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## We Walk in Different Worlds

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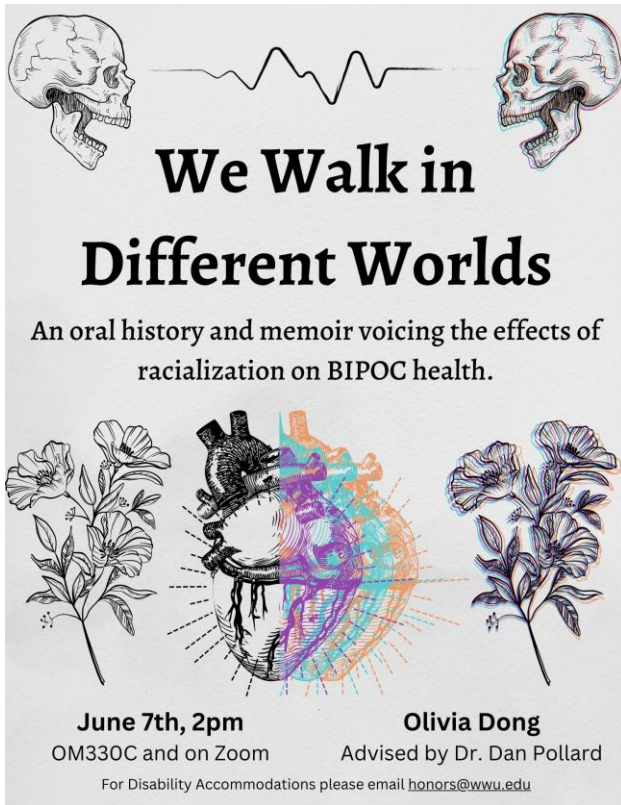
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# WE WALK IN DIFFERENT WORLDS

An oral history and memoir voicing the effects of  
racialization on BIPOC health.

2023

## ABSTRACT

People of color experience higher levels of stress due to exposure to racism at multiple societal levels including systemic racism and interpersonal discrimination. Elevated stress is a precursor to many health conditions, and contributes to explaining racial health disparities seen across America. This oral history record displays some examples of what racialization looks like and how racism has affected BIPOC health. Understanding that race is a social construct but racism causes serious health effects is necessary for moving towards a more compassionate society where BIPOC have the same quality of life as our white counterparts.

**Olivia Dong**

Advised by Dr. Dan Pollard

**Trigger warnings:** Discussions of racism, discrimination, and racial trauma. Mentions of suicide, gun violence, police violence against Black Americans, genocide, mental health issues.

**A note of gratitude:**

*A huge thank you to the four people I interviewed for this project, I appreciate your vulnerability and your trust in me. Thank you for sharing your stories and taking part in something so important to me.*

*Thank you to my advisor Dr. Dan Pollard for giving me the space to take this project in the directions I needed to take it and for valuing the work I do and seeing me.*

*This piece is dedicated to Silvia, Zoe, Jay, Alex, Simone, Fiona, Allyson, Guadalupe and all HSOC members past, present, and future. Keep challenging the system and demanding respect.*

## Introduction

Moving to Bellingham to attend Western Washington University was an adjustment in ways that I never anticipated. I figured Bellingham would be pretty much just like my hometown of Sammamish, WA, but I was incorrect. Approximately one third of the Sammamish population identified as Asian in the 2020 census, and a modest 58% of the population is white. There were enough Asians around me growing up that I wasn't forced to consider my race as something that would cause me to be treated differently. I always knew I was Asian-American, specifically I'm Chinese, but when I thought about identity I would always list my interests first and hardly ever my race.

Five years ago, I probably would have said that I'm a girl, a dancer, a theatre kid, and an aspiring scientist. Today, my race is the first thing I think about when considering my identity, and I think about my race every day. So, what changed? Bellingham is 81% white, and less than 6% of the population identified as Asian in the 2020 census. At first, I didn't know why I felt so out of place and uncomfortable, I wasn't used to considering race as a relevant piece of my identity. But I soon started making the connections and becoming aware of all the ways race has impacted my life and my friends' lives.

My original plan for this project was centered around my experience of living with the autoimmune condition Lupus as a woman of color. But after reconsidering my relationship to the Honors Program at Western, I realized the only way I could get the experience I wanted out of an Honors Capstone would be to center my community. The community that has gotten me through all of the trauma and harm that I've experienced in the Honors Program, made up of my closest friends and strongest support system. Being a part of the Honors Students of Color Board (HSOC) has been one of the best decisions I've ever made.

The Honors Students of Color Board was founded in 2019 by a dear friend named Silvia Leija (graduated 2022). After experiencing several racist interactions without any protection or support from the Honors Program, she decided to create her own safe space for students of color in Honors. What started out as a small group of friends has turned into a larger community that has reached students even outside of the Honors Program. HSOC's purpose has always been providing a space of safety and support for BIPOC students looking for community, and within the past year we began using our collective voices to try and make changes to the Honors

Program to make it more inclusive. Something that has always been central to HSOC is the value of storytelling. Hearing other students share about their racist experiences in the Honors Program and across Western was vital to getting the ball rolling in my racial identity journey. Sharing stories in a group of people that understood parts of me that I didn't have the words to describe yet was so incredibly healing and validating.

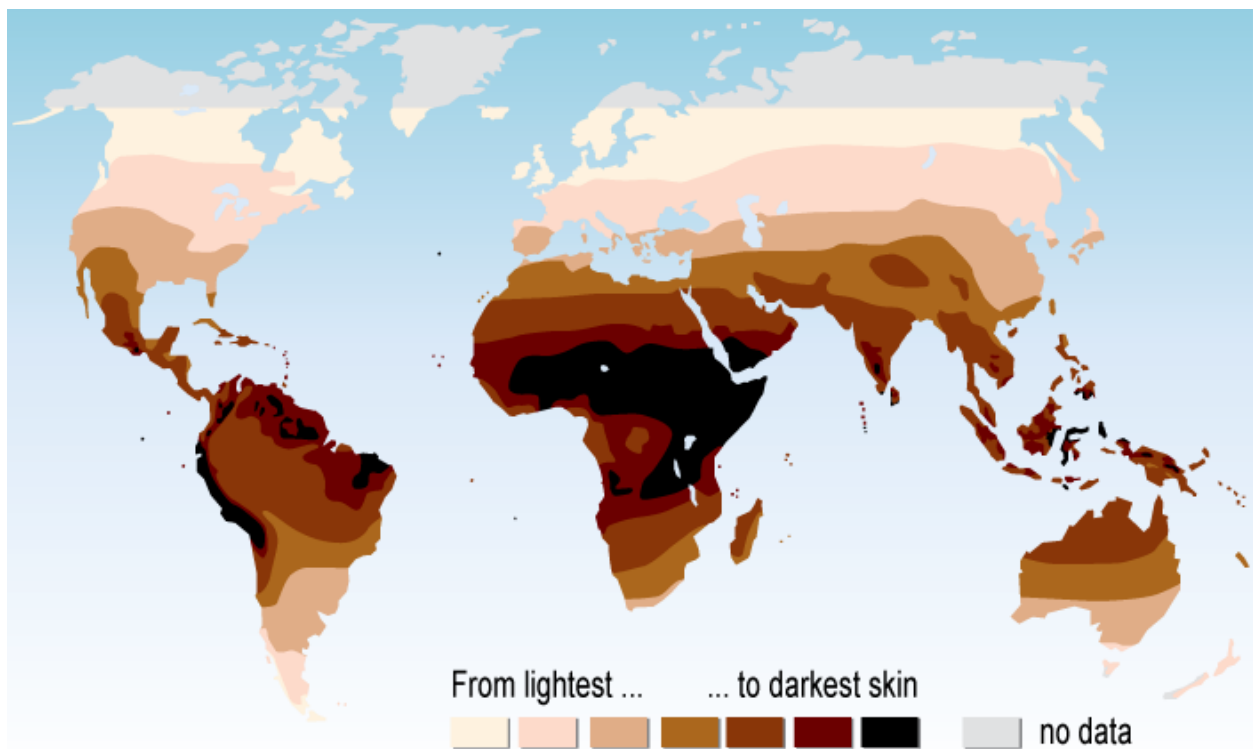
Oral history is the preservation and interpretation of the voices of people and communities throughout history. It's often criticized for being biased and unreliable since people's memories aren't exact and stories change every time they're told. What traditional record keeping and history lack though are the accounts of marginalized people throughout time including women, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people, people of color, and disabled people. History only records the dominant narrative and overlooks the ordinary person. Recording oral history gives a feel for how real people actually experience the world and lets people document their cultures and lives in their own words.

