

**THE PATH TO ACTIVISM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF HOW SIX UNDERGRADUATES OF COLOR  
BECAME ACTIVISTS WHILE ATTENDING  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

by

**Christine N. Navia**

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Eric L. Dey, Chair  
Professor Barry Checkoway  
Associate Professor Carla O'Connor  
Adjunct Associate Professor David Schoem

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“Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others?”

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

∞

“Who ever walked behind anyone to freedom? If we can’t go hand in hand, I don’t want to go.”

-- Hazel Scott

∞

“Give me where to stand, and I will move the earth.”

-- Archimedes

∞

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## **Dedication**

For my father from whom I inherited my sense of  
justice and fair play:

**Maximiano Navia**

For my nephews—known in certain prestigious circles as Bubba and  
The Peanut—who remind me time and again that the fundamental  
purposes of our lives are to give love openly and accept love openly:

**Michael Patrick, Jr. McDevitt**  
**and**  
**Christopher Max McDevitt**

In loving memory of the first person to introduce me to  
the extraordinary enterprise known as higher education:

**Arthur F. Quern**  
**(1942-1996)**

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## PREFACE

This dissertation represents the culmination of a years-long journey to understand how young people are turned on to the vital, redemptive idea of changing the world. Of all the topics and lines of research I have been introduced to in the classroom, nothing has so fully and completely engaged me than the subject of activism. I am fascinated by the idea that there are people in the world who not only espouse the ideals of freedom, justice, democracy, and brotherhood, but who strive daily to create the social conditions in which they might thrive. The truth-seeker in me is compelled by something more intimate: I hope that in trying to understand how others seek to shape history I might come closer to realizing my own capacity to do the very same thing. To my mind, this is the most compelling aspect of studying those who call themselves activists. History is not a foregone conclusion in their eyes; they believe that history can be—and should be—shaped by their own hands.

Time spent wading through the vast ocean of literature on social change as well as my own political experience has taught me, however, that we can be too quick in our explanations of how such a belief takes root and consequently comes to guide human action. More unfortunate is the fact that we tend to do so at the expense of our own humanity. The dreams, desires, and hopes of activists have often been taken for some manifestation of self-interest, ego gratification, or the compulsion to acquire resources rather than the soulful, imaginative yearnings they truly embody.

What about hope? What about dreams of self-determination, justice and freedom? Or even love, for that matter? Much of the literature is strangely silent on the roles these forces have played—and continue to play—in compelling people to work for social change. Why that is, I am not certain. But I do know that to ignore their influence is to ignore the authentic sources of power that have fueled



some of this country's most triumphant social movements.

I always think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement he built in the 1960s. We credit King and the Movement time and again for the sweeping political, economic, and social changes that resulted from their efforts. What we do not acknowledge as readily as we should is the astonishing moral vision by which those changes were borne, what King called the beloved community. This was the true goal of the movement he inspired: a world in which skin color did not keep us from caring for another or when the time called for it, taking up for one another. And King knew that such a community could only come into being if we were brave enough to avail ourselves to the energies of hope and love.

I recognize this kind of talk will strike many as overly romantic and naïve, especially given the tenor of today's times. Though several years have passed, we are still haunted by the terror and anguish of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the attack on the World Trade Center. Nowhere, however, is our pain more evident than in the war with Iraq, a dubious military conflict that seems to have inspired greater conflict and strife than the peace it was supposed to ensure.

Skeptics will say that the turbulent swirl of history we are now caught in requires more than idealistic notions of hope and moral suasion to calm its bluster. And they would be right—to a degree, that is. We also require new visions and new dreams of brighter, better futures; this is what hope and moral suasion are capable of inspiring if we leave ourselves open to their influence.

Yet I do not know of many other social institutions more aptly suited to cultivate the imagination and creativity needed for the birthing of revolutionary visions than the place we call the university. I cannot think of another social institution more responsible for ensuring that the dynamic process of revolutionary

vision-making is imparted to future generations than the university itself. I know Jaroslav Pelikan (and John Henry Newman before him) would stand with me on this. As he wrote in his 1992 book, The Idea of the University: A Reexamination:

...the university's responsibility in relation to the spread of revolutionary doctrines is dialectical: to provide intellectual and philosophical nurture for the moral outrage and social idealism of its students, by exposing them to a wide range of serious reflection about the nature of the good life and the good society and by aiding them to develop rational methods of analysis for relating such reflection to social and political reality ... (1992, p. 163).

How well higher education has met its responsibilities in this particular realm is questionable. College students today are noted in greater measure for their materialism and political apathy than their desire to work for social change. It is in the hopes of reawakening the higher education community to the salience of activism and our role in cultivating the human spirit and intellect behind it that this dissertation has been conceived. The stories and ideas presented herein reflect the deliberate effort to recover a sense of how dreams of equality and justice can move young people to commit themselves to a greater common good.

This dissertation is also an attempt to reclaim the places in history that rightly belong to previous generations of undergraduates of color who have yet to be fully acknowledged for their roles in fostering much-needed social change, particularly within the system of higher education. While college and universities have long touted their commitments to equity and diversity, they have not always acted upon them as genuinely or fully as needed. The University of Michigan, I believe, owes a special debt to the generations of African American, Latino, Asian Pacific American,

and Native American students who fought heartily to defend their place in the classroom. It is primarily because of their efforts that the University was granted its own moment in history as one of the key guardians of affirmative action. Yes, we should credit University for its courage and efforts in defending affirmative action. But no one should ever forget that it was students of color who showed the institution where to stand in the fight in the first place.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Answering the Spirit of History

There are moments in our lives when we are called to commit ourselves to something bigger, something larger, than the pursuit of our own private, secular interests. According to The Honorable John Lewis (1998), we can be beckoned by the guiding moral force of the universe itself—the “Spirit of History” as he once named it—to surrender our identities as individuals and move through the world instead as servants of the collective human good (p. 64).

How we bear our mantles as stewards of humanity, Lewis says, depends upon our ability to freely avail ourselves to the Spirit of History and its transformational influence. In Walking with the Wind, the memoirs that chronicle his dramatic rise from the cotton fields of Pike County, Alabama to the elite ranks of the United States Congress, Lewis describes the moment he first became aware of the Spirit’s existence and the powerful ways it could exert itself in human life. The year was 1957. The place: American Baptist Theological Seminary, a small school for black ministerial students located in Nashville, Tennessee. Lewis was just seventeen years old and growing increasingly enthralled by the social gospel of one Martin Luther King, Jr. He wrote:

It was at this time that I began believing in what I call the Spirit of History. Others might call it Fate. Or Destiny. Or a Guiding Hand. Whatever it is called, I came to believe that this force is on the side of what is good, of what is right and just. It is the essence of the moral force of the universe, and at certain points in life, in the flow of human existence and circumstances, this force, this spirit, finds you or selects you, it chases you down, and you have no choice; you must allow yourself to be used, to be guided by this force and to carry out what must be done. To me, that concept of surrender, of giving yourself over to something inexorable, something so much larger than yourself, is the basis of what we call faith. And it is the first and most crucial step toward opening yourself to the Spirit of History (p. 64).

In the years to follow, Lewis would become a renowned freedom fighter in the struggle to establish a genuine racial democracy in America, a massive political effort the world now knows as the Civil Rights Movement. His reputation as a tireless advocate for racial equality would eventually earn him a seat in the United States' House of Representatives as well.<sup>1</sup> It was through the course of these events that Lewis came to understand the key to being transformed by the Spirit of History's touch: Regardless of our own circumstances, we must seek nothing for ourselves in the instances when we are called to serve others. As he explained further in Walking:

This opening of the self, this alignment with Fate, has nothing to do with ego or self-gratification. On the contrary, it's an absolutely selfless thing. If the self is involved, the process is interrupted. Something is in the way. The self, even a *sense* of self, must be totally removed in order to allow this spirit in. It is a process of giving over one's very being to whatever role history chooses for you (p. 64).

This study chronicles the lives and times of six individuals who once experienced their own soulful call to serve the collective good during their days as undergraduates of color attending the University of Michigan. Like Lewis himself, they would answer by shouldering the cause of racial justice, aiming to transform the predominately white institution into a diverse learning environment of greater equality, tolerance, and inclusiveness. In the course of their change-making efforts, each one of them would endure a critical transformation in political identity, gradually relinquishing long-held notions of themselves as passive citizens in favor of empowered self-images as activists capable of fomenting widespread social change.

The life stories of these individuals and their extraordinary transformations—known in the chapters ahead as Rosa Cortez, Web Murphy, Esme Rodriguez, Ennis Campbell, Malcolm Jones, and India Taylor—are rendered here as a means of exploring the enduring question of how college students construct their identities as

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis was first elected to Congress in 1987; he currently holds the office of Representative for the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congressional District of Georgia.



activists and the ways they learn to cultivate the commitment to work for social change. What critical interpretative processes occasion an undergraduate's participation in such a rare form of politics? Through what circumstances and experiences do they define their capacity to cultivate change and foster justice in the wider world?

According to Rosa Cortez and the other participants of this study, the answers to these questions lie in a multifaceted array of life experiences and personal relationships which ultimately contribute to the formation of critical activist sensibilities such as a strong passion for justice, a healthy skepticism of authority, and a keen awareness of one's power to shape the world. No event or person plays a more salient role in study participants' activist development, however, than the other undergraduates of color they befriend during their time at Michigan. Through both action and dialogue, their peers show them how to channel burgeoning activist sensibilities into the fierce determination to fight for a dignified, respected place within the University. The process of becoming an activist, their biographical narratives reveal, is not solely ideological but relational and highly influenced by one's fellow travelers.

The remainder of this chapter will provide a detailed overview of the present study and its essential elements, including its basic methodological approach, guiding definitions, and scope. Before attending to these elements, the chapter begins with a discussion of what we are to gain in studying the question of how college students become activists. Perhaps the most significant benefit of all is a much-needed sense of how to rise above the political apathy and indifference that currently dominates civic life in America.

### **A Different Public Mirror**

In many respects, to explore the stories of those we call activists is to explore the most idiosyncratic and uncommon of civic tales. The basis for their singular characterization is well founded. As participants in the political process they stand

unrivaled in the disproportionate amount of time and energy they devote to political issues and causes (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995); in their ready willingness to employ extra-institutional means to foment change (Snow & Oliver, 1991); in the boldness of their hopes for far-reaching, widespread change (see Lewis, 1998); and as history has shown, in the risks and sacrifices they are willing to endure as they set about transforming the social order (see, for example, McAdam, 1988).

It is no accident then, that in comparison to bureaucrats, lobbyists, consultants, and party officials, they are considered to be an altogether different kind of ideological animal. Political scientist Nathan Teske (1997) characterized the particularity of the activist's reputation in the following way: "To be a political activist in America is to be someone who is exceptional, unusual, or odd, someone who lives life against the common grain" (p. 27).

The activist persona acquires an even rarer countenance when placed in the context of today's contemporary college students. Unlike the 1960s and 1970s when colleges and universities across the country endured wave after wave of student-led protest, campuses now report significant declines in the numbers of undergraduates engaging in activism or politics generally (see Sax et al., 1999). Unfortunately, college students are not alone in their apathy; weak political engagement appears to be a condition of most young Americans' present circumstances.

Consider the major findings of a study conducted in the aftermaths of the contentious presidential election of 2000 and the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, two defining historic events that were expected to prompt greater political engagement among every sector of the American citizenry. Conducted by consultants Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates in 2002, the study was based on a sample of 1,500 young adults aged 15 through 25 and reported a number of results that ran counter to such expectations. Among them:

- Roughly 50% of young Americans reported believing that it would be difficult for them to have a real impact in politics and government.

- Approximately 52% also doubted their ability to address problems in their own communities;
- Additionally, 49% of survey respondents saw politics as the property of elites, strongly agreeing with the notion that politics and elections are more about politicians competing to get elected than solving problems or giving average people “their say” in government (Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, 2002, p. 10).

Diminished rates of participation in other civic and political forms of engagement among survey respondents were also reported. The percentage of young people participating in voter registration, for example, declined from 70% in 2000 to 66% in 2002; the rates of young people engaging in episodic volunteering<sup>2</sup> also declined over two years times from 38% to 31%. Meanwhile, the overall percentage of young adults who never volunteer rose by 10 points from 27% in 2000 to 37% in 2002.

Additionally, survey respondents revealed being less committed to civic activities such as donating to charities, volunteering with a community organization, and joining non-political clubs. In 1998, the percentage of young people who donated money, food or clothing approximated 86 percent. Four years later, just 72% of young people claimed to make similar contributions. Reports of club joining declined from 57% in 1998 to 46% in 2002. Reports related to volunteering with a community organization also decreased by 10 points falling from 50% to 40% over the course of the same time period. Overall, the study concluded, young people espouse a greater trust in their government and its ability to deal with terrorism, yet many of them remain deeply skeptical, not only about the efficacy of the country’s political system but their own capacity to solve community problems or impact politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Lake, Snell, Perry, & Associates (2002) define episodic volunteering as “people who volunteer anywhere from ‘less often than once a year, but sometimes’ to every two or three months” (p. 5)

## **The Seeds of Political Apathy and Cynicism**

Why so much distrust and disengagement among American youth? Scholars examining trends of political apathy among college students have proffered a number of explanations. A 1993 study commissioned by the Kettering Foundation, for example, argued that college students were less inclined to pursue politics because they perceived such pursuits to be irrelevant to their lives as well as the resolution of real, pressing social problems. The study stated:

Most everything they have learned about politics, most everything they see and hear involving politics, makes them believe that it is not about solving problems; instead it is individualistic, divisive, negative, and often counterproductive to acting on the ills of society (p. 35).

The work of higher education scholars Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton (1998) has suggested that the perceived quality and character of the nation's political leadership also contributes to an ethos of civic pessimism among college students. Of the 9,100 undergraduates they surveyed, just 21% believed Congress had the interests of the people at heart; 50% thought it was impossible for political leaders to maintain their integrity. Additionally, four out of every five respondents did not believe that the country's political system worked well at handling its problems. In their summation of the college student perspective on government and the American political system, Levine and Cureton rendered a simple but unequivocal assessment: "They don't believe either works" (p. 28).

For Carnegie Foundation scholar William M. Sullivan (2000), culpability lies within the system of higher education itself. College students are apathetic about political life, he claims, because the higher education institutions they attend have come to operate on "a default program of instrumental individualism" in which the traditional mission of bringing knowledge to bear on the social, cultural, and economic life of American democracy has been jettisoned in favor of one committed to economic development (p. 21). This "default program" fosters a campus culture of narrow careerism and private self-interest among students as well as faculty

members and administrators. As evidence, Sullivan points to the quality of social leadership in America today, much of which is comprised of college graduates. He claims:

It is as if they have forgotten that they are members, and highly privileged ones at that, of the national society. In the absence of a sense of belonging to a larger moral entity, the most successful of Americans have in effect seceded from the shared responsibilities of citizenship (p. 22).

When taken as a whole, these findings and arguments point to a formidable body of countervailing forces—from the impoverished quality and character of American political leadership to the market-driven mission dominating higher education to the questionable relevance of politics—that hinder young people from cultivating the kinds of political interest and commitment necessary to maintaining a strong, viable democracy. How to counteract these forces? Scholars and social commentators differ in their prescriptions for civic renewal but they agree on one central point: Every solution must include plans for the restoration of an active, involved, and participatory citizenry (see Barber, 1998; Lerner, 1997; Loeb, 1999; Wallis 1995).

Herein lays the significance of exploring the activist story. Although the stories presented in the following chapters are individualized accounts of how six young people of color once forged identities as activists, they can also be read as empowering parables that highlight how young people might cultivate a commitment to the common good from the seedbeds of their own personal lives. In the broadest sense, these personal stories provide what educators Daloz et al. (1996) have referred to as a “different public mirror,” one that provides a reflection of the way people can care about politics and their civic duties even in the midst of opposing social and cultural forces (p. 7). To invoke the language of John Lewis, they can show us what it takes to answer the Spirit of History.

Clearly, we understand the conditions that give rise to the political apathy and disenfranchisement among college students and their younger counterparts. What we appear less certain of is how to free them from the chains of their disengagement. Before we can perform this much-needed task, we must possess a seminal understanding of how people, like those in this study, learn to commit themselves to the common good in the first place.

### **Charting the Path to Activism**

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how college students come to walk the path of activism, a course demarcated by politics, morality, and the engagement in a collective struggle with others. What are the major influences that undergraduates cite as critical to their development as activists? What life experiences or encounters appear to inform their decisions to work for social change?

Guiding the exploration of these questions is a distinctive research approach whose main interpretative methods have been shaped in relation to the core notions of biography and narrative, as well as history and memory. Its key features include:

- The use of the interpretative biographical form, a methodological approach marked by the gathering and analysis of life stories, narratives that render the unfolding of an individual's life over time (Atkinson, 1998);
- The provision of a first-person perspective of college student activism which allows for a close, intimate look at how the commitment to activism is established and perhaps more importantly, the kinds of meaning the experience takes on in the life of the activist individual;
- The inclusion of cross-generational, diverse viewpoints held by men and women of color from differing historical eras which highlight the significant roles they have played in reshaping University life; and

- An emphasis upon the construction of biographical narratives as the central means for understanding how the commitment to activism is established. Invoking a storied perspective of activism underscores our roles as mythmakers and storytellers; that we are “...symbol-making creatures, who spin webs of meaning around ourselves...and we tell each other story after story” (Jasper, 1997, p. 10).

