few occasions [the coach] would single me out as “that Afro-American girl” or “that black girl standing on the side of the pool.” Like if someone asked, “Who’s doing the 100 backstroke in the meet tomorrow?” She would say, “That Afro-American girl standing over there.” Now the first time she said it to me I was like, “Hmm...I’m a freshman. I don’t know anyone on the team.” And that was another issue, because no one introduced themselves to me. To this day, there are still some people on the team, they don’t even talk to me when they walk by.

As the only African American member of the swim team and a first-year student still trying to make sense of the college campus, Assata is both baffled and hurt that her swim coach refers to her as “that African American girl” rather than calling her by her name. During calls to Assata’s home as a prospective student, the coach called her by name. Assata reflects on the coach’s recruitment strategy: “When you were recruiting me, you said Assata. You didn’t say that black girl [in the city], you know? Even though that is probably what she thought.” Coupled with the distance imposed by members of the predominantly white team who neither introduced themselves nor welcomed her, Assata feels marginalized and ostracized by most everyone on the swim team. These actions and inactions on the parts of Assata’s swim coach and teammates, respectively, situate Assata in the margin as site of repression.
Assata confides in her black friends. She shares her troubles with the swim team during an AASU meeting. She leaves the meeting unhappy with the level of their response:

They were very passive and I wasn’t getting the response that I wanted to get. Like when I was having problems with the swim team, they were there but no one really wanted to go out of their way to be like, “Why don’t I come down to the pool with you?”

While Assata’s friends are sympathetic, they are not willing to stage a pool-side sit-in. They provide a space for Assata to speak freely about what happens with the swim team. They support her and give her advice. Assata appreciates that “they were there” for her, but she also expresses disappointment that her friends did not “want to go out of their way” to lend the active support she sought.

Although she finds emotional support within the context of the AASU meeting, the AASU cannot be said to constitute a site of resistance for Assata. She describes their response as “passive” because they are not willing to come to the pool with her. As a formal organization within the black community and Thayer College, she looks to the AASU to provide an active and demonstrative form of support. She requires from them a show of resistance that extends beyond affirmation and validation. When the group fails to meet her expectations, it also forfeits characterization as a site of resistance. Identification of a space as a site of resistance or a site of repression rests with the primary actor in the account. Grant and Breese (1997) caution us “to be ever mindful that individuals’ own construction of meaning is a critical determinant of how they experience and process the objective conditions of marginality” (p. 204).

Assata also confides in her mother:

The second time it happened I told my mom and of course she was like, “Okay, I’m calling the dean.” The dean called me, and she said maybe [the coach] needs sensitivity training and I was like, “Hm... okay.”
Assata’s mother listens with the care and concern of a parent. She intercedes on Assata’s behalf by involving the administration of the college.

Assata’s mother’s attempt to advocate on her behalf could be interpreted as undermining Assata’s power and ability to resist. However, it has the opposite effect. Remember that Assata is a first-year student when this incident takes place. She has yet to develop strong relationships with her peers, so she confides in her mother. Her mother affirms her interpretation of her coach’s behavior and validates Assata’s feelings. In doing so, her mother’s support facilitates Assata’s adjustment to college and the development of Assata’s critical resistant navigational skills (Solórzano and Villalpando 1998). It is partly from her relationship with her mother that Assata actualizes the power of her own voice. Comparative studies of first-year students of color and first-year white students report that students of color maintain closer ties with their families than white students (Kenny and Perez 1995; Kenny and Stryker 1996). Hinderlie and Kenny (2002) found that biological mothers are particularly significant for African American students’ college adjustment. Kenny and Perez (1995) suggest that the “cohesion and interdependence often cited as characteristic of ethnic minority families appears to be adaptive at the time of college entry, when coupled with the perception that the autonomy strivings of the student are also encouraged” (p. 532). This is true for Assata. She develops the independence and the wherewithal to defend herself when confronted with the racist behaviors of her coach or anyone else on Thayer’s college campus. The conversation between Assata and her mother represents the margin as site of resistance.

Two deans contact Assata. The first dean, Greg Darby, an African American who serves as assistant dean for black student affairs, counsels Assata. Assata begins meeting with Greg to discuss matters related to the swim team, and more generally to being a black student at Thayer
College. Assata shares: “I know I can talk to Greg whenever I need to. I can call him at his house.” In these conversations with Greg, Assata receives affirmation and validation, enabling her to resist and respond affirmatively to racist incidents on campus. She begins to develop the power to voice her thoughts and articulate her feelings.

Conversations between Greg and Assata provide a space for Assata to think critically about her experiences on the swim team, as well as her experiences as an African American woman at Thayer. Within this space, Assata cultivates the power of her voice to speak up and speak out when she feels alienated. Greg assists the process of Assata’s development, therefore their interactions can be characterized as examples of the margin as a site of resistance.

The second dean, a white woman, reprimands the coach for her mistreatment of Assata. This yields satisfactory results:

I think that since I went higher up above her, someone said something to her and she was very apologetic and everything about it. I was like, “Alright now that you know I’m not saying anything anymore,” but she still didn’t know my name. … I think she knows what she does because she still lets little ignorant things slip.