Inspired by my positive experiences with storytelling and my love for my community, I conducted four interviews with four of my friends that I met through HSOC. Staying in line with my original plan for this project, I asked each of them eight questions that related to how their health has been impacted by their identities as people of color involved in BIPOC advocacy. The questions were constructed to gather answers to the following research questions: In what ways can we see the effects of racialization in people of color's personal day to day lives in regard to their health? How does racialization affect the health and quality of life of my BIPOC peers?

I hope that this project will bring humanity and awareness to the very real impacts racism has on our health as people of color. It shows the variety of ways racism and discrimination show up in our lives and that it's not always extreme violence but still adds to the extreme effect. I hope that this project inspires other BIPOC to check in with their loved ones and their friends and make sure that you're prioritizing your health and healing.

## Background

We all live in the same world, but the way people experience the world changes based on their race. Inequity is seen everywhere, from the disproportionate amount of Black and Brown men in prison compared to crime rates, the differences in socioeconomic status of the different races in America, the lack of people of color in positions of power. One of the places it can be seen the most prevalently are racial inequities in health. Race, however, is entirely a social construct. Human genetic variation follows gradients as you move through the globe and is dependent on the environment. As depicted in the image below, skin color correlates to UV exposure and changes gradually throughout the globe<sup>7</sup>.



*Skin color map for Indigenous people predicted from multiple environmental factors<sup>7</sup>.*

Humans cannot be categorized into races, distinct boundaries in traits do not exist. However, racial health disparities are seen across the board. Racial health disparities are typically introduced without social context, perpetuating the misconception that there are biological differences between racial and ethnic groups. Ultimately, racism needs to be at the center of conversations about racial health disparities, not race<sup>6</sup>.

Up until recently, socioeconomic status alone was used to explain the differences in health between people of color and white people, but even when socioeconomic status is accounted for, people of color still experience earlier onset, more aggressive forms of diseases, and have higher mortality rates<sup>12</sup>. Ultimately, racism is a fundamental factor in people's health, and racism acts at multiple different levels to affect a person's life.

Racism can act at the interpersonal level with individual or group interactions, as well as institutionally with systemic barriers and differential access and opportunity. These aspects of society all intertwine and compound to result in health disparities. In the case of Lupus, an autoimmune condition, the higher morbidity and mortality rates in Black children compared to white children was found to largely be the result of treatment differences and lack of medication use stemming from lack of access and trust of healthcare<sup>9</sup>.

Stress can have adverse effects on both mental and physical health which can translate into higher susceptibility to illnesses and developing chronic conditions. Experiencing racism and discrimination are major causes of daily stress for BIPOC. Emotional responses to racism can lead to changes in health behavior, and living with the constant threat of exposure to racism and discrimination can lead to elevated stress levels. Experiencing discrimination has even been found to be a preclinical indicator of disease<sup>12</sup>. Daily interactions and exposure to media that accentuates negative stereotypes and actively shows harm against people that look like you takes a toll on mental and physical health. One study recorded that the mental health among Black Americans was significantly negatively impacted after seeing multiple police killings of unarmed Black Americans<sup>3</sup>. BIPOC communities overall are exposed to stressors more often than white communities which may contribute to explaining racial disparities in health and is connected to socioeconomic status<sup>10</sup>. Elevated levels of stress only exacerbate health issues and is a precursor of many diseases<sup>4</sup>.

Seeing genuine, respectful representations of your culture is vital for health, while feeling stigmatized and marginalized has adverse health effects. A study conducted documented Native American students had lower self-esteem and a decrease in feelings of self-worth and aspirations after being exposed to Native American mascots due to the negative stereotypical representation<sup>5</sup>. Not all representation is beneficial, often the inclusion of people of color to check off a diversity box results in playing into stereotypes about race. People of color in real life



are treated differently based on those assumptions, these interactions result in harm and is a concept called stereotype threat and has been shown to contribute to the racial health disparities seen across America<sup>1</sup>.

BIPOC live with this weight every day, in all areas of Western society. Not only are the effects of racism today impacting our health, but the historical generational trauma that has been passed down for centuries is also tied directly to our health<sup>11</sup>. Historical and modern forms of segregation, hostile immigration laws, genocides, and enslavement have all set up the systems we live in today and have impacts across generations. Understanding the grasp that racism has on our society is necessary to see where the problems lie as a basis for building solutions.

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## *My Story*

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My story here really begins five years ago in 2018 when I was diagnosed with autoimmune conditions. I started noticing some odd symptoms, my joints were so swollen I couldn't move them, my whole body felt stiff, and it took an unusually high amount of energy to move. When these symptoms of chronic pain started to show up, I didn't know what to do, I thought I was just stressed or tired, but the symptoms only got worse.

I went in to see my pediatrician and they referred me to a rheumatologist at Seattle Children's Hospital. I underwent extensive full body tests over several weeks, and they later diagnosed me with Overlap Syndrome of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus and Mixed Connective Tissue Disease with symptoms of arthritis and Raynaud's Syndrome. Quite a mouthful, so normally I just say Lupus. It was a relief to get a diagnosis so quickly, but it was an overwhelming life change to adjust to the new normal of having to take multiple medications and have to consider my health as a factor in everything I do. Autoimmune conditions are when the body's immune system malfunctions and starts attacking the host's body instead of only foreign elements. I had been a dancer my whole life and had always been able to rely on my body, so it felt like a betrayal by the one thing that I thought would always be there with me no matter what.

Living through the COVID-19 pandemic was another catalyst for my journey with my identity. Not only was I a member of the at-risk population being chronically ill, but I was also made uncomfortably aware of my Asian identity. This was the first time I had ever actually felt like my life was at risk, and at risk for multiple different reasons. When I would go outside, I knew logically that probably nothing would happen to me, but I was terrified every time someone would look at me, afraid that identifying me as Chinese would spark something hateful inside of them.

In these recent years I have started to understand that just knowing that my heritage is Chinese is not the same as identifying as Asian-American or a person of color. I've accepted the responsibility that there are times that I have to represent the entirety of the Asian-American population. And there are times where I have to be the only POC voice in a room, and that I will always be expected to speak as a representative voice. Thinking back, there were a number of

times growing up that I can remember an insensitive circumstance regarding my race. But I didn't understand the complexities and nuances of how my looking Asian connected to how people would perceive me, and that how I perceive myself does not determine how others will treat me.

Once I realized how racism is ingrained in every aspect of society, I couldn't stop seeing it. I now live with such a heightened awareness of my identity, and it impacts my life every day. Every time I go somewhere new, I notice whether there are people of color or not, I notice the political signals of an area, and I always assume that I'm going to be seen as my race first because that is how I've been treated.

90% of Lupus patients are women, and it is 2-3 times more likely in women of color than white women. As a woman of color, I can't help but wonder why my chance of developing Lupus was higher than my white friends. My family has no known history of autoimmune conditions, and no one knows what caused me to develop my condition. My mother's parents immigrated to Canada in the 1960s, before the Chinese immigrant community had been established, at a time when assimilation was the only option and there was no one to help you. Shortly after moving to Canada my mom was born into that environment. When a female baby is developing, anything that happens to the mother has the potential to directly affect two generations because females are born with all of their eggs. I know there are a lot of factors at play, but I do believe that my health was affected by the stress my grandmother had to endure as a Chinese immigrant at a time of such extreme hostility.

Within the past two years, I've become involved in advocating for BIPOC needs within the Honors Program. In February 2022 we released the [HSOC Demands](#) which resulted in hundreds of hours of unpaid student work to try and make the Honors Program an inclusive space for BIPOC students. There were times where we would have particularly stressful meetings with Honors administration, and I wouldn't be able to sleep for weeks. I wouldn't have the energy or care to cook for myself, and I would lose motivation for my classes. My chronic health conditions would flare up at times from the stress and not being able to take care of myself. We would explain over and over again in so many different ways the harm we had experienced and the ways we needed support and no one would understand because they didn't have the lived experience we had. I finally realized that they live in such a completely different

world than me and my fellow BIPOC peers. They were so entrenched in living and upholding the white narrative and white colonialist infrastructure, they couldn't see a problem because they benefitted in every way from the way things were. They could not comprehend the world I live in, and I think few people with more privilege than me do the work to understand.