Collectively, these methodological features characterize a line of inquiry that offers a fresh and compelling form of insight few other studies of college student activism have before: richly detailed, first-hand accounts that vividly portray the ways in which the process of becoming an activist unfolds in the life of a young undergraduate of color and the many experiences, encounters, and events that determine its patterning.

### **The Importance of Biographies and Narratives**

Why emphasize the notions of biography and narrative? According to sociologists, Joseph E. Davis (2002) and James M. Jasper (1997), too few scholars attend to biography or narrative in their studies of collective political action as fully as they should. In failing to do so, they ignore the potent roles both elements play in the forging of an activist commitment. Biography, according to Jasper (1997), is a key dimension of protest for those who in engage in it often do so on the basis of multiple motivations, many of which are rooted in individualized life experiences. He writes:

Much goes on inside individuals' heads that could lead them into protest. They have long-standing affective ties to people and things as well as shorter-term emotional responses to events and information; moral intuitions and principles derived from religion, professional training, and other experiences; cognitive assumptions and beliefs through which they interpret the world. Depending on how threats are constructed, all these may make individuals open or willing to protest (p. 101).

Narratives are also fundamental to understanding the individual and collective processes that give rise to social movements and social movement participation. In relation to individual processes, Davis (2002) states, narratives often prompt participants “to take an evaluative stance towards unjust social conditions, affirm the virtue of the oppressed, confirm the rightness and efficacy of movement involvement, and imagine an alternative social order” (p. 24). From a collective standpoint, narratives illuminate important internal movement processes as well. Davis writes: “Movements come to know themselves in the stories they tell about themselves...narratives can formulate, control, and represent models of appropriate behavior and affect display, accounts of experience, and legitimate motive, and normative moral understandings” (p. 25).

Together, the lenses of biography and narrative draw attention to one of the most potent yet underappreciated aspects of protest: its inherent artfulness (Jasper, 1997, p. 11). Those who engage in activism draw on more than resources, strategies, and political structures to achieve their aims. They also employ their imaginations, their creativity, and their emotions to affect change. In utilizing the interpretative biographical approach that emphasizes both biography and the construction of narratives, this study affirms the imaginative and creative ways college students come to embrace that vibrant form of citizenship we know as activism.

### **Guiding Definitions**

One of the major shortcomings of the higher education literature on college student activism is that it does not adhere to clear, consistent definitions of the terms student activist or student activism. Numerous other characterizations such as “protestor,” “liberal,” “radical,” and “dissenter” have been used to refer to the young individual who engages in collective protest but typically without any accompanying explanation of their meanings (Keniston, 1973).

Rather than invoke terms from a body of literature marked by inchoate concepts, this study draws its guiding definitions directly from its six central cases of



activism and the common characteristics that describe them as a collective whole. According to the sociologist Howard Becker (1998), deriving one's key concepts from the primary cases under examination is a more logically sound alternative to defining one's meanings than applying terms that only partially describe or characterize a set of cases.<sup>3</sup>

### **Student Activism**

In the context of this study, the term *student activism* possesses several meanings. First, it should be understood as a *collective form of political behavior* in which students work in communion with others to foment change. For study participants, these “others” are constituted by both individuals and groups, appearing in their stories as classmates, floor mates, siblings, romantic partners, friends, peers of color, white student allies, activist coalitions, action movements, and social justice groups. Secondly, the term student activism must be understood in the context of the guiding politics that inform its purpose and scope. In the case of this study, those guiding politics can be defined as a form of *identity politics*<sup>4</sup> in which participants’ activist efforts to change the University are inextricably linked to their identities as people of color. As their stories will reveal, study participants combat racism, inequitable educational access, and the unequal representation of people of color within the University not simply because of the egregious nature of these political conditions but perhaps even more so, because of the ways in which such conditions contribute to the oppression of people of color and adversely affect the quality of their lives. Thus, the student activism this study is centrally concerned with should be defined as both

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<sup>3</sup> Becker refers to this particular manner of rendering definitions as “letting the case define the concept” (p. 104).

<sup>4</sup> Generally defined, identity politics refers to a form of politics whereby individuals of a particular social group or constituency undertake a variety of political activities in the name of liberating themselves from oppressive conditions that restrict their self-determination and independence (see Nagel, 1996).

the attempt to redress injustices as well as the attempt to reclaim and ultimately redefine one's identity.

A third important element that defines the term student activism concerns its intended target, namely, the University. Unlike other forms of activism that attempt to create change on a broader, global scale, the efforts of study participants are localized or *institutionally centered*. Despite the limited scope of their efforts, however, participants nonetheless sought to engender change that was comprehensive and far-reaching, encompassing institutional policies and practices as well as the values and behaviors of University members.

Yet another important element that defines the term student activism centers upon the future-oriented perspective that guided participants in the course of challenging the University. From a developmental perspective, their efforts to create change could easily be construed as a form of *generativity* or the need to nurture and contribute to future generations (see Erickson, 1959). This is, in large part, how study participants saw themselves: as empowered students of color advocating on behalf of future generations of students of color who would attend the University of Michigan after they had graduated and moved on.

Finally, the term student activism should be understood as a *tactically multifaceted* form of collective, political behavior. As their stories will attest, the student movements that study participants were a part of relied upon a wide range of political strategies and tactics to further their causes including activities such as strikes, sit-ins, teach-ins, the occupation of campus buildings, demonstrations, protests, marches, blockades, letter writing campaigns, and in the most violent of cases, the destruction of campus property.

### **Student Activist**

Within the context of this study, the term *student activist* refers to that undergraduate of color who actively works to create change on campus, typically by publicly challenging and/or resisting institutional policies, procedures, and decisions

that are believed to, in some way, perpetuate inequality, injustice, or intolerance among people of color.

Two other definitional elements should be added here. The first concerns the role that participants played in the activist movements and groups they helped to create. Despite the differences in the timing of their activism and the movements they supported, each one of them can be said to have assumed the same general role of *social movement member*, what sociologists Ennis & Scheuer (1987) have defined as those individuals who fully endorse the goals and tactics of a social movement by contributing their time, money and personal efforts to carrying out its agenda and ensuring its success (p. 392).<sup>5</sup> As the chapters ahead will reveal, participants were responsible for a number of critical but largely low-key tasks including writing editorials, scheduling meetings, providing tours, organizing sit-ins and teach-ins, taking part in marches and protests, handling media requests, drafting resolutions, and generally showing support for their organizations in any way they could.

Secondly, the term student activist must also be defined by the risk taken on in attempting to create change. As their stories show, participants opened themselves to significant risk, including the risk of reprisal or punishment by campus authorities; the risk of public ridicule; and perhaps most importantly, the risk of jeopardizing their educational progress. Thus, the term student activist should also be understood as *one willing to take risks* on behalf of a larger social or political cause.

### **The Limits of Memory and Place**

There are several aspects to this study that limit its scope or the intellectual territory it intends to cover and the boundaries by which it will abide. The first limitation is related to the notion of place. This study focuses solely on student

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<sup>5</sup> Previous studies of activism and its roots have often overlooked these committed individuals in their analyses of social movements, preferring instead to focus on popular leaders or charismatic personalities of a particular movement.

cohorts associated with a single institution, namely, the University of Michigan. The limitation in focusing on a large, elite, public institution is that the study's findings cannot be used to explain the activist development of college students from other kinds of institutions. In this respect, the overall generalizability of its conclusions is constrained.

The second limitation concerns memory and the process of recalling the past. According to Harvard University professor Daniel L. Schacter (2001), our minds naturally commit “sins of memory” as they set about the work of remembering all of the events, places, people, and information we need to live our lives (p. 4). The ways in which our memories fail us fall into two broad categories. The first category is known as “sins of omission,” where a person fails to “bring to mind a desired fact, event, or idea” (p. 4).<sup>6</sup> The second category, referred to as “sins of commission,” involve a form of memory that is present “but it is either incorrect or unwanted” (p. 5).<sup>7</sup>

The larger point to be taken from Schacter's work is that as places to store and retrieve information, memories are not entirely reliable. It is their nature to fail us. It is because of the organic fallibility of the human mind that we cannot rely on memory for complete and accurate portrayals of the past. According to Portelli (1991), we must instead look at memory as “an active process of creation of meanings” (p. 52). From this perspective, memories constitute something other than historical recollections. As they are transformed into oral sources—where they are spoken aloud—they reveal the deeper, more personalized significance behind a particular action or event. In Portelli's words, these oral sources “...tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (1991, p. 50).

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<sup>6</sup> The inability to recall information because our attention was focused somewhere else—otherwise known as absent-mindedness—is a good example of memory omission.

<sup>7</sup> Misattribution, or assigning a memory to the wrong source, is an example of memory commission.

The same perspective of memory must also be applied to the present study whose main “data” originates from what six individuals were able to recall about their undergraduate days as activists at the University of Michigan. The stories Web, Rosa, Esme, Ennis, Malcolm, and India relate cannot be taken as literal, factual accounts as the key source from which they are drawn—memory itself—is too unreliable to produce them. Their stories can only be taken for what they are: narratives that reveal how a particular group of individuals handled the question of identity, how they grappled with the passing of time, and the ways in which they constructed meaning in relation to all of the people and places they have experienced.

Can such narratives be treated as credible and truthful? Yes, but with a credibility and truthfulness of a more personal, intimate nature. The narratives study participants created are essentially reflections of what felt real and certain to them about the times in which they once lived.<sup>8</sup> Although they can never be taken for objective truth, they can be viewed as personal truth or what Portelli (1991) described as being “psychologically true” (p. 51).<sup>9</sup> The narratives upon which this dissertation is based then must be seen as representations of what study participants believed was true about their activist days and reflected people, places, and events as they honestly thought they existed.

### **Towards the Revitalization of the Student Activist Spirit**

Despite the particularity of their reputations, scholars and researchers alike have looked to activists to understand a myriad of sociological, historical, cultural, and political processes as well as outcomes (Tarrow, 1994). Early on, for example,

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<sup>8</sup> To the degree that it was possible, participant accounts, particularly as they related to dates, times, and places where verified through archival records and the interviews with panel informants listed in Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> Portelli (1991) states further: “The importance of oral testimony may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no ‘false’ oral sources” (p. 51).

activists were considered to be a key element in the study of collective behavior,<sup>10</sup> a line of inquiry that sought to determine the dynamics and conditions behind the engagement in mass, public displays of group action (Oberschall, 1993; Snow & Oliver, 1991). Since the 1970s, when the study of social movements blossomed into its own independent line of sociological inquiry, scholars have relied upon activists for knowledge of how such movements are formed, coordinated, and sustained as they attempt to transform the social order (McAdam et al., 1988).

This study's purpose in examining the subject of student activism is twofold. First, it looks to the activist life for an understanding of how young people make the leap from private citizen to public activist. It is centrally concerned with uncovering how such a transformation occurs, identifying what Becker (1998) once described as a chronological sense of "first this happened, then that happened and it ended up like this" (p. 61). As the following chapter will reveal, this process has not been well articulated by scholars.

Perhaps more importantly, this study looks to the activist life for inspiration and a renewed sense of the kind of public, communal citizenship that might be engendered once more among future generations of college-goers. As numerous scholars and social critics have pointed out, our notions of citizenship have become increasingly passive and individualized, if not wholly commercialized (see Barber, 1998). Our conceptions of democracy are no better. We tend to think of democracy as the cradle that secures our individual rights rather than a communal approach to social life. That we are both capable and responsible for the shaping of our democracy or the history that informs it is a notion that seems to escape us completely.

According to sociologist Richard Flacks (1988), most Americans deliberately choose *not* to enact their ability to shape the course or content of history.<sup>11</sup> The most

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to public protests and demonstrations, the study of collective behavior included examinations of crowds, mobs, riots, and crazes (Snow & Oliver, 1991).

fundamental expression of the American unwillingness to make history, he claims, is found in our selfish commitments to private life and personal fulfillment. Yet this “commitment to everyday life,” as Flacks refers to it, is not completely devoid of political meaning or consequence (p. 51). He writes:

The most obvious way in which the commitment to everyday life may be seen to be political is to view it as an affirmation of the status quo. It expresses a readiness to delegate political responsibility to elites, a tendency to overlook or be resigned to the moral failures of such elites, a resistance to criticism of established policies, an antagonism towards movements of thought and action that threaten the fabric of everyday life. It is, therefore, the bedrock of contemporary grassroots conservatism (p. 51).

Who better to look to then for an understanding of how to create civic lives that are more communal and participatory than those we call activists? From a historical perspective, few others have so forcefully or effectively generated broad-scale social change. Within the realm of higher education, student activists have proven themselves to be the mainsprings of institutional change and renewal, transforming a number of colleges and universities’ pedagogical, social, political, and economic practices (see Horowitz, 1987).

Thus, the true significance of this study is not simply defined by what it reveals about the processes involved in becoming an activist but more so, by what it reveals about the human capacity to become committed to a greater common good. Hopefully, the stories presented in the chapters ahead will not only rekindle the long-lost sense of college students as legitimate, powerful sources of social justice and cultural innovation but more importantly, provide critical insight that may later be applied to cultivating new generations of activist citizens.

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<sup>11</sup> For additional perspectives on the decline in American civic life see also Bellah, et al., 1985; Bellah, et al., 1992; Loeb, 1999; and Putnam, 2000.

## **Forthcoming Chapters**

The remaining chapters build on the ideas and concepts initially presented in this introduction. Chapter 2 provides a review of the extant theoretical and empirical studies that have attempted to explain why college students engage in activism, and more generally, why individuals participate in social movements. As mentioned previously, these studies largely ignore the roles of culture, emotion, and biography. Chapter 3 details the basic research approach adopted in the formulation of this dissertation. Chapter 4, 5, and 6 provide entry into to the lives Web, Rosa, Esme, Ennis, Malcolm, and India led prior to their undergraduate days at the University of Michigan as well as relay the stories behind their engagement in different student movements on campus. These movements take on various forms and causes, including the first and third installments of the Black Action Movements, apartheid in South Africa, the global movement to free Nelson Mandela, and institutional racism. Chapter 7 looks at the process of becoming an activist across all six lives, situating its central elements in the context of existing literature on social movements. Finally, Chapter 8 presents concluding thoughts on the development of the commitment to activism and outlines additional areas of inquiry to explore in the future.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Interpretations and Explanations of Activist Behavior: A Review of the Literature Related to the Activism of American College Students**

The sudden emergence of protests and demonstrations on American college and university campuses in the 1960's provoked much speculation and conjecture about the roots of undergraduate political activism. Some, such as statesman and Pulitzer-Prize winning author George F. Kennan claimed that students (particularly those who were part of the New Left political tradition) had been victimized by "great and destructive philosophic errors" (p. 9, 1968). They vastly misunderstood, Kennan argued, what it meant to live in a democratic society where the will of the majority ruled above all else.

Others, like President Emeritus Robben W. Fleming, believed that the activism of college students was simply borne out of the natural naiveté and vigor of youth. In his recollections of student activism during his tenure as president of the University of Michigan, Fleming (1996) wrote: "Students are in the prime of their physical energy, they are removed from parental restraints, they are not yet fully mature in their judgment, they find a certain joy in challenging their elders..." (p. 181).

This chapter will examine a host of theoretical and empirical studies that have attempted to explain why college students engage in activism, and more generally, why individuals participate in social movements. In doing so, it seeks to acknowledge the ideas that have informed the study's basic research approach to studying the phenomenon known as college student activism. This review should not be construed, however, as a purposive framework to be confirmed or contested. Rather, it is meant to orient this study within a larger of body of scholarship.

Drawn primarily from the disciplines of higher education, sociology, political science, and psychology, the explanations and interpretations to be reviewed here are based upon analyses of historic and contemporary social movements that

championed (and continue to champion) a wide range of ideological and political causes. These include free speech, civil rights, women's rights, peace, and nuclear disarmament.

The chapter is organized according to the main theoretical issues that scholars consider key in determining why college students (as well as their adult counterparts) engage in activism. They are: the role societal, historical, and generational conditions play in fostering activism; the psychological determinants shaping activist engagement; the influence of personal values and attitudes; and the influence of social movements upon activist development. A brief overview of the literature and its inherent shortcomings is presented here first; a fuller discussion of these theoretical issues then follows.

### **Brief Overview**

The extant literature on college student activism is, in many respects, a literature of competing perspectives. On the one side, are studies that root activism in broad social, demographic, political, and economical processes, what sociologists have referred to as macro-level conceptions of collective action (McAdam, et al., 1988). On the other, are studies that focus primarily on the micro-level correlates of collective action, individual attributes that compel people to become activists or renders them prone to the influence of social movements (McAdam, et al., 1988).