After the deans’ intervention, the coach’s conduct improves mildly, the teammates somewhat. Assata still does not know everyone on the swim team, and her coach “still lets little ignorant things slip.”

While it is important that the college protect Assata as a student, this protection does not amount to resistance. This action does not lead to a change in the way Assata interacts with members of the swim team. However, her conversations with Greg have a clear impact on her behavior. Assata’s ability to critically assess and articulate is partly a reflection of her meetings with Greg.

More than a year later, Assata remains a member of the swim team. When asked about her coach, she responds:
(Re-)Defining the margin

Somebody said, “I think your coach might need sensitivity training.” I was like, “No, she’s ignorant and training’s not going to help that. Someone should tell her about herself.” And, I did that, but it really didn’t get me anywhere (laughing). It’s not even like sensitivity. I mean you don’t have to be sensitive about something to not single somebody out as the only black person, that’s just respect.

No longer the unsure first-year who quietly endured her coach’s erasure, Assata now speaks up in her own defense. Within the margin as site of resistance, she was able to process her feelings through her conversation with Greg and developed the ability to actively respond to situations that occur in the margin as site of repression. On subsequent occasions when the swim coach behaves in ways that offend or insult Assata, she stands up to the coach and “tells her [the coach] about herself.” Assata shrugs off those who would excuse the coach’s behavior as insensitive and identifies the coach’s conduct as symptomatic of “ignorance.” Assata draws on the power garnered in the margin as site of resistance to assert herself in the margin as a site of repression.

An examination of Assata’s experiences complicates our understanding of the margin. Assata’s experiences demonstrate the fluidity of the margin. When her coach erases her identity by calling her “that Afro-American girl” instead of by her name, Assata feels alienated. It is at this time that she occupies the margin as a site of repression. Moreover, her first efforts to transform the margin into a site of resistance dissipate because members of the AASU are unwilling to organize a protest. However, Assata enters the margin as a site of resistance when she speaks with Greg. Unlike with the margin as a site of repression, Assata chooses to situate herself in a clearly black-identified space, the Black Cultural Center, where she confides in Greg. Here in the margin as a site of resistance, Assata receives affirmation and support. This movement between the dual manifestations of the margin is based on the meanings that Assata assigns to the space and/or interactions in the space.
Movement between these different manifestations of the margin illustrates the transference of information and power between the sites. Assata brings the pain of the injury sustained by her coach into the margin as site of resistance when she speaks with her mother and Greg about her coach’s conduct. They validate Assata within this space. From these conversations, Assata’s interpretation of the situation is affirmed and she develops the ability to articulate her position. When she re-enters the margin as site of repression, she is able to draw on the power of voice created within the margin as site of resistance. Instead of withdrawing from the swim team, Assata asserts herself within the margin as site of repression. What transpires in the margin as site of resistance helps to alter the hurt inflicted in the margin as site of repression. The words and actions that once marginalized Assata now assist in the development and assertion of her voice.

(Re-)Defining margin

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.


My friends and companions were drawn mainly from the colored students of Harvard and neighboring institutions, and the colored folk of Boston and surrounding towns. With them I led a happy and inspiring life. There were among them many educated and well-to-do folk, many young people studying or planning to study, many charming young women. We met and ate, danced and argued, and planned a new world.


Du Bois’s descriptions of the margin, offered at the beginning and during the middle of the last century, continue to accurately characterize the experiences of African American students attending predominantly white colleges and universities today. Whether residing in the
margin as a site of repression or operating from the margin as a site of resistance, African
American students at predominantly white colleges often find themselves occupying the space
behind "the veil."

The cases of Jason and Assata permit an exploration of the margin as a dynamic space.
Both participants illustrate the fluidity of the margin. Students move between the margin as site
of repression and the margin as site of resistance. Moreover, what transpires in one location
informs what takes place in the other. For example, conversations in the margin as site of
resistance help to diffuse potentially explosive reactions to what happens in margin as site of
repression. In both instances, we see Jason and Assata draw on the advice and conclusions
reached in the margin as site of resistance to address matters in the margin as site of repression.
Not only are students affirmed and validated, but the power of voice acquired in the margin as
site of resistance enables them to speak directly to those who mistreated them.

We have many useful studies on African American students' experiences at
predominantly white colleges and universities. Research has documented consistently that
African American students endure alienation, social isolation and estrangement within these
contexts (Feagin 1992; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Gossett, Cuyjet and Cockriel 1996; Grant
and Breese 1997; Smedley, Meyers and Harrill 1993; McClelland and Auster 1990; Moffatt
1989). These works are important, but we need to think in more complex ways about the
experiences of African American students. Static, one-dimensional accounts of African
American students' experiences within the margin undermine and underestimate the agency and
self-determination of African American students. Moreover, it masks the dynamism and
potential of the margin. The duality and complexity of the margin warrants further attention and
serious consideration within the field of higher education.
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