Every time I enter a new space, I always scan the room to see if there are any other people of color because I feel unsafe if there are none. I constantly question whether the way someone is treating me is because of my race, or my gender, or something else entirely. I live every day on edge with the constant threat of being racialized and experiencing racism, but it's a constant unease that is the normal for a lot of people of color.

When it comes to my health, I feel so much more protected and comfortable when I'm working with other people of color. Even though everyone is in a different place on their own journey with racial identity, I often feel seen on a level that I don't feel with my white counterparts. I am grateful that all of the primary doctors responsible for my treatment for Lupus have been women of color, I'm not sure my diagnosis would have been so quick if they weren't.

Opening my eyes to the impacts of racism has affected my health negatively. But it is so much better to know what is going on and be upset than to be upset and not know why. I've been exposed to a lot of harmful experiences related to my race as a direct result of getting involved in BIPOC advocacy, but as much harm as it's done to me, the positives hugely outweigh the negatives. Through my involvement, I've found a community that sees me and supports me in a way I have never felt before. I feel protected by my community in a way that I didn't know I needed. The most important thing in my healing journey has been connecting with people of color who can relate to me and my lived experiences.

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Zoe

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*As told to Olivia Dong. Minimally edited for brevity and clarity.*

My name is Zoe, I am 22, I am Black. My mom is from Ethiopia, and she's Ethiopian and Jamaican, and my dad is white and Jewish. As for other identities, I am also queer. I grew up in Santa Cruz, California, which is about an hour and a half south of San Francisco.

I started getting involved in BIPOC advocacy work in high school. My freshman year I joined our Black Student Union (BSU), which had about 5 members at the time, but that's probably when I would say I started. I've always been aware of race, my mom talked about it a good amount. And then also, I've always just obviously existed as a racialized person. I joined BSU because I went to a Passover Seder, which is a Jewish celebration, and someone that was there was also Black, and was like "You should join BSU at Santa Cruz High", so I joined.

I've always known I was racialized I think, but I didn't fully understand the depth of it until this year I would say. There were always experiences growing up like where either me or especially my sister were racialized. There was a big thing where nobody thought we were siblings, because she's lighter, and curlier hair, and I'm darker, with less curly hair. And for some reason that's really hard for people to wrap their heads around. And then there were also a lot of incidences in elementary school, racial incidences, that happened specifically actually more to my sister. So we kind of always dealt with it. And then this year is when I started really looking back and noticing the different times I was racialized as a child. And then I also started realizing how I was racialized here at Western, because I always had this way of distancing myself from it, which is probably a coping mechanism. Going through those realizations, that shit was hard, I didn't leave my house for like a week.

There are different reasons why I thought that I was different. Growing up in Santa Cruz, it's very white only a little bit less white than Bellingham. But there are a bunch of other factors that I think overshadowed the racialization. Growing up, everybody in Santa Cruz is very skinny, and I was always a lot bigger than everybody else. And so that was a big thing that I had to work through. But looking back on it now like, I can think of specific times where I was racialized, even from a young age. So, I don't think that there was a time that I existed without that.

## **BIPOC Advocacy**

Doing BIPOC advocacy work, it's totally changed everything in my life to be honest. I've done this for a while, it's been since my freshman year of high school, I was already fighting. Honestly just existing in certain spaces was, looking back on it, I think some form of that too. But it definitely has changed the way first of all, that I interact with people, especially once I figured out the ways that I've been racialized and the ways that people see me. But especially when I was in the peak of doing a lot of the advocacy work, it affected me in a lot of ways. It affected my sleep, it affected my stress levels. I was putting in so much energy and time. And then also, a lot of the psychological parts of it, like showing up to these meetings and being in this room with only other white people, and being the only ones that weren't being paid to be there. It definitely affected me in many ways, and so now I've gotten to the point of trying to figure out how to navigate that, because I want to keep doing advocacy, but I also really care about my well-being and my mental health.

To be honest, it's also really hard for me to go through and try to pick out which things were because of race because I've always existed this way so I've never had the privilege of existing outside of this space and outside of this environment. My existence in a classroom growing up, I was always called bossy. I am very loud, I have a very big presence, but I was always specifically called bossy, and I really hated it, and I couldn't figure out why. And then once I got older and started coming into the other spaces where there were other “bossy” people that weren't being called bossy, I started figuring out that it was a racial thing. I also have a lot of experiences being in classes with people talking over me or dismissing me, or feeling like I have to really validate myself in ways that I've noticed that my other white peers haven't. Another way that it's also affected me is what I study, I study race, and I study a lot of the systemic issues that people face because of their race. I study a lot of really intense things that have to do with that. Probably the most intense stuff that comes out of it, like the prison industrial complex. And just having that connection to the community, which is part of the reason why I do it, but also having to emotionally deal with reading about it and learning about it, and picking up that work and doing it is very difficult because I have this different attachment to it. And when I'm reading these stories, I relate to them, and I know people who have gone through these experiences because they're my family and me. So that's also another element of how my race does actually

make it harder, but it's also inspired me, this is the reason I do it because I have these close connections to it.

There's an interesting dynamic when you're working with administrators who have power. You have to advocate for yourself against them. In high school I remember having these issues with my principal, but like it's just power dynamics. Like all these people that I'm interacting with are in these positions of power that can directly affect my grades or my school or letters of recommendation. And that has definitely come up and is definitely hurt by my advocacy work.

### **The White Lens of Healthcare**

In terms of my mental health, I have a lot of intersectional identities, so they all play different parts in my mental health. But having to actually go through all of these experiences is pretty difficult. But not only do you go through all these experiences, you are also told that these experiences either didn't happen, or are not valid. And so, having to like constantly, reassure yourself, that like no, this is actually something I'm experiencing and it's valid to feel these emotions and this weight out of it, I definitely think that that's been a whole different element of trying to deal with my mental health with all of this.

I can get very stressed. I do have a couple of different mental illnesses that play a really big role in the amount of stress that I feel so some days I'm perfectly fine but some days I have really bad stress and anxiety. It can get bad enough to where I can't get out of bed or can't really move. It's been something I've had to deal with. But I've also found ways to cope.

I see my doctor pretty regularly, and I can send her messages and stuff. When I started going on medication for some of my mental illnesses, I've been speaking to her more because she's kind of in charge of that, but it's mostly because I live out of state. When I go back home we get all the things done that have to be in person. Mental health wise I do have a therapist, it varies a lot on how often I see her based off of how I'm doing, but that can range anywhere from like once a month to once every two months, or once a month to once a week.

They're both women, but they're both white. I really would feel so much more comfortable, specifically talking to Black women, that has been honestly the way that I have struggled with my mental health, especially this year. I have needed to spend a lot of time with

Black women, and my relationships with the Black women in my life have really gotten stronger because they are the only ones that really truly have existed the way that I have, and have figured out ways to navigate that. It has been a barrier with my therapist, the fact that first of all, she's white, and second of all, she's not queer, because it just leads to really big disconnects. And then also just the way that I interact with white people because of my experiences is just different, especially when I'm talking about race. And it comes up a lot, especially with the advocacy work. I really wish that either of my doctors were Black and or queer, but the bottom line was, I definitely needed them to be women. I don't think that I wouldn't have been able to have this relationship with them if they weren't at least women.

There are little things that I've noticed with the broader healthcare environment, they don't know how to treat darker skin tones, like the scarring is different for surgeries with darker skin tones. Any of the methods that we use is to accommodate white people, it's not to accommodate Black people.

I had a surgery over a year ago, and we had to talk about scarring and just how my skin and body would react to the procedure. And we were just discussing the different ways that it could affect me with my darker skin and with my family history of keloids. It was me, my mom, who is Black, and then my family friend came, and she's white but she's also a woman, and interacting with surgeons was absolutely horrible. I don't know to what element it had to do with race or gender. But either way, talking to all those surgeons, was so uncomfortable, especially because, like the surgery that I had was a bit more of a sensitive subject. But I definitely felt some sort of racialization, because at this point I'm also getting a little bit better at figuring out when I'm being racialized.

That's also just something I've noticed, like my skin is just different than white people's skin. And some of the things that work for white people's skin just don't work on mine. But that's not the problem, it's just being different and having different skin. It becomes a problem when all of the medicine and procedures and everything that we have is tailored to white skin and white people. And it leaves us without having the same support, or having the same results. Which is a choice that was made.