Despite its divergent perspectives, the literature as a whole, suffers from several common shortcomings. Foremost among them, is its inability to speak to the subject of activism as a lived experience. There are few thick, rich descriptions that reflect how college students cultivate a commitment to social change and learn to translate private convictions into public, political action. This is true even of the studies that focus centrally on the individual attributes related to activism. They portray activism as a function of particular traits and motivations but say nothing of it as a real-life experience.

In addition, the literature also fails to provide a sense of the process involved in becoming an activist. Most, if not all, of the studies discussed in this chapter attempt to understand why college students engage in activism but they do not reveal how undergraduates come to do so. As a result, we know more about the characterizations and descriptions of the kinds of people who are most likely to become activists than we do of the process by which they forge their identities as activists.

Finally, there is its shallow treatment of important notions such as political consciousness and human agency. For reasons that are not entirely clear, proponents of both macro-level and micro-level correlates of collective action tend to cast activists largely as deprived, maladjusted, reactionary individuals. One of the unfortunate consequences of approaching activism from such a perspective is that it fails to come to terms with the political mores and values that may be guiding a person's political behavior. The role of politics, in general, takes a back seat to decidedly non-political considerations such as the state of one's psychological or mental welfare.

What follows in the remainder of this chapter then, is the presentation and discussion of a body of literature that possesses several significant shortcomings. These shortcomings should be kept in mind when considering the conclusions that scholars have drawn in relation to why college students become activists.

### **Societal, Historical, Generational, and Institutional Conditions**

One of the main theoretical issues that scholars of activism and social movements have attempted to resolve is the role that larger sociological processes and structures play in fostering activism. Often referred to as the classical or historical approach to collective action, there are a number of studies that pin the roots of activism to particular historical, generational, and societal conditions. Their guiding premise is that social movements (and participation in them) arise at certain times, and not others, because of a particular sociohistorical context (Braungart,

1984). The resulting conditions covered specifically in the literature include: 1) social inequities; 2) war/military conflict; 3) debilitating economic conditions; 4) advances in technology; and 5) social trends (McAdam, et al., 1988). The guiding premise is that these processes contribute to specific conditions that ultimately influence the rise of social movements.

In order to organize a discussion of these conditions, I have utilized the theory of social discontinuity (otherwise known as the breakdown perspective) as a framework by which to explain how these conditions may give rise to the political rebellion and activism of young people like college students. As Braungart (1984) has noted, the theory of social discontinuity is one of the most basic theoretical frameworks scholars have relied upon to understand the link between youth movements and societal conditions. It is briefly summarized here.

### **The Social Discontinuity or Breakdown Perspective**

Grounded in the study of youth movements<sup>12</sup> and derived largely from examinations of trends related to population growth (Moller, 1972), war (Gurr, 1970), and industrialization (Meyer & Rubinson, 1972), the social discontinuity perspective argues that the emergence of youth movements is primarily influenced by the rapid pace of change and differentiation in society (Braungart & Braungart, 1974). The more rapidly a society becomes bureaucratized or technologically advanced, the less likely its social and political institutions will have a chance to adapt to the changes being produced. Consequently, this “speed-up of change,” as Keniston has referred to it, disrupts the equilibrium of society, causing it to break down (1971, p. 58). In a state of breakdown and discontinuity, society and its citizenry become vulnerable to new forces and movements for social change (Braungart, 1984; Greer, 1979).

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<sup>12</sup> Youth movements are typically defined as social movements that have been established, organized, and run by a society’s youth population (Feuer, 1969). Historically, most youth movements have been comprised primarily of college students but as Braungart (1984) noted, they sometimes include youth who have not attended college. The student movement of the 1960’s is considered a prime example of youth movements.

According to Smelser (1968), one of the main proponents of the breakdown perspective, when this kind of discontinuity arises, individuals are likely to become anxious, hostile, or delusional. If and when these sentiments are experienced among collectives of people, they may crystallize into social movements. The most susceptible to these movements, Smelser claims, are young people who, because they are not yet fully entrenched in adulthood, are easily dislodged from their old social ties.

From the social discontinuity or breakdown perspective, then, youth movements and student activism arise as a direct response to historical events and rapid changes in societal circumstances. They prompt a variety of conditions that, in and of themselves, also contribute to the emergence of youth movements. The nature and scope of these conditions, as well the ways in which they have been substantiated by the extant literature on college student activism are enumerated upon in the next several sub-sections.

### **Social Inequities**

According to sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt (1978), youth movements are rooted in changing social inequities whose presence becomes more apparent as society moves from an elitist and class-based form of civic participation towards a more egalitarian one.<sup>13</sup> During this process, new patterns of conflict arise over the ideals of society and the manner in which they are upheld by its institutions. Youth movements, Eisenstadt claimed, emerge out of these conflicts in the hopes of redressing the inequities that exist in society.

Although the relationship between social inequities and student activism has never been systematically tested, it is evident from quantitative and qualitative studies of student activism that the redressing of social inequalities was a central concern of student activists during the 1960s. This is evidenced by their participation in protests

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<sup>13</sup> Social inequities are unequal differences in the status and rights accorded to individuals within the same society.

and demonstrations against racial discrimination (Astin 1968, 1970) and the treatment of welfare recipients (Peckham 1994); activist campaigns aimed at increasing minority representation on campus (Brune, 1984); civil rights work (Coles, 1964; Flacks, 1967); and special projects such as Freedom Summer (McAdam, 1988).

### **War/Military Conflict**

Political sociologists Richard Hamilton & James Wright (1975) have argued that disruptions in a society's routine caused by wars and military conflicts also prompt the emergence of youth movements. They claim that the occurrence of war and military conflict upsets social patterns, dislodging students from established educational and career paths. It is on the basis of this dislodgement and the confusion that it creates for young individuals who are attempting to establish independent lives that youth movements emerge. In this regard, the emergence of youth movements is a result of the spillover effects produced by warfare and conflict. Higher education scholar Arthur Levine (1980) also acknowledged the centrality of war in influencing college student activism. Unlike Hamilton & Wright (1975), however, Levine asserted that wars engender two particular types of environmental phenomena that either promote or suppress engagement in activism. He referred to them as the phenomena of "community ascendancy" and "individual ascendancy" (p. 25).

During war-time, Levine asserted, society is influenced by the phenomena of "community ascendancy," where people are more collective-minded and concerned with the well-being of their peers and their country (p. 25). It is in this type of environment that Levine claimed college students are more likely to engage in activism as well as other collective activities. At war's end, he argued, "Thoughts and actions that were directed outward turn inward to concerns that have been neglected—to getting one's life or the life of one's family in order" (p. 119). In these times, society is influenced by the phenomena of "individual ascendancy," where

individuals are more interested in their own well-being than that of others. As a result, they are less likely to engage in activism (p. 25).

Historical accounts of college student activism and studies of anti-war activists reveal the influence of military conflict on college student activism. It was a central concern of activists during the 1930's and 1960's. Brax (1981) reported that World Wars I and II prompted considerable activism on campus in the 1930's while Altbach (1974) described the same situation surrounding the Vietnam War in the 1960's. Media reports of activism on campus during the early 1990's revealed that Persian Gulf War of 1991 drew the attention of activists as well (see Dodge, 1991). This is also evidenced by college student participation in anti-war protests (Astin, et al. 1975); special anti-war projects such as Vietnam Summer (Keniston, 1968); peace demonstrations (Soloman & Fishman, 1964); and pickets of Army and Navy recruitment on campus (Watts, Lynch, & Whittaker, 1969).

### **Debilitating Economic Conditions**

Similar to their contention that youth movements emerge as a result of the spillover effects produced by war and military conflict, Hamilton & Wright (1975) posited that debilitating economic conditions<sup>14</sup> give rise to them as well. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence substantiating the role debilitating economic conditions play in the activism of college students can be found in the autobiographical account of former activist Hal Draper (1967). In his personal recollections of activism during the Great Depression in the 1930's, Draper recalled how the rise of the first major American student movement arose in response to the unpromising and dim vision of the future the Depression had cultivated. He claimed the depression gave rise to a "locked-out generation" of youth for whom there was few employment and career opportunities. "A whole section of the American Middle

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<sup>14</sup> Debilitating economic conditions refer to severe changes in the economy that disrupt the stability of society.

Class was being declassified,” Draper (1967) wrote, “and the student movement was a result of this declassification” (pp. 155-156).

### **Advances in Technology**

Political scientist Scott Greer (1979) has argued that youth movements come into being as result of rapid advances in destructive technology. He claimed that youth movements arise primarily out of opposition to the necessity of such technology, its intended use, and their concern for their own futures. That advances in destructive technology have been a sufficient cause for activism has been evidenced by student participation in the environmental, ban-the-bomb, anti-nuclear power movements during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Braungart & Braungart, 1980; Keniry, 1993).

### **Social Trends**

Sociologist Neil Smelser (1963, 1968) and political scientist Scott Greer (1979) have asserted that youth movements are produced by particular social trends. For Smelser (1963, 1968), these trends are related to the growing industrialization and urbanization of society. He argued that changes in agriculture, industry, and urban living uproot youth from old social ties and prescribed roles in society. In an attempt to forge a new set of ties and redefine their role in society, youth movements will form. For Greer, the trends related to the emergence of a youth movement involve the rapid expansion of society in areas such as public education, citizenship, and growth in the overall population. He claimed that youth movements emerge as a result of the accumulation of individuals in locales especially conducive to criticism and unrest such as colleges and universities.

It has similarly been claimed in historical accounts and studies on the social bases of student activism that rapid increases in the number of youth enrolling in college provided a critical mass of young people who could be mobilized to participate in activism. Altbach (1974) argued that the advent of multiple, formally



structured activist organizations in the early 1920's were a direct result of the increased enrollment of college students. Additionally, Mankoff & Flacks (1972), Meyer & Rubinson (1972), and Weinberg & Walker (1969) claimed that the college-going population in the 1960's had expanded so considerably, they were no longer able to differentiate between activists and non-activists solely on the basis of background characteristics. College students were being mobilized to participate from different sectors of society.

### **The Role of Generational Units & Generational Consciousness**

Other scholars have focused upon the role that generations play in fostering activism. There are two models that assert that generations<sup>15</sup> are central to understanding the emergence of youth movements and student activism (Braungart, 1984). They include: 1) the functionalist model of generations and 2) the generational unit model. The guiding presumption behind both of these models is that rapid social change produces unique generational cohorts. It is on the basis of similarities, differences, and interactions between generations that youth movements are thought to emerge. The two models are briefly summarized below.

#### The Functionalist Model of Generations

The functionalist model of generations argues that youth movements and activism are driven primarily by the intergenerational conflicts which occur between older generations who have already achieved full integration into society and younger generations who want to achieve full integration into society (Braungart, 1974).

These conflicts are the result of society's becoming more complex and differentiated (Braungart, 1974, 1984). According to Bettelheim (1963), the differentiation of society results in the displacement of youth. Where they were once

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<sup>15</sup> Generations are defined as members of the same age group that share a distinctive set of views, attitudes, and beliefs based on shared experiences of historical events.

highly valued for their energy, physical strength, and ability to fight, they have now become economic and social liabilities in a more modernized world. As a result, Bettelheim (1963) claimed, youth become isolated from participation in society. Therefore, they resort to rebellion and challenge in order to compete with older generations for full status and participation in society. In this regard, youth movements and activism are really symbolic attempts to gain the status denied them by adult society; they are reactions against the status quo rather than true revolutions for youth do not wish to overthrow society but participate in it more fully (Eisenstadt, 1963).

### The Generational Unit Model

The generational unit model asserts that youth movements and activism are not solely influenced by conflict between older and younger generations but by new forms of consciousness that simultaneously arise as the result of rapid social and cultural changes. According to sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952), “the quicker the tempo of social and cultural change,” the more likely individuals are to develop their own unique attitudes and responses to society and politics as well as a sense of “common destiny” (p. 310). He claimed that when young people become aware that their orientation to society and politics may differ from that of their elders, a generational consciousness is formed, providing the basis for the emergence of youth movements as well as intergenerational conflict. Mannheim also noted that because of the different positions and status individuals hold in society, members of a generation may “work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways” resulting in the formation of competing generational units and intragenerational conflict (p. 304).

What these two models suggest, then, is that youth movements and activism are influenced by intergenerational conflicts and the types of generational units to which one belongs. However, extant studies of college student activists reveal little support for the suggestion that intergenerational conflict influences the activism of

college students. In fact studies by Flacks (1967, 1971), Keniston (1968), and Soloman & Fishman (1964) of civil rights and peace demonstrators found that their activism was influenced largely by the political values and beliefs they inherited from their parents. In other words, their activism was the result of the continuity between the two generations rather than conflict.

Follow-up studies of college student activists from the 1960s, on the other hand, indicate considerable support for the influence of membership in a specific generational unit on activism in general. According to Marwell, Aiken, & Demerath (1987); Sherkat & Blocker (1994); and Whalen & Flacks (1989), those college students who had engaged in activism as undergraduates in the 1960s remained politically active and true to their ideological roots as liberals in adulthood. Those who had not taken part in activism during the 1960s were more likely as adults to remain politically conservative and rarely, if ever, engaged in political activities outside of voting. This finding suggests that belonging to a particular generational unit not only affects whether one engages in activism but it may exert a long-term influence on activism in adulthood as well.

### **Institutional Conditions**

Much like the studies that have attempted to pin the roots of activism and youth movements in larger historical and generational conditions, there are studies that suggest the activism of college students is influenced by a different kind of macro-level condition, namely, the types of colleges and universities they attend. In the words of Keniston (1967): “However we define his characteristics, one activist alone cannot make a protest: the characteristics of the college or university he attends have much to do with whether his protest-proneness will ever be mobilized into actual activism” (p. 121).

Extant studies on the institutional characteristics that contribute to the “protest-proneness” of its student body reveal that they are related to institutional

size, type, selectivity, faculty and teaching assistants, and institutional response to protests and demonstrations on campus.

### Institutional Size

Empirical studies by Astin, et al. (1975), Norr (1977) and Peterson (1968) reveal that institutional size greatly influences the presence of activism and activist on campus. For example, Norr (1977), in his study of 1000 four-year accredited colleges and universities found that in relation to other institutional characteristics such as denominational control, tuition and fees, politically relevant majors, and student academic potential, institutional size had the greatest direct effect on a campus' level of activism and political activity. According to Astin, et al. (1975), institutional size influences the presence of activism on campus by providing a critical mass of potential activists capable of organizing protests. In short, the larger the student body, the more likely there will be students and faculty activists to organize political activity.

### Institutional Type

Astin, et al.'s (1975) study of a stratified national sample of 246 colleges and universities revealed that institutional type influenced the presence of activism and activists on campus as well. Comparing different types of institutions across self-reports of protest on campus during the 1968-1969 academic year, Astin et al. (1975) found that more public and private universities endured protests on campus (70.5% and 43% respectively) than two-year public and private college (0% and 10.4%), four-year Protestant and Catholic colleges (17.8% and 8.5%) and four-year private nonsectarian and public colleges (42.6% and 21.7%).

In his analysis of all the regionally accredited, four-year degree granting institutions in the United States, Peterson (1968) found different types of institutions also endure different types of protests. For example, public institutions tend to endure protests and demonstrations over instructional issues related to class size and

impersonal instruction as well as minority educational issues, while Catholic, independent liberal arts, and technical schools tended to experience protests over issues related to student freedoms such as dress codes and living-group regulation (Peterson, 1968).

### Selectivity

Astin, et al. (1975), Bayer & Astin (1969), and Peterson (1968) discovered that institutional selectivity plays a role in activism on campus as well. Bayer & Astin (1969) and Peterson (1968) reported selectivity to be the greatest predictor of campus unrest; none of the least selective institutions experienced severe protest in their samples while the incidence of protest rose sharply at each successive selectivity level. More public and private research universities reported severe protests on campus than two-year public and private colleges.

Astin, et al. (1975) claimed that selectivity of an institution influenced the activism of college students in a couple of ways. First, students attracted to highly selective institutions tend to be more intellectual and well-informed about political issues. Thus, Astin, et al. hypothesized, they use protest to express their political concerns. Secondly, because highly selective institutions tend to engender competitive academic environments, students naturally look for ways to ameliorate these sentiments and often channel them into activism. Finally, highly selective institutions also tend to attract politically active faculty who influence activism on campus by either supporting it or helping students plan protests and demonstrations.

### Faculty & Teaching Assistants

Two national surveys conducted by Boruch (1969) and Lipset & Ladd (1975) revealed that an institution's faculty and teaching assistants are also influential in prompting the activism of college students. Lipset & Ladd's survey of 6,000 faculty members at 307 colleges and universities revealed that it was a particular type of faculty who supported activism on campus. They tended to be: liberal in their

political ideology; more likely to work in the social sciences; younger than their faculty peers; and of Jewish ancestry.

Boruch's (1969) study of deans' perceptions of faculty and teaching assistants' activist involvement at 285 two- and four-year institutions of higher education in campus unrest found that these individuals influence activism on campus directly by helping students plan events such as rallies and teach-ins. Overall, however, Boruch reported that faculty and teaching assistants were more likely to act as sympathetic supporters than actual planners.

### Administrative Responses to Activism

Based on his examination of repressive institutional tactics utilized by Berkeley, Columbia, and Kent State University administrators to contend with activists, Lammers (1977) argued that the manner in which institutional administrators respond to protests and demonstrations also influences the presence of activists and activism on campus. He argued that repressive techniques such as calling in local police or the National Guard actually work to create greater support for activists because the rest of the community construes them as an inappropriate exercise of power. Concessive strategies, such as agreeing to sponsor new classes or create new departments, while they are less harmful on the educational process, may be injurious to the legitimacy and reputation of an institution if applied on a large scale. They tend to cultivate the impression that institution leadership is "soft." Yet concessive strategies, Lammers (1977) concluded, tend to quell activism on campus, not augment it.

### **Contributions & Limitations of This Perspective**

Through a discussion of social discontinuity theory, various societal conditions such as war and social inequity, functional and generational unit models, and different institutional characteristics such as size and type, it has been suggested that certain types of societal conditions and institutional factors influence the

presence of activism and activists on campus. In this regard, how society contends with rapid social change, the inequities and conflicts that are produced by this change, the manner in which it shapes generational conflicts and consciousness, and the impersonality of an institution, are all factors thought to influence the activism of college students.

While the theories and studies discussed in this section are not without their limitations, it should first be noted that they provide an important perspective for studying the forces that mold the activism of college students. In examining the social and educational backgrounds that give rise to activism, we are asked to consider not only the complexity of human political behavior but also the complexity of the environment that shapes it.

Nevertheless, there are significant limitations to the literature that has been summarized here. First, it lends itself to the impression that activism and activists are influenced primarily by social and educational grievances. Colleges and universities are cast as too big and restrictive while society is cast as unstable and deficient. If grievance over one's social and educational conditions could fully account for the activism of college students, we would no doubt find a greater number of college students engaging in activism consistently. Even at its height in the 1960s, however, it was reported that college student activism only involved four to nine percent of an institution's total student population (Peterson, 1968).

Clearly, individuals are not affected by the same environment in the same manners. What is experienced in the public realm is often subject to private interpretations. Herein lies another shortcoming of the literature presented in this section. It fails to explain the private mechanisms or processes by which environmental cues are translated into actions. Even Mannheim's theory of generational consciousness, which assumes some form of interpretative process, does not detail how members of the same generation "work up" the same historical experiences to produce different generational units. As such, the literature implies that activists are by nature more reactive than they are deliberate.

In sum, while studying the activism of college students from a situational standpoint lends a broader perspective to how their activism is shaped, it also makes some problematic assumptions about the nature of society, its educational institutions, and the individuals who take part in them.

### **Biographical Contexts**

One of the most disputed and contentious subjects in the literature on college student activism concerns what sociologists (Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson, 1980) refer to as “differential recruitment” or the difference in activist participation among individuals. Why does one person engage in activism while another does not? What explains the individual variation in activist participation?

One camp of thought claims that the differential in activist participation is influenced by the biographical circumstances of a person’s life (McAdam, et al., 1988). The underlying presumption is that there are certain biographical contexts that generally predispose (or constrain) people to activism. In this section, I will review and critique a set of studies that accounts for the activism of college students on the basis of their personal and familial background characteristics as well as the values and beliefs that these characteristics are believed to engender.

### **Individual Characteristics, Familial Characteristics & Familial Socialization Practices**

Based on comparisons between activist and non-activist college students (or where noted, between rightist and leftist activists) and gauged through the use of descriptive statistical measures such as crosstabulations and chi-square tests of significance, the study findings presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 suggest that a student’s engagement in activism can be explained by their political and intellectual orientations, the types of families they come from, and the manner in which they are socialized or reared.



From studies of civil rights activists (Flacks, 1967), peace protesters (Soloman & Fishman, 1964), and members of radical political activist groups (Braga & Doyle 1971), Table 1 notes that the personal characteristics influencing a student's activism are related to a high intelligence or academic achievement, a liberal political outlook, and one's academic achievement. Table 1 further indicates that age, ethnicity and occupational preference are also related to activism.

Derived from studies such as that of Free Speech Movement members (Watts & Whittaker, 1966; and members of Students for a Democratic Society and Young Americans for Freedom (Braungart 1971a), Table 2 reveals that a student's activism is also influenced by the types of parents they have. In general, it seems that the familial characteristics related to activism include coming from families who are primarily of Jewish ancestry but non-religious; upper middle class; politically liberal; as well as highly educated.

Inferred primarily from activist self-reports of their home and family life, Table 3 suggests that college students engage in activism based on the types of households in which they are reared. Generally, children of less authoritarian and strict parents are more likely to be activists than those who grow up more authoritarian and disciplined households. Yet the work of Braungart (1971a, 1971b) casts some doubt on these findings, as the rightist activists in his study were also less likely to come from disharmonious households than their leftist peers.

Only Astin, et al. (1975) has suggested that different individual characteristics influence participation in different types of activism. Based on their survey of 5,351 college freshmen at 178 institutions and their participation in three types of protest (those related to war, racial discrimination, and college policies), Astin, et al. (1975) found that students who participated in all three types of activism, while they did not possess any formal religious affiliation, tended to be of Jewish ancestry.

In terms of racial discrimination protests, black students were more likely to participate in protests regarding race than war-related protest or college policy-related protest. Astin, et al. (1975) also discovered that students who planned to major in

political science and who had well-educated mothers were more likely to be activists and take part in racial protests. In general, the strongest predictor of involvement in racial protests was related to being Jewish or African American. As for participation in Vietnam War and college policy protests, Astin, et al. (1975) found that the lack of religious ties, and a high level of intelligence to be strong predictors of engagement in such activities. He concluded that different individuals participate in different kinds of protest on the basis of their background characteristics.

### **Values, Attitudes & Belief Patterns**

It has also been suggested that a student's engagement in activism is influenced by their personal values and beliefs, especially as they relate to politics, intellectual pursuits, humanitarian concerns, and authority.

#### Importance of Politics

For example, Braungart & Braungart (1974), Solomon & Fishman (1964), and Watts & Whittaker (1966) noted that activists in their studies tended to believe more strongly in the importance of politics and take a greater interest in them than non-activists. Further, Braungart & Braungart (1974) revealed that the activists who took part in their study of 800 college students at Pennsylvania State University scored higher on tests of current political events, discussed politics with their friends more frequently, and were more likely to hold membership in a student political group than non-activists.

#### Value of Intellectual Pursuits

Flacks (1967), Katz (1968) and Keniston (1967) assert that the activism of college students can also be explained by the intellectual values they hold. From his study of 117 activists and non-activists drawn from the University of Chicago and other Chicago-area colleges, Flacks (1967) found that activists were more likely to

rank the pursuit of intellectual endeavors such as reading, writing, and discussing theory as worthy life activities than non-activists who reported a greater affinity for traditional activities such as establishing a career. On the basis of these value differentials, Flacks (1967) concluded that activists were likely to challenge conventional norms than to conform to them.

### Humanistic, Idealistic, and Altruistic Values

In addition, activists also express greater sentiments of altruism, idealism, and humanism than non-activists according to Flacks (1967), Keniston (1967), and Soloman & Fishman (1964). For example, activists in Soloman & Fishman's study of peace march participants, described their participation as an outgrowth of the vision they held for the world, one that would be "...governed more by love than hate" (p. 69). Keniston (1967) argues that these values predispose students to working on behalf of the disadvantaged and less fortunate.

### Institutional Authority

Other studies, like that of Somers (1965) and Lyonns (1965), note that activists, while they are not distinctly dissatisfied with the quality of their university or its educational services, nevertheless resent its authority particularly when it infringes upon or violates the rights of students. In contrast, non-activists tend to accept the authority of the institution and express greater support for its administrative policies.<sup>16</sup>

## **Contributions & Limitations of This Perspective**

Through a discussion of various personal and familial characteristics as well as particular political and aesthetic beliefs, it has been suggested that individual

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<sup>16</sup> Institutional authority has been defined as the church, high schools, and colleges and universities.

characteristics and attitudes also play a role in shaping a student's activism. One's political leanings, socialization experiences, and humanitarian beliefs can be considered factors that influence the activism of college students.

Yet it is also apparent that one of the central problems with the presentation of these study findings is that they have not been related to or placed within a larger discussion of how these characteristics and beliefs work to influence or inhibit a student's activism. This is due to the fact that researchers have rarely done so themselves (Gergen & Ullman, 1977; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). In short, while activism studies have identified a number of personal and familial characteristics as well as beliefs of activists, very few of them have been linked to theories or ideas that might help us explain what they mean.

To be sure, the findings presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 have been the subject of much speculation. For example, Keniston (1967) argued that a permissive family environment produces children who are more independent-minded. As a result, he claimed, they "make up their own minds" and are able to "stand firm against group pressures" (p. 155). It is on the basis of this ability to stand one's ground that facilitates engagement in activism. Feuer (1969) on the other hand, asserted that a permissive household produced unhealthy deep-seated resentment with its children. Therefore, he claimed, participation in activism was really a function of maladjusted psychological development.

Perhaps the most important shortcoming of the literature to be noted is its emphasis on the family as the main socializing agent that fosters participation in activism. While the family has long been considered the primary socializing agent of a child there are other socializing agents that require attention as well, particularly his or her peers. The influence of peers or peer groups on a student's activism remains unexplored, however. Braungart & Braungart (1974) have alluded to their importance in reporting that activists tend to discuss politics with their friends more frequently than non-activists and hold the same political opinions, but the specific role peers play in the activism of a college student has not been fully examined.

In light of the evidence which exists as to the general importance of peer groups in the socialization of college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Weidman, 1989) and their influence on the formation and stabilization of a college student's political attitudes (see Dey & Ramirez, 1993) it seems that this would be a valuable area of study to explore.

**Table 1. Personal Characteristics of Activists as Identified in Empirical Studies on American College Student Activism**

Variable	Study and Findings
<b>College Major</b>	Activists drawn primarily from the humanities, social sciences or liberal arts (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975; Braungart & Braungart, 1974; Perry, Pugh, Snyder, & Spreitzer, 1971; Soloman & Fishman, 1964).
<b>Career Aspirations</b>	Activists' vocational goals are centered on people-oriented occupations such as teaching and social services (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, et al. 1975; Baird, 1970; Flacks, 1967; Katz, 1968; Soloman & Fishman, 1964). Activists also interested in joining the Peace Corps or Vista upon graduation (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, et al. 1975).
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	Activists are more intellectual, report higher grade point averages than non-activists (Braungart & Braungart, 1974; Flacks, 1967; Perry et al., 1971). Activists exhibit a greater level of social intelligence (Braga & Doyle, 1971). Both right and left activists score higher on intelligence tests than nonactivists (Kerpelman, 1969, 1972).
<b>Age</b>	On average, activists tend to be younger in age than nonactivists (Lyonns, 1965; Soloman & Fishman, 1964; Watts & Whittaker, 1966).
<b>Political Affiliation</b>	Activists more likely to define their political affiliation with Independent or liberal Democratic parties (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, et al., 1975; Flacks, 1967; Lyonns, 1965; Perry et al., 1971).
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	Activists identify themselves as non-religious or no religious affiliation (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, et al., 1975; Lyonns, 1965; Soloman & Fishman, 1964; Watts, Lynch, & Whittaker, 1969; Watts & Whittaker, 1966). Leftist activists do not attend church or synagogue on a regular basis; conservative activists do (Westby & Braungart, 1966).
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Leftist activists drawn from low-status ethnic groups (Braungart, 1971a). Activists report being of Jewish ethnic background (Flacks, 1967; Watts, Lynch, & Whittaker, 1969; Watts & Whittaker, 1966). Right activists drawn from British and North European backgrounds (Westby & Braungart, 1966).

**Table 2. Familial Characteristics of Activists as Identified in Empirical Studies on American College Student Activism**

Characteristic	Study and Findings
<b>Parent's Occupation</b>	Fathers of activists tend to hold high-status or professional occupations such as those related to law and medicine (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin, et al., 1975; Flacks, 1967; Watts & Whittaker, 1966). Mothers of activists reported to be engaged in "career" employment outside of the home (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin et al., 1975; Flacks, 1967).
<b>Parental Income Level</b>	Parents of activists report higher levels of income than parents of non-activists (Flacks, 1967).
<b>Parental Social Class</b>	Conservative activists come from lower social class (Braungart; 1971b). Left activists come from upper middle class families. Rightist activists come from lower middle or working class families (Westby & Braungart, 1966).
<b>Parental Religious Affiliation</b>	Right activists have parents who are highly religious (Braungart, 1971b). Activists report parents who are non-religious (Flacks, 1967; Mankoff & Flacks, 1971). Activists' fathers more likely to profess no religious affiliation than activists' mothers (Watts & Whittaker, 1966).
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Leftist activists drawn from low-status ethnic groups (Braungart, 1971a). Activists report Jewish ethnic background (Flacks, 1967). Rightist activists drawn from North European backgrounds (Westby & Braungart, 1966).
<b>Parental Political Affiliation</b>	Activists' families are predominately liberal in their politics (Astin, 1968, 1970; Astin et al., 1975; Flacks, 1967; Soloman & Fishman, 1964).

**Table 3. Familial Socialization Practices of Activists as Identified in Empirical Studies on American College Student Activism**

Characteristic	Study and Findings
<b>Birth Order</b>	Activists most likely to be the eldest child or first-born in the family (Soloman & Fishman, 1964).
<b>Degree of Permissiveness</b>	Activists' parents more lenient than firm, but not severe (Flacks, 1967).
<b>Division of Parental Authority</b>	Authoritarian family structure associated with conservative activism (Braungart, 1971b). Family decisions related discipline and upbringing of children made by activists' mothers and fathers (Flacks, 1967; Westby & Braungart, 1966).
<b>Level of Family Closeness or Warmth</b>	Activists report lower levels of family closeness (Braungart, 1971a). Activists not as influenced by family views or opinions (Lewis & Kraut; 1972). Activists characterize their families as disapproving of their participation but supportive of them in general (Soloman & Fishman, 1964).
<b>Level of Family Conflict</b>	Activists from conservative families report less conflict (Braungart, 1971a). Activists characterize parents' marriage as unhappy (Braungart, 1971b). Activists report higher levels of strife between parents (Lewis & Kraut, 1972; Westby & Braungart, 1966). Activists are twice as likely to engage their fathers in political conflicts as opposed to their mothers (Soloman & Fishman, 1964).



## Psychological Motivations

According to Robert E. Lane (1981), a Yale University professor of political science, understanding the psychological motivations that guide human political behavior requires taking into consideration all models of man:

...man as a cognitive, information-processing decision maker; man as a motivated, reinforcement-seeking bundle of learning experiences; man in search of himself; man seeking above all to control his own environment; conflicted man; lustful man; man as a moral agent; man guided by the need for optimal arousal; man as persuasible and plastic and purposeful and autonomous; man seeking to fulfill himself, seeking to reassure himself; seeking to lose himself in groups (p. xxi).

In this section, I shall examine the psychological factors that have been put forth in quantitative and qualitative studies to account for the activism of college students. Much like the models presented in Lane's (1981) quote, the factors to be discussed here also operate by the general proposition that psychological propensities or needs render some individuals more "protest-prone" than others (Keniston, 1967, p. 152).

## Psychological Deficiencies

Based on the work of French social theorist Gustav LeBon (1960) and psychologist Sigmund Freud (1959), one of the earliest explanations put forth to account for an individual's engagement in activist behavior argued that such participation was the result of psychological deficiencies.<sup>17</sup> According to LeBon (1960), these deficiencies were produced by taking part in mass settings of people or crowds. Once they joined a crowd, individuals were thought to undergo a transformation in which they lost their rational faculties and the aptitude to behave in

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<sup>17</sup> By psychological deficiencies I mean defects or abnormalities in a person's psychological make-up that are thought to produce aberrant behavior.

a moral manner. Similarly, Freud (1959) argued that individuals who participated in collective behavior did so because of their insecure and unstable personalities.

The proposition that weak and maladjusted individuals are the ones who typically engage in collective behavior has also been supported by Feuer (1969). In his historical analysis of various youth movements, Feuer (1969) claimed that youth who participate in social movements are essentially driven by the latent and innate feelings of resentment they feel towards their parents. As such, he argued that their engagement was really a form of Oedipal rebellion by which their subconscious emotions were transferred to and acted out in the political arena. Other psychological deficiencies believed to account for the activism of college students include hostile and aggressive impulses (Baird, 1970), authoritarianism (Bay, 1967) and alienation (Oppenheimer, 1968).

### **Hostile and Aggressive Impulses**

Like Feuer's (1969) contention that student activism is driven by feelings of resentment, it has also been claimed that student activist participation is often spurred by deep-seated feelings of hostility and aggressiveness (Gergen & Ullman, 1977). According to Gergen & Ullman (1977), these feelings produce a form of repressed psychic frustration that is called forth from an activist's subconscious when they encounter environments of open conflict and controversy, such like that typically engendered by protests and demonstrations. In this regard, activism is believed to be a manifestation of repressed feelings of hatred and anger.