## Seeking Respect in Spaces

One of the things that I'm very aware of when I enter spaces is if there are any other people of color, or if anybody else looks like me, that is probably the first thing that I notice. And that's also something that I can tell is noticed by the other people in the room too, so it's definitely something that I'm very aware of. I really do try to put myself in positions where I'm surrounded by other people of color, but sometimes it happens that I'm the only person of color which sucks for lack of better words.

The way that I decide what events I want to do and what spaces I want to be in, I've kind of decided to really just first find people of color and then go from there just because I found that the biggest way to feel comfortable is being surrounded by other people of color. I also do pay attention to people's attitude towards me. The way that they see me, and then also the way that we interact. Because I want to feel respected in spaces that I go into and I've gone into plenty of spaces—predominantly white spaces—where I have not been respected, or I'm seen as less than, or been told that I am the stupid one of the group. Like very directly have been not welcomed in spaces. And that doesn't even tap into the part where I am queer, which plays a whole other level. While I do feel comfortable in spaces that are full of people of color, it's also different when I'm in Black spaces, I do feel even more comfortable. But top tier is Black queer spaces. That's where I feel the absolute most comfortable, because those are people that share a lot of the same identities and have gone through a lot of the same experiences. And I can really be my true authentic self and talk about a lot of the experiences I've gone through and know that I'm not being racialized or seen in the same way as if I was in different spaces.

It's so sad but I normally go into things not trusting most people just because I have been let down a lot of times and been put in situations where I'm not comfortable a lot. I feel like I am pretty aware of the way that I that I am racialized, and I'm also aware of the way that the people that I'm with are racialized too because my friends are mostly people of color and we mostly are in white spaces. I pay attention to the way that people are perceiving us. And if I am feeling uncomfortable, I always trust that instinct because it is rooted in something, and I leave.

I would say I do these assessments of safety a good amount. I think, that there are a lot of obvious times like, if I'm ever walking around at night, or anything like that I'm very aware of my spaces. If I'm ever going out with my friends, especially if I'm walking into restaurants or

into these new spaces, I think this has a lot to do with being in Bellingham as well, but I'm just very aware. Wherever I'm going, it's just something that I'm paying attention to. I pretty much always have, I think it's kind of always been like this.

## **Healing**

I had to really figure out a lot of ways to take care of myself and heal, with the mental health issues that I've had and then also just a lot of the experiences I've gone through, I've needed a lot of ways to cope with that. Some of the biggest things that I would say have helped me are, first of all, I've gotten into weightlifting, that has been a huge outlet for me. And then also being around people I love, and being around the friends that I love, especially because again, a lot of my friends share the same identity with me. So, it's really helpful, when we're all going through something really difficult it's nice to at least be around each other or talk through things. And then just hanging out with them is always nice.

Sleep is a big one for me and just being able to rest. Sometimes it's really hard to remove yourself from a lot of the things going on. And a lot of the spaces that you have to be in and so just being in a space where I feel comfortable and being able to push a lot of it aside and watch something stupid or lay in bed, is really healing. That's what I realized I really needed more recently.

*As told to Olivia Dong. Minimally edited for brevity and clarity.*

My name is Allyson, I'm 22 years old. I'm Chinese, Vietnamese, and white adopted so I'm adopted by white parents. I grew up in Arlington, WA, which is a pretty Republican rural town like an hour south of Bellingham. So not an ideal place to grow up.

About a year ago, Zoe and I went to some party and she was telling me about the HSOC Demands. I had never heard about the Demands prior to this, and when I read that the first demand was to not use the N-word I was kind of shocked, like that's pretty straightforward, something you don't do. And for that to be something that they need to hold the University accountable for, I think it was kind of sad just to realize they're not watching out for people of color. And so that inspired me to read the Demands further and get involved with HSOC and advocacy.

When I was in second grade, I was sitting in the bus line and this guy turned around and pulled his eyes back and said, "Look I'm you." And I think that really hurt. At the time—it's really funny—I didn't realize I was adopted, even though my parents were like super super white and I'm this is really brown kid. But in my head I was like, "Oh, this is what it's like to realize you're different from a lot of people", because there weren't a lot of people of color in my hometown, and so that's kind of when I didn't want to be myself. It really affected my health, like I would take milk baths and put lemon juice on my skin as forms of natural bleaching to try and fit in. And I was really sad because even in the media, everyone around me, no one looked like me and it was a really hard time. That's when it all started, second grade. That carried on through high school and then college when I started doing advocacy work because I feel more comfortable with my identity now.

### **Tokenized and Unsupported**

I think experiencing racism and doing advocacy work affects me more mentally, I'm constantly thinking, "Oh, can I say this without being like racialized? Can I say this and will it hurt someone else?" I think that I'm very careful with how I portray myself now. Especially with

work and with clubs, and being associated with HSOC. I can see that it can have negative consequences. I think that I'm just very careful with the way I talk, and how much I put myself out there. When I'm in a room or classroom, for example, if I see that I'm the only person of color I don't want to engage, I don't really want to participate, because I know that either I will be overshadowed, or it's just an uncomfortable environment to be in when it feels like no one else is there supporting you. And that can lead to a physical toll for sure, you don't want to eat, you don't want to sleep, like you're always thinking about it. I remember last year after we'd leave from some of the HSOC meetings, I'd go home and I'd just feel like, this system is not built to support us. And then it's like, why would I want to do my work? Why would I want to associate myself with a place that isn't here for me?

The impact of being racialized on my mental health has not been great, especially during COVID. You see so much violence against Asian people, I was afraid to go out in public, which is a really weird feeling to have because I don't think I really ever experienced that before. So that was especially hard, I think now it's not as bad as it was during Covid, or when I was a child, like I'm okay, but especially going to a white dominated school, it's like, "Oh, am I going to be tokenized? Am I going to be used to make some point—you know like with the honors program—oh, we're so diverse but actually we don't really care about HSOC or anything that they want to do." Being taken advantage of in that form. I think now that I'm able to process and analyze and be aware of these situations it's helped, because I'm not that naïve kid. I think I'm just coming to terms with it, which is kind of sad in the way, you just kind of accept that you're going to be tokenized, you're going to be The Brown Kid, and with your friends you're going to be The Brown Friend.

I think my parents tried to take us to cultural events when I was younger, but it stopped when I was maybe in elementary school. But I'll tell my friends things, like in high school people wanted me to be in some commercials so it would be considered diverse, and they were like, yeah that's kind of shitty man. I think it's mainly telling my friends and them kind of showing me, "Oh, this is racist because this, or this is bad because this." Before I would just be like, "Oh, that's funny." You just kinda laugh it off like you don't realize it, you don't think that people are trying to inherently be racist. But I've been made more aware through HSOC and through my friends.

## **Opening the Door to Honest Conversations**

I don't like doctors. I'm kind of a scared of the doctor in general. I go to my yearly checkup maybe like every 3 years, so not frequent at all. I do have a regular doctor, but she's a white woman. I'm doing an Econ research paper on how having an advisor that shares the same identities as you affects your performance, whether it be grades, retention, major choice things like that. I haven't fully looked into the data yet, but I just know from personal experience when I have professors that share the same identities with me, I'm more inclined to participate and talk to them. Which I don't try to intentionally do, but I just feel more comfortable in that space and like I can connect to the professor more, more so than if it's a white woman or white man. Maybe I'd be more inclined to go to the doctor then if I had a doctor that shared my identities.

I have had an Asian mentor. I met her through this scholarship program, and it was really interesting because she was pursuing the actuarial field, which is what I want to do. And one time we set up a zoom with couple of her friends who were also all women of color. And we were talking about how much they hate white men in the corporate world which obviously wouldn't have happened if it were you know, a white man. So yeah, I think having a mentor match really, really helped me, we can be honest and have conversations that I wouldn't normally have or comfortable with, or don't have a lot of knowledge on. I think having that mentor match is really important.

## **Unanswered Questions with a Steep Price**

I don't know if my race has had a lot of impact on my healthcare. But definitely I think that my gender has. Oftentimes I hear my friends, and even I've had this too, I feel like I'm being gaslit. I'll go in and I'll feel super sick for some reason, or I don't know what's going on with me, and they're like "Oh, here take some Ibuprofen, I don't know what's wrong with you, we've run all these tests like there's nothing we can do." And then it's like boom, a \$1,000 bill. So then I don't even want to go to the doctor anymore one, because of financial reasons, and because I'm not getting the answers that I need. And I don't know if it's because they don't believe me, or it's chalked up to me being a woman so they feel like they can just glaze over my issues and not take me seriously. But I don't know if my race has affected it, maybe it has but I just haven't realized it.