On the whole, the evidence linking hostile or aggressive impulses to the activism of college students reveals that such impulses are characteristic of both liberal and conservative activists. For example, Schiff (1964) noted high levels of hostility among young members of the radical right group known as the Minutemen. Additionally, Coles (1964) and Fishman and Soloman (1964) have also described civil rights activists in the same terms. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions. Keniston's (1968) qualitative study of 14 Vietnam War protesters found a low degree

of hostility among them, as did Fishman and Soloman's (1964b) empirical study of peace demonstrators. These findings suggest that aggressive or hostile impulses may play a larger role in the activism of conservative and civil rights activists than those involved in anti-war or peace efforts.

### **Authoritarianism**

Defined as an aggressive, rigid, prejudiced, and overly conventional character trait (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950; Peterson, Doty, & Winter, 1993), authoritarianism is another psychological deficiency thought to influence the activism of college students. In their empirical studies of Berkeley activists and non-activists, Watts, Lynch, & Whittaker (1969) and Watts & Whittaker (1966) found that non-activists tend to exhibit greater degrees of authoritarianism than activists. They supposed that individuals who are overly conventional or rigid are less likely to challenge the status quo.

Yet there is other empirical evidence that claims that an individual's authoritarianism is positively related to activism. The work of Braungart (1971a) and Westby & Braungart (1966) that examined conservative student activists of the rightist organization, Young Americans for Freedom, found them to have highly authoritarian dispositions. Additionally, Kerpelman, (1969) and Lewis Kraut (1972), in studying both liberal and conservative college student activists also found conservative activists to exhibit high levels of authoritarianism. These studies suggest that one's level of authoritarianism can facilitate activism or preclude its occurrence altogether.

### **Alienation**

Defined as feelings of powerlessness, isolation, self-estrangement, and meaninglessness (Seeman, 1959), alienation is an additional psychological deficiency that is thought to shape college student activism. Generally, it is assumed that activists engage in activism because they are socially disaffiliated and isolated (see

Kennan, 1968). Here too, however, quantitative studies of alienation and college student activists have produced variable research results.

For example, research done by May (1964) and Watts, Lynch, & Whittaker (1969) of leftist activists who participated in the Berkeley Revolt and Free Speech Movement found that they were marked by a high degree of alienation. Baird (1970), on the other hand, found that activists from both the right and the left ranked low in terms of their alienation level. Finally, Cowdry, Keniston, and Cabin's (1970) examination of antiwar activists did not find any correlation between their activism and alienation. Thus, alienation plays a role in influencing the activism of some students but not others.

### **Psychological Needs**

There are also studies of college student activism that suggest activists are motivated by psychological needs. For example, in her qualitative study of both white student activists and student activists of color, Sidel (1995) claimed that one of the main contributing factors to their participation was the need to fend off feelings of personal victimization and isolation. Similarly, in her qualitative study of four radical socialist activists, Duncan (1980) argued that their activism was a way of fending off the depression and despair they felt as result of being unloved or rejected by their parents. In sum, there is research that indicates that the activism of college students can also be a coping mechanism by which their psychological needs are ameliorated. Psychological needs related to group affiliation (Gergen & Ullman, 1977) and identity (Braungart, 1984) have also been advanced as potential influences upon the activism of college students.

### **Group Affiliation**

Gergen & Ullman (1977) argue that an individual's activism is motivated by their need for "frequent and active contact" with others, also known as the need for group affiliation (p. 420). An examination of the qualitative and quantitative studies

reveals that activists do indeed manifest high measures of group affiliation. However, the need for group affiliation has only been studied among leftist activists.

In terms of quantitative studies, Bakke (1966), Fishman & Soloman (1964), and Flacks (1967) have found that leftist activists express high needs for group affiliation. Keniston's (1968) qualitative study of liberal anti-war protesters also indicated a salient need to interact with others. These findings suggest that group affiliation may be an important factor in influencing the leftist activism of college students. However, the collective, affiliative needs of rightist activists remain to be explored.

## **Identity**

Grounded in the work of psychosocial theorist, Erik Erikson (1963), the activism of college students has also been accounted for on the basis of identity needs. According to Erikson (1963), the major development task of adolescence is to establish an identity. In establishing this identity, Erikson (1963) claims adolescents are driven by the need "to feel that they are some special kind...whose insignia they will wear with vanity and conviction and defend...against the foreign, the inimical, the not-so-human kinds" (p. 2). As they search for an identity, adolescents must experience a series of crises in which they weigh their conceptions of who they want to be with the roles being presented to them. Erikson (1963) also asserts that this weighing and decision-making operates "only in the interplay of a life stage with the individuals and the social forces of a true community" (p. 235). In this regard, adolescents learn who they are and define their identity only through interacting with other people.

Scholars of student activism have interpreted Erikson's psychosocial theory of adolescent development in different ways. For example, Braungart (1984) used Erikson's notion of the need to feel special in his explanation of why adolescents would be interested in joining a social movement. He claimed that the appeal of social movements to adolescents is in their promise to create something new, better,

and rarer. Similarly, Keniston (1971) and Flacks (1971) have asserted that activism is influenced by the need to establish an identity in a rapidly changing society.

Erikson's need to establish a special identity has also been placed at the forefront of what sociologists have termed new social movement theory (NSM theory). NSM theory asserts that identity needs constitute the central condition of participation in student activism and social movements. In other words, individuals who become activists on behalf of social movements do so out of a "...intrinsic need for an integrated and continuous social self..." (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994, p. 11). Individuals, then, become activists in a social movement out of a desire to define themselves. According to NSM theorist Alberto Melucci: "What individuals are claiming collectively is the right to realize their own identity: the possibility of disposing of their personal creativity, their affective life, and their biological and interpersonal existence" (1980, p. 218).

## **Racial Identity**

Few scholars have thoroughly examined the role of racial identity and its influence upon a college student's engagement in activism. Astin, et al. (1975), for example, observed that African American students were more likely to participate in race- or civil rights-based protests than war-related or institutional policy-related protests. He did not, however, tie this observation to a larger discussion of racial identity development or the processes by which young people of color establish their identities as African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, or Asian Americans.

The work of contemporary social and racial identity theorists suggests that the quest to establish one's identity as a person of color can be an important influence upon the overall activist development process itself. Many of today's leading racial identity models contain elements that speak to transformations in thought and action that can be linked to the engagement in activism. Tatum's (1993) model of Black racial identity development, for example, includes the stages known as "Internalization" and "Internationalization-Commitment" whereby a young African

American recognizes the political and social necessity of building coalitions with other members of an oppressed group (or groups) and has become committed to the needs and concerns of African Americans as a whole.

Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) model of racial identity includes the stage known as "Redefinition" whereby young people of color actively seek to recast the ways they have typically been defined by society and its institutions. No longer content to view themselves as victims of oppression, these young people begin to actively challenge the oppressive policies and practices they once unconsciously accepted. Like Tatum's (1993) model, these young people eventually move into the stage known also as "Internalization," where they seek to eradicate oppression regardless of which group is being targeted.

Although these models have not been specifically invoked in studies of college student activism, they provide a unique perspective of another possible influence upon the engagement in activism. The potential impact of racial identity and the process by which it is developed deserves attention particularly in this study which focuses on the life experiences of several students of color.

## **Personality Traits**

Additional psychologically based explanations that have been presented as plausible rationales for a student's activism are related to the specific characteristics of an individual's personality such as his level of autonomy (Keniston, 1968), conformity (Kerpelman, 1972), locus of control (Gore & Rotter, 1963), and his optimism or pessimism (Somers, 1965).

### Autonomy and Conformity

It has been noted that the activism of college students is often characterized by strivings for autonomy or independence from adults and adult values (Gergen & Ullman, 1977). Yet empirical studies which have examined the relationship between autonomy and student activism suggests that this personality trait tends to

characterize leftist or liberal activists more so than rightist or conservative activists. Fishman & Soloman (1964) found this to be true of the peace demonstrators in their study, as did Keniston (1968) in his study of civil rights and anti-war activists.

From this basis we might speculate that tendencies toward conformity or the adherence to established norms and values, would constrain an individual's activism but study results have been variable. For example, Schiff (1964) has found conservative activists to be highly conformist while Kerpelman (1972), in examining both leftist and rightist activists, found no difference between the two ideological groups on ratings of conformity. In sum, autonomy seems to influence the activism of liberal activists while the role conformity plays in shaping activism remains unclear.

### Locus of Control

Locus of control refers to a psychological measure that defines individuals according to whether they believe what happens in their life is a function of their own behaviors and choices or a function of outside forces beyond their control (Gore & Rotter, 1963). Those who believe that they control what happens to them are defined as Internals, or individuals with a high level of internal control. Externals, or those with a high level of external control, are individuals who believe that what happens to them is the result of fate, chance, and powerful others (Levenson, 1970). According to Renshon (1975), a person's locus of control can affect their engagement in activism.

Yet the few studies that have tried to link locus of control to activism reveal conflicting results. For example, Gore and Rotter (1963) and Strickland (1965) found that African American students who participated in civil rights activism scored highest in internal control than their non-activist peers who scored higher in external control. These studies lend themselves to the impression that activism is a function of whether or not an individual believes he can control what happens in his life. However, Gurin, Gurin, Lao, & Beattie (1969) discovered that African American activists scored the lowest in internal control. Additionally, Geller & Howard (1972),



found no relationship between locus of control and activism in their inquiry of antiwar activists. Therefore, the role an individual's locus of control plays in shaping his activism is not altogether clear.

### Optimism and Pessimism

Keniston (1967) has argued that a basic faith in other people and a positive future, otherwise defined as optimism, are key to a student's engagement in activism. In contrast, Keniston (1967) claims, students who are pessimistic or who do not believe in the inherent goodness of people and their ability to positively influence the future, do not typically engage in activism.

Investigations into the optimism and pessimism of activists, however, do not disclose any clear patterns. Furthermore, they only pertain to leftist activities. For example, studies of leftist activists Keniston (1967), May (1965), and Somers (1965) have found the personality trait of optimism to be positively related to activism. Yet in also examining liberal activists, Jacob & Landua (1966) and Coles (1964) linked their activism to pessimism. These contrasting results suggest that both optimism and pessimism play a role in influencing a student's activism.

### **Cognitive Ability**

Social movement theory also posits that an individual's engagement in activism is related to her ability to interpret, weigh, and understand objective conditions. As such, activism is influenced by the individual's cognitive ability or her ability to reason and think. Cognitive ability plays a central role in the theory of relative deprivation a theoretical framework that sociologists have relied upon to account for individual engagement in social movements (Gamson, 1992; Mueller, 1992).

## Relative Deprivation Theory

The theory of relative deprivation asserts that all causes of protest are subsumed into an individual-level social psychological process in which what *ought to be* is compared with what *is* (Gurr, 1970). Put differently, individuals are believed to engage in collective behavior because of the tension that exists between their external, objective conditions and the internal aspirations they hold for these conditions. According to Gurr, the discrepancy between the objective and the subjective results in acute feelings of resentment and aggression that fuel activist behavior as well as violence.

Yet there are accounts of college student activism which conflict with the theory. For example, Hirsch (1990) found that college student activists while they did resent the investment practices of their institution engaged in a campus divestment protest not because of that resentment but out of larger desire to create social change. Similarly, McAdam's (1988) study on Freedom Summer showed that students also took part in the Project not out of resentment for their own conditions but for others. In this regard, relative deprivation theory seems limited in its ability to explain the activism of college students when it is predicated upon altruistic sentiments or concern for social change.

### **Contributions & Limitations of This Perspective**

Through a discussion of psychological deficiencies, needs, personality traits, and cognitive ability, it has been suggested that psychological dispositions also play a role in the activism of college students. Aggression, group affiliation, optimism, and how one interprets their conditions, are additional factors influencing the activism of college students.

In this regard, the literature has acknowledged the important fact that human political behavior is often inspired by more complex factors than simply one's demographic characteristics like ethnicity or socioeconomic status; human political

behavior can also be influenced by more basic concerns such as the need to establish an identity, to be in contact with other people, and to exercise repressed feelings and emotions.

As the studies in this section have also shown, however, embedding the activism of college students in psychology is not without its limitations. If one examines the extant literature discussed here, what is revealed is the tendency to define activism and engagement in collective behavior largely in terms of personal pathology or emotionality. This is even true in the case of relative deprivation theory that emphasized an individual's cognitive ability. The theory assumed a level of rationality that in itself seemed somewhat pathological as it argued that individuals take part in activism solely on the basis of rational calculations of costs, benefits, and objective conditions.

Additionally, these studies treat the psychological influences of activism as static facts that are consistent from one point to the next. Yet it is common knowledge that an individual's psychological disposition endures a number of changes and fluctuations from one instance to another depending upon the circumstances he finds himself in. In other words, one can feel hostile or pessimistic while engaging in activism and feel amiable or optimistic about his participation at others. What seems to be of particular importance in understanding college student activism, then, is not just the activist's psychological disposition but also the contextual factors that influence how he feels.

### **The Role of Social Movements**

Thus far, the literature reviewed and critiqued in this paper has suggested that some college students are more susceptible to activism than others because of the intrinsic individual characteristics they possess or because of their environmental surroundings. Yet these arguments overlook one fundamental fact: individuals typically do not take part in social movements without first being informed about or introduced to them (Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson, 1980).

In other words, social movements and their organizations also play a central role in inducing student activist participation through the kinds of recruiting efforts they make. Therefore, any attempt to understand the factors that influence the activism of college students must take into consideration another situational factor, namely, the types of strategies social movements utilize to attract and enlist new members.

While there is a considerable body of literature related to the types of recruitment approaches that social movements undertake to bolster support for their causes, very little of it directly addresses student-led social movements (Perrow, 1972). The main purpose of this section, then, is to explore the various approaches sociology scholars consider central to social movement recruitment and ascertain the potential of these approaches for helping develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the activism of college students.

### **Competing Perspectives on Social Movement Recruitment**

How social movements and their organizations attract and recruit members has remained a dominant focal concern of social movement scholars for nearly thirty years (Ferree, 1992, p. 29). In that time, two competing theories have emerged: resource mobilization theory and social constructionist theory. Both operate under different assumptions about what determines an individual's engagement in collective behavior. As a result, the approaches they emphasize for influencing social movement participation also differ. The two perspectives are briefly summarized below.

#### **Resource Mobilization Theory**

The resource mobilization theory views social movement participants as rational actors who join social movement organizations when the actors believe the benefits of their participation outweigh the costs (Oberschall, 1973, 1993). Built on the work of economist Mancur Olson (1965), resource mobilization theorists argue

that individuals will always act out of their own self-interests first before they act out of a concern for others. In the words of sociologists Ferree and Miller (1985), "...individual actors each have a schedule of preferences that guides their choice of action in the direction of greatest personal reward" (p. 38). Thus, the motivation to participate in a social movement is viewed primarily as purposive and incentive-driven.

This motivation, however, is mediated by the extent to which they believe the movement itself can achieve its goals (Kendrick, 1991). From the perspective of resource mobilization, then, the main recruitment tasks facing social movements are to convince potential participants of the movement's ability to create social change and to establish a base of resources that can be used for recruitment purposes.

### Social Constructionist Theory

Social constructionist theory views social movement participants as meaning-making individuals who take part in social movements based on the way they cognitively construct the possibilities for doing so (Mueller, 1992; Snow & Oliver, 1991). The theory assumes that individuals are motivated to participate in social movements based on how they interpret the meaning of their participatory actions. This meaning-making process is believed to be influenced by the extent to which potential members feel a sense of solidarity to others in the movement and can identify with them, the social context in which their meaning and value are constructed, and the cultural content of social movements themselves (Hirsch 1986, 1990; Mueller, 1992).

In this regard, engagement in social movements is viewed as an interpretative process whereby individuals weigh their participation in relation to salient others in their lives and in the movement. According to Ferree & Miller (1985), "Costs and benefits play a role in generating movement support, but the translation of objective social relationships into subjectively experienced group interests is also critical in building movements, as in political activity generally" (p. 39). From the perspective

of social constructionism, the main tasks facing social movements are to understand how individuals interpret and construct the meaning of their movement participation, to identify the forces which positively or negatively influence the interpretative process, and to develop a sense of group cohesion and identity (Gamson, 1992).

### **Key Recruiting Elements**

Table 4 summarizes the key elements that resource mobilization theory and social constructionist theory emphasize in their approaches to recruiting new members. From the perspective of resource mobilization theory, individuals must not only be given something for their movement participation (selective incentives) but they must also perceive that the movement is, in and of itself, competent enough to achieve its goals (movement efficacy). Social constructionist theory, on the other hand, asserts that the establishment of group cohesion (solidarity) and a group identity (collective identity) are more central to recruiting new members.