It's tricky because they do ask, "Do you have any family history of this" and I go, "Well, I don't know because I'm adopted." It's harder too, because I can't be like oh, this is where this comes from, this is why I feel this way, or this runs in the family. I don't have that and that definitely makes it harder, because I just have a bunch of unanswered questions that probably will never get answered. Especially the way that I've been treated at hospitals, where they say, "Oh, nothing's wrong. We don't know what to do with you. There's no alternative solution. So good luck." But yeah that's definitely been a barrier for sure.

### **Sharing Identities Lowers Barriers**

Assessing if I'm welcome in a space, I think eye contact for sure, engagement, like if I'm talking to someone and they ask a follow up question, I can tell they're listening. I guess maybe body language like open body language. Just the way people talk to me. I think, like a quick assessment I do is are there any POC in the room? Is there anyone that shares the same identities as me? Because usually if you have something in common with the people in the room, you're more inclined to talk to them, it's a little bit easier than someone you don't have anything in common with. I think maybe next I'd look to see if people are grouped up, and if they are how are they grouped up, because then I can assess, "Would I fit in there?" I'm quicker to let my wall down with someone who shares the same identity as me versus someone who doesn't. Same with maybe age too, like if someone's a little bit older I'll probably be more guarded because I feel like I have to prove myself. Like if it's a white older man, for example, I feel like I should present myself a certain way to make sure that they think I'm smart enough to have a conversation with them, or that what I'm saying is valuable. I'll probably use like different syntax or diction when I'm talking versus someone who I feel more comfortable around who has the same identities as me.

### **Self-Care is the Freedom to Process Thoughts**

For self-care, I wouldn't say it's an isolation method, but I like being alone. I like taking time for myself. When I'm not having class, I'll just go out take myself on a date, I'll go shopping maybe thrifting. I think just being alone has really helped me process my thoughts, and how I go about the next week or so. Take a nice bath or something. Make sure I'm eating because sometimes that doesn't get prioritized. Sometimes you just need to recharge your social battery and that's my number one priority when it comes to self-care. Which is something I'm realizing

now, like I think beforehand when I came to college I thought, “I have to hang out with my friends all the time and constantly be doing something.” But I realize it’s so draining.

What I mentioned with Stacy, my mentor, we can have these conversations that I feel like I wouldn't be comfortable having, with my white friends for example. We talk about how we can often be racialized in the corporate world. I think it's nice to have someone who knows the struggle you're going through for real. Some people say like, “I'm so sorry this happened to you, I understand.” But they don't understand, unless you've gone through it you really don't understand. So yeah, I think that's also part of self-care having someone to talk to who shares my identities. Not to say that it’s not valuable to have these conversations with other people, but I just think that it's more productive. Because white people are just, constantly like “I'm sorry this happened to you. What can I do?” and it's just like, ok thanks, you know, thumbs up. Thanks, but you just don't. So, yeah, that is definitely part of self-care, having those conversations for sure.

### **You Can Try to Run but You Can't Hide**

I think, during Covid, just because there was nothing to do, I was probably on my phone more. It was that lull in time where no one was working and school was online, nothing really happening. But prior to it, even after I don't think I've been too much into the news, I don't know if it's just for fear I will find those stories and that it'll hurt, or if I just don't have interest in it. It's probably the former. I think the media is hard to wrap my head around, because you never know whose point of view it’s going to be told from and I think it takes more time to analyze what they're saying. Sometimes I just don't have the brain power, or the energy to do that, or I know it'll hurt. I remember, I think it was on Lunar New Year, and there was that shooting and I had no idea. I think Zoe told me on the way home. It just kinda makes your heart drop when you hear something like that, because they're just celebrating they're not doing anything wrong and for someone to commit such—anything like that—yeah I just can't. I don't think I can read that. Maybe that makes me ignorant, but I think I probably don't read the news as much just because I don't think I want to see stuff like that.

The system is not built for us. I can tell you that much, and the more I realize the more depressing it is, I don't know what to do to fix it. I think about our work meetings, and the question that really stuck with me is, “What do we do about bringing people into a space that has historically done harm?” I don't know it seems like a vicious cycle. We can stay in the system

and try and change it, but ultimately you're not going to see the results you want. Why do we stay? But why should we also let them push us out of a space that should be meant for us? It's this constant battle that I don't know what to do. But maybe with HSOC work something will get done. Maybe with projects like these, like big institutions will go “Oh, oh, no” but probably not.



*As told to Olivia Dong. Minimally edited for brevity and clarity.*

I'm 21, I am Mexican and Irish, and also Spanish a little bit, and queer. I grew up in Boise, Idaho. I really liked it, I had a very privileged upbringing there. It's the liberal bubble of Idaho. It's not really what people would associate with it. But also, I have realized being up here that I did have the specific experience of like being around guns and being around like a lot of Republicans. The capital is Boise, so people do come and protest there, there's a lot more political action there, even though it's a liberal area there's still a lot of conservative influence which is interesting. And it's also very white, but honestly maybe less white than Bellingham. There's like a fair amount of refugees. But still very white, and I only had white friends.

The first advocacy thing that I did was I was part of a youth advocacy network at Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence. I entered a high school writing competition, and I got my poetry published in that, that was the first piece I ever published which was very exciting! And then they sent me an email about this thing they were doing. And it was so cool, it only happened for like a year, which is really sad. But we got paid to meet a lot of people of color and other students from around Idaho. And we'd meet every other week and talk about current events and advocacy in Idaho specifically. And it was trying to create change, or like inspire youth leaders basically. But it was a very healing space, like a lot of story sharing and just discussions and stuff which is really cool. Yeah, I think that was the thing that kind of made me start to get more heavily involved. Then I started going to more protests and doing other things like wanting to do HSOC.

### **To Fit In or Not to Fit In?**

I don't think I really noticed that I'm racialized at school very much, but I did Irish Dance for 12 years, and my Irish dance group was a bit outside of Boise, I had to drive like half an hour to get there. Almost everyone who I danced with was Mormon and they were all white, and I went because my neighbor went. She's a white Mormon, but I was really good friends with her. But yeah, I mean, I started doing that when I was six or seven. And then as I got older, I started to notice how I was sticking out from the group I guess. I think it was just such an extremely not

diverse group that that was the place that I most noticed it. I specifically remember one time going grocery shopping for some event with a bunch of people from my dance group, and they were making jokes about how they we were like all siblings except I'm adopted, and I was like, "Ha, uh...yeah." I just wasn't super aware of it, because we pretty much just danced. There were 3 teachers, and they were all siblings, and they were super Mormon home schooled and as I got older, like in high school, I started to realize I really did not vibe with them. Especially the guy who was the only one who would really talk about stuff. But he started to talk a lot during classes, and like I would never talk to him again. They're just they're really not open-minded people. And that was a weird experience. I was just like, really in that group, but then like now, I would never be able to set that aside because now I'm aware of it.

Part of why I wanted to get involved in advocacy work was also my want to connect with my culture, because I lived in Mexico for a year when I was 3 because my mom was working there. My dad's the one who's Mexican, but my mom knows Spanish because she's a bilingual ed teacher, and she decorated our house but it's very like Mexican, and she was the one who tried to keep us learning Spanish. And I learned Spanish and was fluent in it and then when I came back, I didn't want to speak it anymore because everyone was speaking English, which makes me so mad. I think there are some threads of my culture like in my house, or in our cooking but I don't really know the history behind it. So I think that also motivated my desire to do advocacy work, and also realizing I was queer in high school. There was just a lot of things, like March For Our Lives that was also happening and, like all that together got me involved in BIPOC advocacy.

### **Taking the Blinders Off**

My suitemate during COVID in Edens Hall and one of our friends both heard about HSOC and they both told me to go, and I think we might have all attended over Zoom in my dorm room together. But I think I was not sure if I should go because I've never been in a BIPOC designated space, or advocacy group that's specifically for BIPOC. I had always been in spaces that's also for white people. So I was like, I don't know if I belong here or if I should do this. But since they were both good friends of mine at that point I definitely was interested. And also, they were my first friends of color, so that was exciting. And it was making me feel inspired to embrace my also being a person of color. And I think the first year was really different because we were in limbo because it was COVID, but it was clear that Silvia was just really amazing and

just wanted to create this fun space. I feel like a lot of clubs died during COVID, but this club persisted, and it's the only thing I regularly have gone to throughout all of college. But then once, we started doing advocacy work the next year, I think just everyone's passion, and like especially hearing you guys talk about experiences that you had had since you had already been in Honors a bit longer like, just hearing about experiences made me think, "Oh, shit like Honors is so messed up." And I think the first year, since we didn't really do advocacy I had my blinders on about honors. I was in the dorm and literally I only hung out with Honors people, and I was just like, "Oh yeah, let's learn about white western civilization." So I just didn't think to criticize it because it was my first year of college I was like, "Oh, college is this place where professors know more than me. And I'm gonna learn from them." And then I didn't realize that it was such a skewed perspective that I was being taught, because that's also like what I had through all of the rest of school pretty much. So I was like, "Yeah, this is exactly what I should be learning." And then, once I started to hear things, doing the advocacy work was important to me.

I feel like the biggest thing about how it's affected my daily life is just like the way that I think now, which is just thinking a lot more, and it's a very good thing. And I'm glad that I think more, but it's also hard, because I'm constantly questioning everything like if things that I once saw as fine are problematic or hurting someone. Well, especially just being in college, because I'm just continuously learning how much institutionalized racism there is, I'm also doing that Education and Social Justice minor and there's a lot about that that I'm learning. And also, I was doing the Ethnic Studies work for a bit. I think HSOC and that were like my two experiences that have been super positive and negative, because it's an amazing community that really prioritizes people, like our humanity and our lives, and like with Ethnic Studies they're paying you and feeding you and like with us like joy and having friends outside of HSOC too. But then the advocacy aspect is really taxing and awful. I spent a lot of time learning about the whole Ethnic Studies program here, which people don't even know about, and it was removed for our school. And people don't know about that either, that it was here, that they took it away, they took away the funding, and now they're trying to bring it back, and they're still taking away the funding. It's just so frustrating. So I think just like, being in college every year I just want to question everything which makes it like harder to navigate but also, I think I'm having a deeper experience and the experience I want to be having, I don't want to go through it blindly anymore.

## **Is it My Job to Speak Up**

And it affects my classes, I think it's most often feeling uncomfortable from things that classmates say. I think I pretty much avoided really problematic classes since the first year, although the first year there were also some really uncomfortable conversations with professors and students. I think it can either make me completely disengaged from the class where I'll stop paying attention or just like be silent, or it will make me engage a lot, because I'm like, "Whoa! What are you doing? What are you saying?" Like trying to make people question what is assumed in the room. But it can also be a very stressful position, especially if you're feeling like the only person who is going to say something. And there's been times that I wish I'd said something, but it's also like, why is that my job? And I definitely have sat in class and just been stressed just trying to decide what to do.

My mental health is definitely affected by my identity, like a lot of questioning, also questioning my place in terms of having privilege and also being a person color and what space to take up. I would say actually overall that college has actually been a pretty healing and positive experience on my mental health in terms of being a person color. Not college, but my experiences in college through HSOC, and through having roommates who are people color and close friends who are. It's even just like being able to have conversations that I've never had before that I've always thought about, it's so helpful and validating. And even to be able to say, "Whoa! Like this class, is awful, or like this person was so racist" and have someone to empathize about that, whereas before I would just ignore it, or like not even realize what was going on. I think just having those spaces and that community has been very positive. Obviously the curriculum and stuff has not been, but I've found doing the Education and Social Justice minor has been really good, there are a lot of professors of color, and really important curriculum. Having the opportunity to learn about my culture, or about other people's cultures and questioning the dominant narrative are all things I've always been wanting to know. And even though it's within college it's a good counter narrative to kind of offset what's going on at the institutional level.

## **Health**

I see my doctor like maybe once a year. The only identity she shares with me is she's a woman. Nothing else though. Which I think does affect our relationship. I think mostly in terms

of her being straight, is more of where I feel uncomfortable than in terms of race. But definitely yes. In the future I would try to prioritize finding a queer or BIPOC doctor. I think even just on a financial side of things like I would much rather be giving money to a BIPOC healthcare worker, because it's a very white dominated field too. But also, for the aspect of them caring for me, I would want that.

### **The Makeup of a Safe Space**

Body language is a big thing, like the way people are in a space determines how welcome I feel. If they seem closed off, or grouped versus open to people. I think someone inviting me in is probably something that I want. If I enter a room, and it's super silent or something I'm going to be super scared to go in or get really anxious. Having someone I know would also make a big difference. Having something shared like a shared thing to talk about or like sharing food or some interest or activity you're doing. A genuine interest or care in my being there. I feel like I can really easily tell if someone's being fake nice, or if they want to know how I am or are interested in what I what I'm interested in, or what I have to offer. Kind of just like caring beyond themselves.

I do think it's kind of a different experience with being in HSOC and having roommates who are also in HSOC, because I feel like we all take home a lot of weight with the Demands and just like things that happen. We have the opportunity to continue to discuss that stuff all the time which I know that it weighs on all of us. But I do think that it is really helpful too to have each other to bring things up to when they're coming up outside of school, outside of our meetings, and in person. And also like we make up half of our house which is really cool and, I don't know, I think I do kind of take it for granted, like I don't really think about how it used to be where I just ignored all of this stuff. Because now it's like race comes up all the time, or like random experiences we remember having, or something came up in class that I probably would not bring up to a white person. And so it's just the opportunity for all these conversations that I think are really important to have and not having all the pent up rage or concern, and instead getting to share that. And share it with everyone in HSOC and when we hang out outside of it, I think we also have done a good job of planning things where we're having a lot of fun because we all are way too stressed all the time. Prioritizing having fun is so important I feel. And keeping tabs on everyone, and I feel like we all are trying to balance each other out.

## **Healing**

Writing that's my main thing for self-care. A lot of writing, because sometimes I don't like talking about things that are going on with me, I prefer to write them because I feel like I can articulate better or figure out what I'm even feeling. Food too, especially sharing food and making food with people. And also fun, like we were talking about having fun is really, really important and helpful. As well as like actual rest, putting everything aside and reading, watching something, and just not thinking about anything else, even if I should be doing something else. Complete abandonment of obligations for a second.

*As told to Olivia Dong. Minimally edited for brevity and clarity. Name changed for anonymity.*

I am multiracial and Indigenous to North America, and also Indigenous to Asia, and my mom is white, and I am 20 years old. I identify as multiply disabled meaning I have multiple disabilities. I grew up on the east side of Seattle in a suburb. And I also grew up kind of going back and forth between the Seattle area, Southern California, and the Midwest, or like around the Rockies. I've spent most of my life in the greater Seattle area before moving up to Bellingham for Western. I think my thoughts about where I grew up have changed as I've moved around. As I got some distance from where I've spent all my school years that has changed a lot. Now that I have a little bit of distance, I'm realizing how much of a bubble I lived in—but that I was always outside of that bubble. So I guess it just made me more aware that regardless of where I am like in Bellingham or back home that, I am always kind of outside of that bubble. And that, being surrounded by upper middle class or well-off white people all the time is really isolating.

### **Seeking People Who Know What It's Like**

I was directly recruited in ninth grade to become a part of my school's Students Organized Against Racism Club. I had started the like Gay, Straight Alliance in middle school, and so I had founded a club before, and they were like “You're a person of color in our very small, very white high school, you probably wanna do this right.” And then I didn't stop after that. I eventually became the president of that club, and then I completely burnt myself out. And that's kind of how I started in BIPOC activism, because I was recruited by the only Black person who's ever been employed by my high school. But I would say it's because I'm a person of color. It's because some of my earliest childhood memories are of adults or other children, reminding me how different I am. I remember in kindergarten or first grade like this white girl claiming that she was half Japanese and so her squinting her eyes and pulling them back was her appreciating her own culture. And I just remember looking down the lunch table, and being so angry that I didn't have the words at the time to place why that hurt me so much. And then I couldn't tell anyone. And I think that it's just a lot of experiences like that over and over and over again. I'm being reminded that I'm different all the time, and that no one looks like me. I was looking for

other people who were experiencing that. And I was looking for a community where I could voice and learn how to talk about those things. And so I think, being recruited was actually one of the best things for me, because it led me to my major at a time where I didn't have any interests outside of doing school.