The recruiting approaches of these two perspectives also have some elements in common. Both emphasize the importance of establishing a readily definable set of guiding beliefs (ideology). In doing so, social movements minimize any confusion or question as to the movement's purpose or its goals (Kendrick, 1991). The other common elements emphasized include understanding the other social networks (a variety of ties individuals have to other people via friendships, family, and jobs) a potential recruit may be tied to and how they are going to affect his or her ability to join the movement, as well as which public or private locales are the most conducive for recruiting efforts (sociospatial conditions). These elements allow social movements to be more strategic, direct, and efficient in their recruitment efforts (Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson, 1980).

### **Solidarity, Social Networks & Sociospatial Conditions**

It should be noted here that the influence of these recruitment approaches and their key elements they are based upon has generally been proven by quantitative

and qualitative studies of social movements focused on nuclear disarmament (Benford, 1992, 1993; Cable, Walsh & Warland, 1988; Walsh & Warland, 1983), women's rights (Freeman, 1973), peace and justice concerns (Hunt & Benford, 1994), the rights of laborers (Klandermans, 1984), millenarianism (Lofland, 1972) and a mix of religious and neighborhood concerns (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986).

Yet the conclusions drawn about their influence in the recruitment process of social movements and their organizations is based largely upon analyses of members who were adults, not undergraduates. Of the few studies that have examined the recruitment approaches of student-led movements, all of them have been guided by the social constructionist perspective, arguing that movement participation is dependent upon the way individuals construct and interpret their participation in relation to salient others in their lives and in the movement (Fernandez & McAdam, 1988; Hirsch, 1990; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow, Zurcher, Eckland-Olson, 1980). These studies have also provided evidence for the influence of solidarity, social networks, and sociospatial conditions in the recruitment of college students to social movement participation.

### **Solidarity**

Based on participant observations, extended interviews with 19 protest participants, and a survey of 300 undergraduates at Columbia University during an anti-apartheid protest movement in 1985, Hirsch (1990) claimed that student recruitment and commitment to the protest could be attributed to the political solidarity student protest leaders had established. Through the use of group-based political processes such as consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, polarization, and group decision-making, protest organizers created a strong sense of group cohesion that ultimately led to their willingness to sacrifice personal welfare for the collective good. Hirsch (1990) further argued that the resource mobilization perspective was less adequate in accounting for student recruitment and participation

because students took part in the anti-apartheid protest at great personal costs to themselves. Solidarity also played a central role in the recruiting efforts of the radical 1960s activist group, the Weathermen. In examining autobiographical accounts of former Weatherman participants, Braungart & Braungart (1992) discovered that ex-Weathermen reported being swayed to the join the group by the promise of unconditional support and acceptance. In emphasizing a “sense of identification and belonging,” Braungart & Braungart (1992) claimed, Weathermen gave the impression of solidarity among members that potential recruits found hard to resist (p. 67).

### **Social Networks**

The influence of social networks on the recruitment of college students into student-led movements has been supported by the work of McAdam & Paulsen (1993) and Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson (1980). In their study of 720 college students applicants accepted to participate in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, McAdam & Paulsen found that students whose family and friends supported their desire to participate were more likely to take part in the Project than those students who had also been accepted but did not enjoy the same level of familial and peer support. Overall, the best predictor of participation in Freedom Summer was the tie to other accepted applicants who were firm in their commitment to participate.

Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson (1980) drew the same conclusion about the salience of social networks in their study of 300 undergraduates and 25 student-led activist organizations at the University of Texas in 1979.<sup>18</sup> Based on an examination of various recruitment avenues that the student organizations used to attract new members, Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olson concluded that students were more

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<sup>18</sup> The types of organizations and the causes they supported were not specified by the study.



likely to consider joining an organization if they already knew someone who was a member than those students who did not know anyone in an organization's membership.

Social networks were also shown to be a more productive means of recruiting new members. In a sample of new members participating in the study's various student activist organizations, approximately 63% were recruited through social networks, 30% were recruited through mass media techniques like the distribution of leaflets and fliers, and 7% were recruited through the use of public spaces such as street corners and student centers. Recruiting through mail and telephone solicitation methods did not yield any new members. These studies suggest that social networks, especially those involving peer groups, are influential in fostering movement recruitment.

**Table 4. Key Elements of the Resource Mobilization and Social Constructionist Approach to Recruitment**

Type of Element	Definition of Element and Purpose	Perspective
<b>Provision of selective incentives</b>	Tangible benefits which social movement participants receive that non-participant do not; Critical because they overcome the tendency of people to ride free on the efforts of others (Carden, 1978; Fireman & Gamson, 1979; Olson, 1965).	Resource Mobilization
<b>Ideology</b>	Readily definable set of guiding beliefs; Helps reveal sources and states of suffering, grievance, and inequity that otherwise might have gone unrecognized (Ferree & Miller, 1985; Fireman & Gamson, 1979).	Resource Mobilization & Social Constructionist
<b>Movement Efficacy</b>	The sense that social movements possess the ability to make a difference; Enhances the perceived value of individual's contribution to the movement (Klandermans, 1984; Fireman & Gamson, 1979).	Resource Mobilization
<b>Collective Identity</b>	Individuals' sense of who they are relative to their co-participants; Increases the possibility of a sustained loyal and committed following (Gamson, 1991, 1992; Melucci, 1989).	Social Constructionist
<b>Solidarity</b>	Sense of group cohesion and loyalty; How individuals develop and maintain their commitment to social movements; Group solidarity augments participants' willingness to sacrifice self-interest for the collective good (Hirsch 1986, 1990).	Social Constructionist
<b>Social Networks</b>	The variety of ties individuals have to other people via friendships, family, and jobs; Aids in the identification of new recruiting avenues and information conduits (Snow, Zurcher, Jr., & Eckland-Olson, 1980).	Resource Mobilization & Social Constructionist
<b>Sociospatial Conditions</b>	The environmental conditions where recruitment takes place; Assists in the identification of those locales which are most conducive to recruitment efforts; (Fernandez & McAdam, 1989).	Resource Mobilization & Social Constructionist

### Sociospatial Conditions

Fernandez & McAdam (1988) claimed that sociospatial conditions, or the environmental contexts in which recruitment takes place, influences movement efforts to attract new members as well. Attempting to study the pattern of social networks among 40 applicants to Freedom Summer from the University of California at Berkeley and 23 applicants from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Fernandez & McAdam found that both institutions were such activist contexts that their network variables could not predict participation. The identification of social network patterns was impossible because of their density, interrelatedness, and the extent to which they overlapped. In other words, the campus environments of both institutions facilitated such a great level of interaction and contact with other activists and activist organizations that it was nearly impossible to clearly delineate the key influences that led students to submit applications to Freedom Summer. They were simply tied to too many individuals in too many ways. This study suggests that it is not only how individuals are recruited, but where they are recruited that plays a part in whether or not they join a social movement.

### **Contributions & Limitations of This Perspective**

Through a discussion of social movement theory related to recruitment approaches, their key elements, and empirical studies of college student activist recruitment, it has been suggested that social movements play a central role in inducing student activist participation mainly through the kinds of recruitment efforts they make. In attempting to attract and enlist new members, social movements themselves act as another influential factor fostering the activism of college students.

Yet as was noted earlier, the efficacy of these recruitment approaches and the salience of elements such as selective incentives and solidarity in a movement's attempt to encourage other individuals to join have been determined primarily in studies of adult movement participation. Furthermore, these studies have examined

the efficacy of recruitment approaches after they have already become a member. Therefore, the power of these theoretical constructs and elements to explain how college students are recruited into student-led movements, prior to making a commitment, remains undetermined.

These issues raise the question as to the potential the theories of resource mobilization and social constructionism hold for helping us develop a clearer understanding of college student activism and the forces that shape it, as well as whether or not exploring recruitment approaches of student-led social movements is a worthy endeavor in general.

In terms of the latter question, it could be argued that there are benefits to be had from exploring the recruitment approaches of student-led social movements. In doing so, we may gain insight into important yet understudied aspects of college student activism such as the role peer groups play in influencing the activism of college students and the forces that dictate the longevity and scope of student-led social movement. At this point, scholars of student activism have attributed the “shelf-life” of student movements on campus to the overall social climate, casting them as passive entities whose rise and fall is dictated solely by external social conditions (see, for example, Beeler, 1985; Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Manaster, Greer, & Kleiber, 1985; Tripp, 1991). How a student-led social movement contributes to its own future viability or demise has not been thoroughly examined.

In terms of the former question, resource mobilization theory and social constructionist theory offer new perspectives that when applied to the activism of college students provide, in many ways, provide a more comprehensive approach to studying college student activism than those discussed in the previous sections of this paper. Applying either theory requires us to take into consideration a number of factors. For example, we would have to examine background characteristics in order to determine the types of social networks that may influence student participation. Because both theories presume that individuals undergo some form of emotional or rational interpretation in deciding to participate, psychological motivations would

have to be taken into consideration to ascertain the role selective incentives, solidarity, and collective identity play. Resource mobilization and social constructionism also emphasize examining the environment in which recruitment takes place. As such we would have to study the societal and institutional conditions as well as other elements of the environment such as challengers and the media.

In sum, these theories hold great potential for helping us develop a more comprehensive approach to studying the activism of college students as they require us to take into consideration the actor and his or her environment.

### **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, the extant literature suggests that in order to fully understand a students' engagement in activism, we have to look at a broad base of factors. These include the wider sociopolitical context in which they live, the biographical circumstances of their lives, their political beliefs and values, and their developmental status as young adults. Together these factors provide the stage, so to speak, upon which their activism is played out.

In the next chapter, this study's approach to studying college student activism in way that attends to both biography and history will be detailed. Unlike many of the studies presented here, however, this study focused on understanding activism as a lived experience; one that is attentive to the process by which college students cultivate a commitment to social change and affirms the role of political consciousness and human agency.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Research Approach

According to the late C. Wright Mills, our lives emerge from the confluence of biography and history. They are marked by the generations we are born into, the mores and values of the societies we inhabit, and the continual “push and shove” of history (p. 6, 1959). This is why, Mills argued in *The Sociological Imagination*, those practicing the craft of social science must try to understand men and women not simply as private individuals but as “historical and social actors,” people within whose lives the making of history and society occurs (p. 225, 1959).

At the core of this approach to social analysis was what Mills referred to as the “sociological imagination,” a quality of mind that bred the capacity to connect the personal troubles of the individual to larger social issues (p. 7, 1959). From his perspective, there was no way to understand how people’s lives were shaped or how history was made without examining the interconnections between the social circumstances of the individual and the historical moment in which that individual lived. Mills wrote:

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues—and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations (p. 226, 1959).

While he believed that all people—whether they were journalists, artists, editors, scientists, or everyday citizens—were served by the sociological imagination, Mills was especially forthright about what it meant for scholars within the social sciences. He said: “No social study that does not come back to the problems of

biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey” (p. 6, 1959).

Keeping true to the intellectual tradition of Mills’ sociological imagination, this study also explores the intersections of biography and history, albeit with a specific purpose in mind: to understand how six individuals of African American, multiracial, and Latino descent forged activist identities for themselves from their own biographical, social, and historical circumstances during their tenure as undergraduates at the University of Michigan.

Complimenting the study’s unique focus is a methodological approach whose main elements are intended to reveal the interconnections between personal troubles and public issues as well as the human meaning inherent in them both. They include:

- A qualitative and naturalistic research design which affirms the primacy of lived experience and the first-person viewpoint;
- A grounding in the interpretative biographical tradition which focuses upon the construction of a life narrative and honors the roles reflection, memory, and story-telling play in how human beings generally make sense of their lives; and
- The use of the life story form as the primary means of gathering insight into the parallel processes of constructing both a personal biography and a commitment to collective action.

Perhaps the most distinctive hallmark of the present study’s guiding research approach is the theoretical perspective of human action it draws from, a position known widely as symbolic interactionism. Coined by its main progenitor, the late sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969), the term refers to the vital process through which human beings determine their own patterns of behavior and action. Symbolic interactionism is predicated upon the notion that all human conduct is driven by meaning. Underscoring this claim is a conceptualization of people as conscious, reflective individuals who are always actively engaged in constructing the terms of their behavior as they move through the world.

The research approach and methods presented in the following pages are based upon the same characterization of human beings and their actions. Despite the extraordinary public and political nature of activism, this study presumes that it is a form of human behavior constructed like any other and dependent upon the same intentional processes of internal reflection and meaning-making known to guide all other behavioral determinations.

Temporarily setting aside the task of detailing the study's guiding research approach and methods, this chapter begins with an elaboration of Blumer's (1969) rich sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism. In addition to the work of Mills (1959), the present study also bears the imprint of Blumer's influence, most especially in determining the kinds of methods it would use in its exploration of how young people of color formulate a commitment to activism.

### **Herbert Blumer & The Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism**

Writ large, this dissertation is a study of human behavior. It is an examination of how young people of color endure educational inequality and racism; the ways through which they come to know themselves as individuals capable of righting wrongs; and ultimately, how they learn to publicly confront and challenge the institutions, leadership, and practices that perpetuate the continuation of similar social problems.

At the core of this behavioral study lies a special view of the way in which human beings shape and form their behavior. That perspective is known as symbolic interactionism,<sup>19</sup> a theoretical position refined by the late sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) from the works of fellow sociologist George Herbert Mead and the philosopher John Dewey. Specifically, the term references the conceptual approach

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<sup>19</sup> Symbolic interaction refers to the interaction that takes place between human beings (Blumer, 1969).



that embeds human action and group life in an interpretative process from which meanings are created and then translated into guides for action.

Blumer (1969) presented an extensive amplification of this particular theoretical perspective in his seminal work, Symbolic Interactionism: Perspectives and Method. The central premise: Human beings, above all, act on the basis of meaning. We move towards everything in our lives—physical objects, other people, institutions, situations, values—based upon how we ascertain and define their significance. Initiating factors such as attitudes, psychological motives, or cultural norms might also be at play in determining human behavior but without an analysis of meaning they cannot fully account for the formation of human behavior.

Unlike traditional conceptualizations of the term, however, meaning from the perspective of symbolic interactionism is neither defined as “the intrinsic makeup” of a particular object nor does it arise through “a coalescence of psychological elements in a person” (Blumer, p. 4, 1969). Rather, symbolic interactionism “...sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer, p. 5, 1969). In other words, we come to understand what our wider world signifies to us, in part, based upon our interactions with others and the ways in which they also define the significance of the world around them.

The constructed meaning that results from the social interaction between people is then subjected to an interpretative process in which human beings reflect and deliberate upon it in light of their own situations. Based upon the interpretative process, “...meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). Just as the core of our actions are rooted in social interaction, they are also grounded in “self-interaction” where we as individuals assess what has been presented to us and through which we ultimately determine how we will act (Blumer, p. 15, 1969).

One of the most critical aspects of Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory is its characterization of the human being. Humans, as the theoretical perspective defines them, are not simply products of their surrounding structural elements. Rather, they are "acting organisms" continuously engaged in social interaction with others and working constantly to shape their surrounding environs (Blumer, p. 12, 1969). Symbolic interactionism holds to a similar conception of social life. While constituted by economic, political, and social institutions, at its core, society is comprised of many conscious social actors involved in the processes of interaction, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Blumer best portrayed his idea of how human beings make their way through the world in the following words:

...the human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization. He has to cope with the situations in which he is called on to act, ascertaining the meaning of actions of others and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretation. He has to construct and guide his action instead of merely releasing it in response to factors playing on him or operating through him. He may do a miserable job in constructing his action, but he has to construct it (p. 15, 1969).

To be sure, there are other theories that also place meaning at the core of human behavior; these ideas, however, neither define the concept as a product of social interaction nor do they fully take into account the process of interpretation by which it is created. This is but one of the reasons that the present study looks specifically to the symbolic interactionism perspective to guide its overall research approach.

A second reason is the potent characterization of human behavior and action the perspective embraces, a portrayal not typically found in other analyses of activism. As the review in Chapter 2 noted, the extant literature on the activism is riddled with problematic assumptions about activists' abilities to consciously determine for themselves what paths they will follow and what actions they might undertake. The

symbolic interactionism perspective reminds us that human beings inherently possess the mental, reflective capacity to determine their own actions and behaviors.

When coupled with C. Wright Mills' (1959) rich and time-honored notion of the sociological imagination, symbolic interactionism also helps to establish a strong theoretical foundation whose core abides by the genuine power people possess in harnessing history and shaping the future. It is in adhering to the tenets of symbolic interactionism then, that this study is able to do what others have not: honor the capacity of human beings to deliberately and effectively transform the social order based upon something more than the unconscious response to structural predicaments, psychological crises, or the whims of larger historical forces.

Perhaps most importantly, the symbolic interactionism perspective allows us to move beyond the antiquated and conventional notions that have long overshadowed our perceptions of college students. One of the unfortunate tendencies among scholars who study undergraduate life is that they often overemphasize the influence and sway institutions have over their students.