For HSOC, this is another thing where I feel like I was reached out to, like I was recruited by the person in charge. I think it was just at a time in my life where I was really isolated, not just because of the pandemic, but isolated because all of my friends were white, and it hadn't always been like that. But moving to Bellingham and having my partner and like all of my friends that I knew they were all white and so the people that I was isolating with people like my suitemate on campus, like everyone in all my classes, they were all white. I took a lot of Honors, classes my first year, I did one colloquium, and I did a seminar, and the entire first year sequence in the first year. So I was taking almost entirely Honors classes, and there was never more than 2 people of color in a class. And I went through my entire first year not being a part of HSOC and feeling so isolated on so many different levels. And I went to one meet and greet right at the beginning of the year, and I met Silvia and I met some other HSOC people, and I felt heard. And then, when I had the capacity to look for community again, that was the first place I went, and I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't. And I think again, what has always brought me into community work and into activism and organizing has been when I'm getting fed up with my situation and I'm looking for community to heal in.

### **Centering Race is Unavoidable**

In one of my earliest memories of really recognizing my race was the one I already shared. But I always knew that I—I don't know, I can't pinpoint it really—I was told, that I was Asian, and that I was Native American, but I didn't know what those things meant. I knew it meant being with my grandparents and eating Japanese food and going to the shrine. And I never really knew what that part had to do with how my dad and I were treated compared to my sibling and my mom. Because my sibling and my mom have way, lighter features, and obviously, my mom is white, but my sibling just has different features, than mine and was always mistaken for East Asian, and I was always mistaken for Mexican, or some racist acclamation of whatever. And I think that racialization and the aspects of culture that was what I thought being Japanese was, those things like didn't really click for me as the same thing until I was, in middle school or



fourth or fifth grade. And I think it was just a lot of pain and a lot of feeling different, and knowing that I was different and feeling ugly, because I didn't look like all the people that were beautiful.

In what way have racism and advocacy not affected my life. Yes, I'm a person of color, yes, I'm an anti-racist activist, but I also study this stuff so no matter what I'm doing, I'm usually thinking about race and I don't really get a break from it. Because in having classes where I am talking about race, or even just talking about structures that are relating to society, race comes up and in that I experienced the racism in all of my white classmates who are learning about these things for the first time. I've recently started taking a lot more Indigenous studies courses and having to have empathy and console someone through recognizing that genocide is a thing and learning what it is, and learning how my people have gone through multiple genocides. Having to hold their hand through that process, and how much it has impacted me on the day to day, like making it really hard to go to class, making it really hard to eat beforehand, because it makes me nauseous, you know. It's just that, no matter what I'm doing, it feels like I can't really get away from it. And that even when I am intending to rest from just the traumas of my own racialization, it's also where my interests lie, but it's also I don't get a choice to not think about it, because all of the movies I watch are either made by racists or have racist subplots or main plots. And all the video games I play, I've never had a character creator where I can make someone that looks like me. Like all these things now that I have seen, and now that I'm understanding what it means to be in my positionality in the world, I can't unsee. And so even listening to the radio, or like doing things that used to make me happy—it's not like I'm plagued by it, it's very normal—like it's not a terror every time, it's just exhausting and I feel like I have a general malaise relating to you know, “well, it's not a surprise if something is at the very least racially insensitive.” So I feel like I walk with it every day, and every second, no matter what I'm focusing on, and that's not always a bad thing, but it is always exhausting.

### **With Racial Awareness Comes Great Responsibility**

I think one thing that was kind of implicit in what I was saying before is that as an advocate and an activist, it feels like it's my responsibility to speak up regardless of where I am. So like, especially in my studies, and in all my classes, I do always have to show up as an activist. I feel like I do have to defend something a lot of the time. But I think in general, being

an advocate means knowing that your values and beliefs are othered in a way in which you are seen as a threat by everyone around you. And because my values and beliefs are radical, even though they're things as simple as I believe human beings should be able to eat food and have a place to call home. Those things aren't radical to me, but they are on the daily. And just knowing that, you know, if I speak my mind to the wrong person, it could have real repercussions for my life, and that I have to be very careful about how I speak to everyone. Not just as an activist, but as a person of color and as a queer person, like the amount in which I code-switch, would terrify you. It's so easy to lose yourself, and where you get to fit in when you're always carrying the weight of all of your people. That it doesn't matter what room I'm in, it doesn't matter what we're talking about, everyone expects me to be able to speak on behalf of whatever they see me as and how they're labeling me. And that means that if I'm going to be a responsible, racialized, politicized person, that I do have to respond to that gracefully and recognize that however I show up in this room could have real impacts for the safety of other people like me. And that I can't just go around saying whatever I want, because it could mean someone like me being seriously harmed. And that's a very real thing every day.

Really it comes down to, I don't get to turn off being an advocate or being an activist just in the same way I don't get to turn off being a racialized person, and that means that sometimes it comes up when you're talking to your partner, and sometimes it comes up when you're talking to your mom because they're white and they don't understand. And sometimes you want to go to the dentist and just get your teeth cleaned, and you have to explain all of your identities, and why you deserve to be served the same as everyone else, and it's exhausting. But I have developed so many coping skills and so many things to help me get through that. And that one of the big things was knowing that you can't be an advocate if you're not in community, because doing that every single day and experiencing that every single day and not being able to talk to anyone about it would literally kill me; and not having to justify myself with people who understand has saved me over and over and over again, and has made it so I can refill myself, and that I'm not giving up or giving up on my values.

### **The Categories Shouldn't Matter but They Do**

As a multiracial person I have really struggled with how to check those boxes my entire life. My mom had to petition to my elementary school that I went to for all 6 years for them to

take Hispanic off my profile, because every year, no matter what they would add it back on, and it definitely impacted, how I was treated at school and how I was treated by the office staff. But I don't identify as Hispanic, I have never spoken Spanish, no one in my family does. And at the doctor, when I was a kid the same thing would happen. I remember, like several times, this one dentist would just speak to me in Spanish and like that's great, great for people who need that. It is also kind of racist to just speak Spanish to someone based on their features. But like as a kid I had that weird thing where like I would always mark Asian and white and then what would get marked for me was always like Hispanic.

And then, as I developed in my identity, I started marking Asian and white and Indigenous, but that wasn't always an option. So then eventually I started marking two or more races, but then you don't get to say what you are. And now I just mark Indigenous and Asian, because I'm trying to decenter whiteness in my identity. And it shouldn't matter at the doctor, but I've had a lot of issues, especially recently with the doctor, and with the racialization in the medical healthcare system, there are actual differences in how certain treatments are given. Like there are all these things where there are benchmarks of what they expect certain races to have when it comes to their labs, which is fucked up. And because I've been misclassified so many different times in all of my history, I've looked through my medical records, and pretty much every doctor I've ever gone to has just decided that I'm a random different race. But it definitely has impacted me.

And I don't want to not mark the right thing, because I feel like it really diminishes the existence of me and other people like me. I don't want to just say I'm white, because even if it would benefit me technically of not being discriminated against as much I don't think that it is right for me to not identify correctly, but I also feel super weird about them having that information and using it against me. And it always makes me really uncomfortable, and it shows up all the time. And even recently, I always see there's some incorrect thing on my medical chart, whether it's my gender or my race, or whatever. There's always something that's wrong, even when I get to self-select it and fill out the forms, meaning that I don't know if that's misconduct I don't know if it's a filing error, but it seems to always happen to me, even with doctors I've seen multiple times over like a long time. And obviously in the school system too.

## Identity-Based Barriers to Healthcare

I see a therapist. I've been seeing different therapists since I was 13, and up until my most recent therapist it was always a white cisgender woman who was an intern working on their certification. And so I would meet with them for 6 months to a year, sometimes less, and then they would leave. But also none of them had any expertise in anything that I was going through. And it wasn't until recently, after not having a therapist for like a year and a half that I went out and found one of the only queer women of color therapists, she doesn't even take my insurance I pay out of pocket to meet with her, because there is no one in my network that has the skills that I need. And I meet with her virtually because she's not local. And then, so that's the only medical professional that I meet with regularly. I'm working with my parents and the facility that I work with to get a family primary care provider who specifically works with Indigenous people, but I have not met with her yet. And then I am supposed to have a gender affirming care team, I went to Seattle Children's Hospital for a really long time and they were supposed to help me get into adult care for gender affirming care, and then a similar problem they were always changing my doctor, none of them ever knew my story or stuck around long enough to get to know me. And I tried to reach out to social workers, to talk to people that would help me like get into something as an adult and every single time it would fall through every single time there would be some issue. And then I tried to use Westerns gender affirming care team, and it was a very similar thing.