Consequently, college-goers are treated largely as subjects to be acted upon rather than as individuals capable of acting independently. What is rarely stressed in equal measure are the powerful ways in which students shape and mold the lives of colleges and universities themselves (see Dey & Hurtado, 1994). Taking as fact undergraduates' abilities to shape the world around them allows us to go beyond the old question of why students rebel and ask instead how it is they learn to construct a commitment to social change. It is a fundamentally different question with potentially greater implications for the practice and scholarship of higher education.

In sum, the present study is served by the symbolic interactionism perspective in its attentiveness to the vital role meaning plays in determining human behavior; in its potent characterizations of human action that are not typically presented in previous studies of activism; and finally, in the fact that it allows us to explore the activism of college students from a different vantage point.

The remainder of this chapter will reveal time and again the import of the symbolic interactionism perspective as a methodological influence that provided both coherence and organization to the study's overall research approach. The notion that human behavior is determined by meaning runs through the whole of the research design from its overall qualitative character to its utilization of the interpretative biographical method as the central means behind data collection and analysis. Where appropriate, the chapter also draws from ideas presented in other disciplines such as education, higher education, political science, psychology, and sociology.

### **A Qualitative Approach**

In much the same way that Mills' (1959) sociological imagination helps to ground the present study in history and biography, Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism also helps to root it in the salient notions of meaning-making, self-reflection, and consciousness. To remain true to these core ideas requires a research approach that can tap into the reflective, interpretative process underlying the creation of meaning.

As Blumer (1969) himself noted, holding to the symbolic interactionism perspective necessitates the use of research methods in which the process of meaning-making is captured through the eyes of the individual(s) actually engaged in such reflective work. He wrote: "...the research scholar who is concerned with the social action of a given individual or group must see that action from the position of whoever is forming that action" (p. 56, 1969).

Methods adopted within the tradition of symbolic interactionism are also required to attend to the various ways in which the particular social action under study is essentially created. Blumer (1969) stated:

He [the researcher] should trace the formation of the action in the way in which it is actually formed. This means seeing the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he interprets what is taken into account, noting the alternative kinds of acts that are mapped out in advance, and seeking to

follow the interpretation that led to the selection and execution of one of these prefigured acts (p. 56, 1969).

Adhering to the symbolic interactionism perspective then, obligates scholars of human behavior to respect the viewpoints and experiences of the people they study as well as their ability to render meaningful interpretations of themselves and their lives.

To fulfill these obligations, this study utilized a qualitative and naturalistic research approach in its examination of the process behind becoming an activist. No other methodological paradigm is better suited to examine activist development from an experience-based, first person perspective than the naturalistic paradigm. Numerous scholars have testified to the ways in which qualitative research methods allow us to see through the eyes of study participants how they interpret the circumstances of their lives as well as the meanings and purposes that are attributed to them (Bryman, 1988; Patton, 1990; Weiss, 1994). In the words of qualitative researchers Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin, the qualitative “mode” permits us to “understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (p. 7, 1992).

While subsequent chapters will highlight this point in a more in-depth manner, it can be noted here that the qualitative approach used in this study did indeed permit a deeper examination of the dynamic and humanizing nature of activism. The process of becoming an activist, at least for the participants of this study, was as personal as it was political. Establishing an activist identity entailed wrestling with both public, political issues and the intimate questions of identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

A qualitative approach was also employed, in part, because it was the most appropriate way to examine the study’s research questions that centered upon the exploration of process (Merriam, 1998). As Miles and Huberman (1994) observed, the data that comes from a qualitative study can be a rich source of description about the ways in which interconnecting events take shape and ultimately unfold. They

write, "...one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (p. 1).

The life stories presented in the remainder of this dissertation bear witness to the inherent strength of the qualitative approach to explore questions of process. In recounting their life experiences, participants in this study revealed that, although it can sometimes appear so, becoming an activist was neither a capricious nor a sudden occurrence. The process was one negotiated and constructed over the life course. It was from an accumulation of ideas, values, and experiences that the commitment to social change was fashioned.

An additional consideration was the flexibility and openness of the qualitative paradigm in pursuing viewpoints and experiences that were unanticipated (Bryman, 1988). The approach presumes that in whatever social phenomena are being examined, there are entirely "unexpected important topics" which may reveal themselves in the course of one's research (p. 67). According to Bryman (1988), this flexibility allows qualitative researchers to freely pursue those unexpected topics as well as change direction in the refinement of their research problems. Such flexibility was important to my own study whose main subject was relatively unexplored and whose research questions were general enough to elicit a range of responses, several of which were unexpected and warranted the refinement of interview questions.

### **The Biographical Tradition**

As Mills' (1959) asserted, studies of social life must explore the twin terrains of biography and history if we are to truly understand how people's lives are shaped as well as how history is created. To attend to the biographical element in Mills' social analytic equation, this study drew from the methodological tradition known as biography. Simply defined, a biography is the study of an individual and his or her life experiences (Creswell, 1998). According to interpretative biographer, Norman K. Denzin (1989), biographical studies presume that a life has been lived out in a way that can be "constructed, reconstructed, and written about" (p. 28).

Within the biographical tradition, there exists a multiplicity of forms that a study can take. These include autobiographies, personal histories, oral histories, memoirs, personal narratives, life histories, life stories, recorded narratives, self stories, and personal experience stories (Creswell, 1994; Denzin, 1989; Yow, 1994). The biographical form adopted in this social study was that of a life story,<sup>20</sup> a kind of biographical writing in which the researcher attempts to establish a fairly complete narration of the particular experiences surrounding a predefined set of events (Denzin, 1989; Geiger, 1986).

Just as the biographical form is consistent with Mills' (1959) contentions about how social science must be conducted, it also is consistent with the perspectives of other sociologists who believe that biography plays a key role in the construction of collective action. In the words of one such sociologist named Joseph Kling (1995):

The ways in which collective action connects to the stories people tell themselves about who they are, and with whom they identify, is a process not well articulated by institutional theories of mobilization. Identities emerge out of complex psycho-social processes through which the intimate self, in its earliest phases, is grafted, onto environing group structures. The construction of collective action, therefore, is inseparable from the construction of personal biography, from the ways, that is, we experience the imprecation of our individual and social selves (p. 3).

In particular, maintains the Italian sociologist Donatella della Porta (1992), life histories are especially well suited to explore the construction of collective action because they attend to several key elements: 1) the process by which people become engaged in collective action; 2) the myriad of motivations that influence their decision

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<sup>20</sup> According to Robert Atkinson (1998), professor of human development and founder of The University of South Maine's Center for the Study of Lives, little difference exists between life stories and life histories. The terms are often used interchangeably to define the same vantage point: a first-person viewpoint that encapsulates how a person experiences and understands his or her life over time. In later sections of this chapter, the term life history will appear in relation to data collection procedures as they have been outlined in the work of Norman Denzin (1989). The use of the term should be taken to hold the same meaning as a life story.

to participate in collective action; and 3) the interplay between reality and perception in defining the purpose and meaning of one's engagement in collective action. These key elements are clearly reflective of the same notions that Blumer (1969) argued were essential to the study of human behavior namely experience, context, and meaning.

### **Interpretative Biography**

Biographies, it must be noted, are ruled by particular analytical approaches. These approaches are usually of two kinds: the classical approach and the interpretative approach. In the classical approach, emphasis is placed upon theoretical relevance, validity, reliability, generalizability, and the formulation of hypotheses (Creswell, 1998). In contrast, the interpretative approach emphasizes meaning and interpretation (Denzin, 1989). It acknowledges the cultural constraints and practices that influence how lives are constructed and ultimately, how are they composed into literary productions. These "texts," as they are called, serve as forms of narrative fiction, stories "cut from the same kinds of cloths as the lives they tell about," and are subject to Western literary conventions that often shape how lives are told (Denzin, p. 26, 1989).

In simpler terms, the interpretative perspective treats people's lives not as theoretical propositions in need of validation but as socially constructed stories with beginnings, middles, and ends; this is how they are experienced and understood by those who live them. Furthermore, the interpretative approach acknowledges that the composition of these stories is not an objective process, but it is subject to the interpretations and perceptions of the researcher. Thus, biographies are believed to reflect not only the lives of those being written about but the lives of the individuals crafting the writing of them as well (Creswell, 1998).

There were several reasons for employing the interpretative biographical approach. First, it was a methodological form entirely in line with the present study's overarching theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. Similar to symbolic



interactionism's emphasis on meaning-making, the interpretative approach affirms the significance of how individuals comprehend their own actions and ascribe value or purpose to them. According to Denzin (1989), this is a fundamental component in constructing biographies and life histories. In the gathering of stories, the researcher is expected to explore and search for the meaning ascribed to these stories, often working in conjunction with the storyteller to provide explanations and clarifications.

Additionally, the interpretative approach was utilized because it emphasizes exploring the historical and structural contexts in which a life is situated; human lives are believed to "...belong not just to persons, but also to larger social collectivities, including societies, corporations, and, for some, the world-system" (Denzin, p. 29, 1989). In this respect, the interpretative approach was consistent with the study's overall intent to examine the larger sociological forces that influenced the process by which a college student becomes an activist.

Finally, the interpretative approach recognizes the prominence of storytelling as the way people naturally communicate and represent their experience (Denzin, 1989). This is important for as Kling (1995) has noted, stories and narratives are central for understanding how people come to take part in social movements. He wrote:

Social movements are constituted by the stories that people tell to themselves and to one another. They reflect the deepest ways in which people understand who they are and to whom they are connected...they are constructed from the interweaving of personal and social biographies—from the narratives people rehearse to themselves about the nature of their lives (p. 3).

In sum, the interpretative approach was used in this study because it allowed for the exploration of what Mills (1959) once called the intersection of biography and history. An added advantage was that the approach allowed for the discovery of process and meaning-making in a way that naturally coincided with the way people are known to convey an understanding of their lived experiences.

## **Situating the Study**

According to Becker (1998), a study whose basic intent is to understand *how* something became possible is fundamentally different than a study that seeks to know *why* something became necessary; one is concerned with process, the other with cause. Of this distinction, he writes, “This is not just a matter of saying the right words, ‘process’ instead of ‘cause.’ It implies a different way of working” (p. 61).

In this section as well as the next, the design of the research, the specific path that was followed in cultivating an understanding of how certain college students become activists will be detailed. The section begins with a brief discussion of the institutional setting in which the study was situated, namely, the University of Michigan. It was the one common element that crossed the lives of all of the individuals included in this study.

## **Institutional Setting**

Studies that are intent upon understanding a general process have a range of sites and institutional settings in which they can be situated (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The choice of where to conduct it is not usually considered to be as critical as the purposive and representative quality of its sampling strategy. Thus, researchers studying general processes are not nearly as constrained in their choice of the settings and backgrounds where they will carry out their inquiries.

Although this study might have been located in a variety of other college and university settings, it was situated specifically at the University of Michigan. One of the most compelling reasons for doing so was the institution’s long, storied tradition of college student activism. Since the late 1800s, University undergraduates have championed a wide range of political and social causes such as civil rights, free speech, peace, gender equity, women’s rights, the ending of apartheid in South Africa, multiculturalism, laborers’ rights, and most recently, affirmative action (Peckham, 1994). Michigan’s impressive base of student movements, social and political organizations, groups, and causes made it a well suited background for a qualitative

study of activism because there were a “rich mix” of people and interactions to examine (Marshall & Rossman, p. 51, 1995).

In addition, access to the University had been previously established. This access was facilitated through a variety of means: in the author’s role as a graduate student in the School of Education; her two years of work in the University’s Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives; and in her former position as a student services associate in the Office of the Dean of Students. Through all of these experiences, she became familiarized with Michigan’s history and culture, particularly as it pertained to students of color. It was a logical choice for a research site, then, because she possessed a useful working knowledge of the site and its climate.

Above all, the study was situated in a single setting like the University of Michigan because it allowed for a more in-depth examination of how a particular context could affect the process of becoming an activist. Previous analyses of college student activism had shown that where a movement took place mattered in a variety of critical ways: the kinds of people it could recruit; the types of protests and demonstrations that could be staged; the other social networks it was able to look to for new members, allies and coalitions; and the kinds of challenges the opposition could wage against the movement (see Astin et al., 1975; Gamson, 1990; Lammers, 1977; Lipset & Ladd, 1970; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Peterson, 1968; Snow, Zurcher, & Eckland-Olsen, 1980).

Place also matters to the individuals looking or thinking about taking part in social change efforts. One of the most important discoveries that came from focusing specifically on the University of Michigan was that the institution gave rise to a set of shared commitments that bound study participants—for the first time in their lives—to larger communities of color. In seeing themselves as part of a larger whole, participants began to fashion identities in which creating change became an integral focus.

It was in the careful examination of one institution's history, culture, and students that this study came to reflect what the sociologist Howard Becker (1998) maintained was the central import of place. He said:

The importance of everything being somewhere is that what you are studying is taking place somewhere specific, not in the world in general, or in a 'social setting' but in this place, right here, and whatever is true of this place is going to affect it (p. 56).

### **Study Participants**

Qualitative inquiry is fraught with ambiguities (Patton, 1990). This seems especially true of qualitative studies that involve gathering the life histories of political activists. The dynamic and fluid nature of social movements often pre-empts a clear-cut determination of key research issues such as what types of activists to include in one's life history research, how many should take part, and the degree to which the experiences of those activists included in one's research resemble that of others (della Porta, 1992). Donatella della Porta spoke to similar concerns when she admitted, "The universe of activists is rarely known," (p. 182). Consequently, special care must be taken in identifying the activists upon whose lives one's life history research is based.

This present study's approach to identifying potential study participants consisted of using both a "snowball" or "chain" sampling technique as well as soliciting recommendations from a panel of University faculty, staff, and administrators that had been previously identified as knowledgeable about student activism and activists at Michigan.

#### Snowball/Chain Sampling

Patton (1990) defines the "snowball" or "chain" sampling technique as a kind of purposive sampling in which cases of interest are identified by asking well-situated people to recommend individuals who could act as good, informative subjects for

one's study. The technique allows for the construction of a "universe" of activists through referrals and recommendations from those who were themselves involved in various social movements, activist organizations, and political groups as Michigan undergraduates. A central element of this sampling technique is the determination of a core set of individuals who can both participate in the study and provide references for identifying others.

Initially, the process of identifying study participants was attempted through archival sources like papers, files, special collections, and other materials that could provide details about the different political organizations and movements which had existed on campus over the years and possibly who participated in them. Some of these materials included Peckham's (1994) history of the University, previous editions of the campus student newspaper, the Michigan Daily, the University's Labadie Collection, and Bentley Historical Library holdings related to student activism, student affairs, and student clubs and organizations.

While these sources named a number of student activists, most of them were leaders or key spokespeople, not the general members the study intended to focus upon. As an alternative starting point, the panel of "knowledgeable informants" that had been established prior to the start of the research process were the first interviews to be conducted. It was hoped that they would be able to help identify some of the lesser well-known but committed activists who attended Michigan as undergraduates.

### Panel of Knowledgeable Informants

According to Weiss (1994), it is always wise to establish a panel of what he calls "knowledgeable informants" at the outset of one's research (p. 17). Knowledgeable informants are people who can significantly inform a study either because they possess a certain expertise or a particular kind of experience that speaks in some way to the topic under investigation. They are helpful, he claims, because

they can often be counted on to enrich and extend our understanding by offering direction or providing alternative perspectives of it.

Originally, the panel of knowledgeable informants established for this study was composed of eleven individuals. They included current and former presidents of the University, several professors, and personnel from Michigan's student affairs division. These individuals were chosen because of their experiences with college student activists and student movements. Several of them, for example, conducted their own analyses of student activism during the protest eras of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, they lent the study their expertise and impressions of the process related to becoming an activist. Others worked with student activists at Michigan on various political issues and were able to impart a sense of their commitments and how they worked to create change. Still others, by virtue of their long-standing tenure at the University, witnessed different waves of activism as they have occurred on campus over time. They provided important historical memories and accounts of the actions that took place over time.

Over the course of the study, however, the original composition of the panel underwent several revisions. Scheduling constraints, as well new recommendations, resulted in a final panel consisting of sixteen people from a wider cross-section of positions and roles within the University than was previously anticipated. The full range of former and current University faculty, staff, and administrators from both academic affairs and student affairs is represented in Table 5.

**Table 5. Panel of Knowledgeable Informants**

<b>General Title/Position</b>	<b>Number of Informants</b>
Former Presidents	1
Social Science Faculty	3
Former and current Student Affairs Personnel	6
Academic Affairs Administrators	2
Natural Sciences Faculty	2
University Staff	2
Total	16

Appendix A contains a copy of the interview protocol that was used in the interviews with panel informants. The protocol consisted of four general categories of questions:

- **Personal Background.** In an attempt to establish rapport, panel informants were first asked about their personal lives: where they grew up, where they went to school, and the extent of their tenure at Michigan.
- **Memories of Student Movements & Student Activism.** This second set of questions probed the informants' memories of the student movements and activism that they had witnessed during their time at the University. Other questions looked to capture their thoughts about the aftereffects of these events and any changes that had occurred at Michigan as a result of it.
- **Specific Questions.** These questions focused on what was known of their roles or responsibilities at the time a particular student movement took place. They were intended to allow informants to speak in detail about how their particular office, unit or department reacted in times of protest or were affected by campus instability.
- **General Opinions of Activism & Activists.** To help further understand the perspectives they put forth in the midst of our conversations, informants were asked several questions about their general opinions of activists and activism. In the end, their

responses were quite helpful in contextualizing some of the statements they made earlier in the interview.