Over the past couple of years, I've been really trying to work on my health because it has declined. I have been seeing this one psychiatrist for a few years, and I just don't have the energy to go see her, because every time I have to pretend to be a different person than I am. I already had to quit seeing a certain psychologist at the Student Health Center, because she gaslit me about my symptoms. And so I went and saw another person a year later, but it's just like exhausting to set up these appointments and go to them. And I get so tired of having to deal with that, especially when I'm already stressed out I just can't go, and a lot of times the times when I'm having the worst time is when I need to go. I had a time where I had a break in my medication because I was so afraid and so uncomfortable with going to the doctor. But also there just aren't other options in Bellingham that take my insurance and that have availability. If I wanted to be on a waitlist for two years, I could try but I don't have that time. So I've been

commuting two hours to go to the dentist and to go to the doctor. It's something I'm thinking about all the time, like my health, and that I need to go to the doctor like I need to go see so many different specialists and I just can't, because the amount of work for me to find someone that will take my insurance, just that, too much. To find someone that has availability that takes my insurance—horrible. And then to find someone that isn't going to racially traumatize me or misgender me the whole time, or tell me that the reason why I'm like having all these problems is because I am on testosterone, or because my dad is brown, that doesn't exist, I haven't been able to find them.

And I cannot afford to just pay for healthcare, and I'm going out of my way to pay out of pocket for a therapist, because she shares identities with me, and because she specifically works with people on racial identity and queer identity and she's also a trauma therapist. So all things that I need. But she also is the first healthcare provider I've ever worked with that listens to me, and even in the past when I've had healthcare providers that share like one or two of my identities, I've never had someone that I've felt as heard with or that I don't have to justify myself with. She is not Indigenous, but she is Asian, and she is mixed and like when she doesn't understand something she asks in a way that is really respectful and compassionate.

### **Racism is Traumatic**

I feel like it is generally traumatic to exist in this world and in this country, as a racialized individual, and especially as part of so many different marginalized groups. If you're constantly undergoing trauma, that's going to impact not just your mental health but your physical health. And that's how I feel, I feel like I have complex PTSD, and part of the complexity is the racial trauma. And I think just every day I have to be hypervigilant of race for my own safety, and that makes me really anxious and paranoid, and really exacerbates a lot of my problems. And that when I am in spaces where I don't have to be as hypervigilant, or as paranoid, and anxious about race and racism, I can feel a huge difference in my body, and I can feel a huge difference in my general mood. But it doesn't ever go away, because even if I'm in a room alone, I'm still racialized. And I still feel that internalized racism and the impacts of it. So I don't know, I think racism and colonialism have definitely made me feel really hopeless at times, and has really impacted feeling suicidal and feeling just absolutely like nothing. And being isolated and not having other people of color to talk to about race, and to talk to about racism for large chunks of

my life has just done, insurmountable harm. Because not only could I not talk to anyone about what was going on, it actually means I was just internalizing stuff and never really processing it and I just see how that has impacted my mental and physical health, like so much. And has led to like being really fragile and vulnerable in areas that I haven't had a lot of care around for myself.

### **Hypervigilant Caution**

The first thing is, I always assume that I'm not welcome in a space, and I mean, yeah that's fucked up but accurate, I think. One of the things is I look around the room and see how many people of color there are. Which I think from talking to people that seems like a pretty common thing, like I was just talking to a professor who's also person of color, and is also Indigenous, and was like, "I am always looking for other Indigenous people in the room, and for any sign that someone might understand what it's like to be me in this space." And I'm also paying attention to people's body language all the time and what they're doing and how they're posturing themselves and how they're feeling, all the time and no matter where I am. And that's not just because of my race and being racialized, but that definitely impacts how I'm able to perceive whether a space is safe or not because I am so hypervigilant, and I think if a space is created and is intentionally very loud about welcoming me, I'm usually very skeptical.

### **Healing Takes a Village**

I'm starting to think of self-care more as doing things for myself but in community, and recognizing that, taking care of myself doesn't always need to be being alone and doing things for my physical body. A lot of my self-care is just doing things that nourish my spirit and a lot of that looks different depending on where I'm at and what I'm feeling in that moment. But I've been really trying for my healing process feeling my feelings more, and getting in touch with my body in a way I don't think I've had since I was really young. I intellectualize everything as a way to avoid feeling my pain, and so the thing that has been the most healing for me, and that I've been working on with my therapist has been being in my body. I try to pay attention to what my body needs more, because your feelings live in your body, and I can intellectualize and think as much as I want, but it's not going to get me through my pain. I'm a very verbal person, I verbalize everything, and I'm trying to find a way where I can still do that but in a way that's serving me more and I'm trying to keep things a little bit more sacred. I don't know what that means exactly, but that my healing journey doesn't have a start or an end. And that it doesn't need

to look a certain way or be able to be charted on a graph, and that my friends and my family—my friends who are my family—are an integral part of that healing process. And working on my relationships with them, has really helped me work on my relationship with myself and with my healing. And finding community where I can be myself more has been healing in and of itself. And learning what boundaries look like, and how to negotiate them, and how to protect myself more. Those are all things that have been a huge part of healing.

I think my biggest thing is that all of this for me has not been a linear process, and that getting more in touch with myself, has meant a lot of regressing and a lot of hurt and a lot of hurting people around me as I'm learning how to heal and learning how to be an adult in the world, an adult in the world who is marginalized and who is recognizing for the first time really what it means to be in community for real and to be seen in community. And that has not come easy, and that has ebbed and flowed, and that for anyone who's looking to heal, and who's looking to feel seen, regardless of their reason, you'll have that. But not if you don't fight for it. And you don't have to do it alone. That's the big thing for me is that I wouldn't, I wouldn't be here if it was just me.

## Conclusion

Everyone's stories were very unique and incredibly individual, but similar themes and experiences did come up. As people of color living in this society, we all have a shared experience to an extent and that can really be seen through these stories.

Overall, everyone described elevated stress levels, mental health challenges, feelings of isolation, as a direct result of racialization. Being involved in BIPOC advocacy and being a person of color in general has affected everyone's schoolwork and changed what opportunities they have access to. Everyone described the need for connecting with other people of color in the healing process. Everyone mentioned that there was a time before they really understood racialization and racism, and that they are still learning about how their race affects their everyday lives. Going through these realizations of how important race is in your life is traumatic, and the only people who really understand are other people of color. These stories have shown me that we all rely on sharing stories within our communities of color to seek advice, validation, and build connections without having to be questioned or explain ourselves.

Racism is a complex issue that acts in all aspects of society and affects all people. Racism is something that is so ingrained in how we run as a global population, it's unfortunately not going away anytime soon. Institutional racism requires efforts to solve deep rooted issues, targeting things such as increasing income and employment opportunities, increasing access to quality education, and improving housing and neighborhood conditions have been shown to have wide downstream improvements<sup>12</sup>.

Things at the systemic level aren't always tangibly felt by individuals, so it's also vital to support improvements to how people interact with each other. Cultural competence is the ability to respect and adapt to other cultural environments built through the reflective awareness on how culture influences thought and behavior<sup>13</sup>. It is everyone's responsibility to be culturally competent, and should be required by institutions and organizations that value their BIPOC members. Being culturally competent requires acknowledging areas of privilege, deconstructing learned behaviors that harm marginalized groups, and practicing empathy.

Uplifting communities of color and prioritizing BIPOC spaces of safety and healing is one of the best ways to immediately help BIPOC. Cultural empowerment, accurate representation, and maintaining BIPOC only spaces can all help individuals feel more valued and



safer. Seeing people that look like me in the media that aren't just a collection of racialized stereotypes has been really positive for my self-esteem and feelings of security.

Race-based medicine is still being widely taught in medical schools. This is based on the misconceptions that race is a biological category and that there are biological differences between races which is not true because race is a social construct. Race-conscious medicine acknowledges that racism has substantial effects on people's health and strives to medically treat people based on their symptoms and family history and not based on false racial categories<sup>6</sup>.

This project has been a compilation of a lot of different passions for me and I'm so glad I found a way for them to intersect. Learning about racism and realizing how much of an effect it's had on my life has been one of the most challenging and traumatic experiences of my life and it's difficult to confront the fact that this will continue to affect me for the rest of my life. But I know now that I have a strong community to turn to for support, and I feel confident in my ability to build that community wherever I go because people of color everywhere are seeking these answers and these connections even if they don't know it yet.

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