Conducted from May 2001 throughout November 2002, the interviews themselves took place in locations always of the informants' choosing. They were met in their offices, in coffee shops, in diners and restaurants as well as in their homes. On average, these conversations lasted for an hour and a half.<sup>21</sup> Each one was tape-recorded. Informants were later provided with copies of the interview tape and consent forms for their own records.

Before an interview with a knowledgeable informant took place, each person was asked to read and sign a requisite consent form. (A copy of this consent form is provided in Appendix B.) While several informants freely granted their permission to have quotes attributed to them directly in this study, most did not. Often, that decision came at the end of the conversation, after a brief moment in which they reflected upon all that had been revealed.

Many of them seemed to struggle in one way or another with the degree of disclosure they exhibited. What first appeared to be a fairly straightforward question-and-answer session became a more personal conversation than many of them expected or intended.<sup>22</sup> This seemed especially true of informants who were people of color themselves. More than the others, they seemed to grapple with what came across as conflicting emotions. These emotions arose in the context of discussing issues such as serving an elite institution whose commitment to students of color they did not fully believe; understanding the frustration of their younger brethren but also feeling frustrated themselves about the heavy burden of responsibility they believed

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<sup>21</sup> The total amount of time spent interviewing the panel of knowledgeable informants came to approximately 22 hours.

<sup>22</sup> One of the surprising elements of these interviews was the highly emotional and personal nature of the responses that were elicited. Recounting the past often brings long-forgotten feelings and sentiments to the surface, of course. In the case of individuals who possess a strong emotional attachment to the University like those who were interviewed, greater emotionality should have been expected.



they also carry in relation to fostering a more equitable and just campus; and recognizing that good changes had occurred within the University but many more were needed.

There were several common elements to be found among the sixteen conversations that occurred. One of those common elements was the strong belief that student activists at Michigan were a great source of change and renewal. Each of the informants was able to point to a particular unit, curricular adaptation, or organizational structure that was the direct result of student efforts to change the University. That the presence of activism on campus was not as visible as it was in previous years troubled them all too. They wondered what the implications of a diminished activist presence would mean for the University and the country as a whole. Additionally, every panel informant admitted to learning something vital about themselves as stewards of the University when confronted by activists and their demands for a fairer and just campus. Perhaps most remarkable was the fact that nearly every one of the panel informants admitted to engaging in social change efforts as undergraduate and graduate students themselves. The topic of activism for these individuals then, was far more personal than anticipated.

The interviews with panel informants also revealed some vital truths about the University and the people who give it life. It is composed of people trying to live out their own commitments to social change in the midst of younger generations also learning to do the same. Underneath the shiny veneer of titles and degrees, lies a genuine yearning to see justice carry the day. In this respect, panel informants are no different than the students they serve. They are running the same race; it is their starting points that differ.

Given the rich detail and insight that informants provided, it would have been easy to draw more heavily from their own stories in the chapters that follow. The present study was deliberately parsimonious in sampling quotes and remarks from these interviews primarily because it did not want to detract in any way from the stories that should receive the lion's share of attention, namely, the stories of the

former and current Michigan students who endured the process of becoming an activist.

Additionally, there was a concern about maintaining confidentiality. Although the consent form clearly stated that I would not be able to full ensure their anonymity because the study was bound by particular time periods and specific events that took place on campus, the study does not include any details that would make the identification of panel informants a possibility. Thus, no quote is directly attributed to an individual by name or title; only generic descriptions indicating their main role (e.g. administrator, faculty, staff) are used.

This is not inconsistent with the original purpose behind establishing a panel of knowledgeable informants in the first place. The study intended to use these conversations as a way to further understand the historical background surrounding student activism at Michigan as well as explore the notion that Becker spoke to about the import of place and larger effects. These conversations were meant primarily to help contextualize the stories of activists themselves.

### The Main Study Participants

There were three avenues by which the study established a larger pool of potential participants. The first avenue was through conversations with knowledgeable informants; several of them offered names of individuals they believed would be appropriate and informative study participants. As these individuals weighed the possibility of participating in the dissertation, they also offered other names of people to contact for the study. This was the second main avenue the study followed to create a “universe” of activists whose participation would be later solicited. The third avenue was based in the direct knowledge I held in relation to the University’s student of color community and the individuals who were noted within that community for their activist efforts.

The initial list of potential study participants was composed of thirteen people. Once their contact information (addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails) had been established, each of one of these individuals was mailed a series of documents that included a letter of introduction, a brief overview of the dissertation and its central research questions, a copy of the short questionnaire, and a consent form. (See appendices C, D, E, and F.)

The purpose of these documents was to give potential participants a fuller sense of the research so that they could make a more informed decision about their participation. The overview, for example, offered insight into the larger aims and purposes behind the study as well as its guiding line of inquiry. Additionally, the letter of introduction helped establish my identity as another person of color with her own record of activism and commitment to social justice. In this respect, these documents also served as a way of establishing some credibility and rapport with potential participants before direct contact could be made.

The initial group of thirteen participants were quickly winnowed down to a smaller group of eight individuals due to a variety of factors; a non-responsiveness on the part of several invited participants who despite several attempts to make contact never responded in kind; certain scheduling problems for others; and some invited participants' inability to commit to more than one interview.

### Criteria for Inclusion

The remaining eight individuals were then considered for participation based upon a set of criteria that della Porta (1992) claimed were helpful in ensuring some degree of consistency in life history studies of activists whose samples consisted of more than one or two individuals. These criteria included:

- **Relevance of Experience.** The degree to which an individual's life experience includes a significant, steady engagement with activism;

- **Sufficient Expressive Capacity.** The ability of study participants to reflect upon and discuss their activism as well as the degree to which such a person participates in activist efforts; and
- **Interest in the Research.** How open potential study participants are willing to be in telling their life stories.

It was light of these criteria that the final six individuals included in this study were approached about their availability for interviews. The two individuals who were not approached for interviews did not possess the same level of activist participation as the others.

### Representativeness

Although life history research does not aim for statistical representativeness, della Porta (1992) argues that some semblance of general representativeness can be achieved in life history studies of activists by ensuring that participants have been involved in different forms of activism—such as boycotts, strikes, protests, social movements, demonstrations—and belong to various generations, gender, political affiliations, and social groups.

Some of these elements had already been built into the study's guiding research design. For example, the study intentionally set out to focus on three different eras: the 1960s, 1980s, and the early years of the new millennium. In addition, the study looked to have a balanced representation among study participants in terms of gender and racial backgrounds. As Barlow (1991) documented, there is a conspicuous lack of studies that address the student activism of women and people of color. He claims that the social mores of the 1960s limited the roles and responsibilities that women and people of color could assume in social movements.

The inattention to these groups warranted deliberate efforts to construct a sample that reflected gender and racial differences. Table 6 on the following page provides a brief overview of the main participants in this study and the different elements of representativeness they embodied.

**Table 6. Main Study Participants, Movement Affiliations, Racial Background & Timing of Activist Participation**

<b>Era</b>	<b>Study Participants &amp; Class Year</b>	<b>Racial Background</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Organizations &amp; Student Movements</b>
<b>Late 1960s</b>	India Taylor	Mixed	Female	Black Action Movement (BAM I)
	Malcolm Jones, '69	African American	Male	
<b>Mid 1980s</b>	Ennis Campbell, '89	African American	Male	Black Action Movement (BAM III)
	Esme Rodriguez, '92	Mixed	Female	United Coalition Against Racism (UCAR) Free South Africa Coordinating Committee
<b>Early 2000s</b>	Web Murphy, '02	Mixed	Male	Student of Color Coalition (SCC)
	Rosa Cortez, 01	Mexican American	Female	Michigamua Tower Takeover

### **Data Collection Procedures & Analysis**

As Creswell (1998) indicated, the tradition of inquiry in which a study is rooted often directs the ways in which its data will be collected. A study rooted in the ethnographic tradition, for example, requires collecting descriptions of behavior through observations, documents, artifacts, and interviews (Creswell, 1998). Studies in the phenomenological traditions, on the other hand, rely primarily on in-depth

interviews to describe the lived experiences of the individuals taking part in them (Cresswell, 1998).

Because this study was rooted in the biographical tradition, it relied upon long, biographically oriented interviews, as well as documents and archival materials in its data collection efforts. In addition to observations, these are considered to be the main forms by which biographies and life histories are constructed (Creswell, 1998, Denzin, 1989). Data collection procedures were also influenced, however, by the fact that the study embraced the interpretative approach to the biographical tradition which emphasizes story telling, meaning and interpretation.

Denzin (1989) advanced several strategies for collecting stories and narratives upon which life histories are based in a manner that was consistent with the interpretative approach. After a brief enumeration of these strategies, the other critical aspect of the study's data collection efforts, namely, data analysis will be discussed.

### **Interpretative Strategies**

In his book, Interpretative Biography, scholar Norman K. Denzin (1989) proposes several strategies for constructing a life history. These strategies, he claims, can be used to analyze the lives of different individuals, allowing for cross-case analyses and the formulation of comparisons between them. Denzin (1989) presents these strategies as a series of procedural steps:

- As a first step, investigators begin to examine an objective set of experiences in a person's life. These can be related to different stages (such as early adulthood) or experiences within the life-course stages (e.g., marriage).
- In the next step, biographical materials are gathered primarily through what Denzin refers to as "the use of the narrative interviewing strategy" which involves the reconstruction of a particular life experience through the telling and relaying of stories (p. 56).

- The stories that are gathered from these interviews are then read for patterns of meaning and interpretation. The biography of the individual is then carefully recreated while the larger structural factors that have shaped the overall life experience are recognized and acknowledged for their influence.
- The resulting biographical material is then written up. The account focuses on three main elements: 1) The structural processes at play in the life of the individual under study; 2) the various theories and perspectives that illuminate the meaning of the individual's life experiences; and 3) the characteristics of the individual's life that make it either distinctive or common.

In the case of this study, the particular experience under examination—that of becoming an activist—was at a particular point in person's life, namely, young adulthood. Thus a major focus of my story-generating interviews was centered largely on the experiences and biographical events that were influential in the participants' development as activists. The content and scope of these interviews are discussed below.

### **Interviews with Main Study Participants**

According to Atkinson (1998), life story interviews follow three primary steps: 1) planning or preparing for the interview; 2) conducting the interview; and 3) transcribing and interpreting the interview. This section of the chapter will speak to the planning and conducting phases of the life story interview process.

#### Planning for the Interviews

Every person whose participation was solicited agreed to be interviewed. In all cases, the main study participants initiated contact not too soon after they had received a packet of documents that included a letter of introduction, a brief overview of the dissertation and its central research questions, a copy of the short questionnaire, and a consent form.

Once an agreement to participate had been established, preliminary research was conducted in relation to the specific time periods and student movements that were known to take place while study participants were enrolled at Michigan. For example, one of the participants, Ennis Campbell attended the University in the mid-1980s when the third wave of the Black Action Movement (BAM III) was initiated. In preparation for Ennis' interview, information pertaining to the demands of BAM III, the organizations and students who supported it, and the University response to the movement were gathered through old editions of the Michigan Daily, several archival records, and BAM conference proceedings. This information helped, in part, to establish a context in which Ennis's story could be placed amidst the larger tale of the movement that was unfolding on campus. During the interview, this background information also served as a reference for those moments when he was uncertain about the chronology of events and the timing of particular actions.

To aid in gathering background information on the participants themselves, a questionnaire was created to capture some of the essential aspects of their identities and their activism. The questionnaire was derived from a similar survey that sociologist Douglas McAdam (1988) used in his study of Freedom Summer volunteers.<sup>23</sup> As Appendix E reveals, the questionnaire gathered basic information related to the demographic profile of the individual, starting points and initial influences on their activism, and "before and after" questions designed to elicit a sense of the outcomes associated with the engagement in activism.

Originally, the questionnaire was to be returned prior to the first interview. Most of the study participants, however, did not return them until after the first interview was completed. This posed no real problem; the results of the questionnaire were later worked into the second interview and used as a form of

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<sup>23</sup> During the construction of the questionnaire, Douglas McAdam granted permission to sample from a survey he used in his study of Freedom Summer participants. While there is overlap between the questionnaire of this study and that of McAdam's, the items used for the six main participants are broader and more general than those found in the Freedom Summer survey.



clarification to further refine an understanding of the stories and themes that ran through the study participants' lives.

Other pre-interview preparations went according to the general guidelines Weiss (1994) presented in Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies. They included deciding how best to record the interview; reading any materials that may have been written by or about the study participant to be interviewed; and reviewing notes from interviews with other participants.

### Guiding Philosophy of the Interview

It is important to note here that the interviews conducted for this study were bound by a constructionist perspective of the interviewing process, what sociologists James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium have referred to as the “active interview” viewpoint (p. 4, 1995). Unlike other conventional approaches to interviewing where study participants are treated as respondents or “passive vessels for answers,” the active interview philosophy construes those being interviewed as people who actively construct knowledge in collaboration with their interviewers (p. 7, 1995). The interview itself from this philosophical standpoint is seen as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion that is not so much dictated by pre-designed interview protocols but directed by questions that appeal to the human capacity for creating competent narratives of human lives.

This study did not adhere then to the notion that its participants could inaccurately relay or spoil the meanings of their experiences. Nor did it presuppose a greater ability on my behalf to extract those meanings from study participants. The facts, details, and significance related to the experience of becoming an activist arose from what was essentially a social encounter between me and the study participants.

## Conducting the Interviews

Holding to the active interview philosophy has certain implications for the role that interview questions play in a study (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Protocols, guides, and schedules are not so much viewed as stimuli or catalysts that provoke the production of answers but rather, they are framing devices for a study participant to follow in characterizing their experiences.

It was with this mindset that I set out to facilitate interviews with the present study's panel of main participants. Interviews were conducted from May 2001 through November 2002. Appendix G contains a copy of the protocol that was used in them. It consisted of several categories of open-ended questions:

- **Personal Background.** In this first category, the questions posed sought to establish a sense of participants' origins: what their families were like, the kinds of neighborhoods and communities they lived in, where they went to school, and what their high school experiences consisted of as well as the transition to college;
- **Initial Starting Points.** The second category of questions framed their initial years at Michigan and where they found themselves in the process of beginning to cultivate a political consciousness of the world around them;
- **Path to Activism.** The questions in these categories spoke directly to the process and transformation from private citizen to public activist as well as the reaction of friends, family, and other peers to such a change.

These questions were posed over the course of two interview sessions with a series of follow-up questions seeking to gain greater clarity about how the process of becoming an activist unfolds over the life course. Typically, the first interview session covered life course stages such as childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Once participants began to talk about the transition from high school to college, the interview questions about their plans for college were generally followed up by queries about the campus climate, the major political issues taking place at the

time, interactions between and among students of color as well as white students, and other parts of college life that dealt with their academic and social experiences.

The second interview was concerned with the fuller details of participants' activism: how they became involved in a particular protest(s), the kinds of issues they were drawn to, and the major outcomes in which their participation resulted. Taken as a whole, the main focus of these questions was to garner an understanding of the ways in which people are transformed through their own efforts to foster social change.

Where these interviews would take place was determined by study participants themselves. One set of interviews took place in a University library study room; two others took place in a coffee shop; another occurred in a participant's home; and yet another was conducted in a small diner. Malcolm Jones was the only interview that required travel out of state; it took place in Cleveland, Ohio where he was on a business trip.

On average the duration of these interviews lasted from two to six hours per session.<sup>24</sup> With the exception of Malcolm and India who did not wish to have their conversations tape-recorded, every other interview was fully tape-recorded. Upon completion of these interviews, copies of the interview tapes were made and mailed to a professional transcriptionist. Once the transcripts were finished, I re-listened to the taped interviews while cleaning up the transcripts. Copies of transcripts, interview tapes, and consent forms were later provided to study participants.

### **Additional Data Collection Efforts**

In addition to the use of interviews, various historical documents and archival materials were referenced to provide details about the different political organizations and movements which had existed on the Michigan campus over the years as well as

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<sup>24</sup> The total amount of time spent interviewing the main study participants came to approximately 30 hours.

help situate study participants in their larger historical and social circumstances. Table 7 provides several examples of the kinds of archival materials drawn upon in this study.

**Table 7. Examples of Archival Sources Referenced in the Study**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Archived Materials</b>	Floor plans, memorandums, correspondence, flyers, posters, conference proceedings, meeting minutes, recorded interviews
<b>Student Handbooks</b>	The Circle; Exíto; The Little Black Book; Proactive
<b>Histories</b>	The Making of the University of Michigan, 1817-1992 (Peckham, 1994); History of Ann Arbor (Marwil, 1991); A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present (Zinn, 1999)
<b>Newspapers</b>	New York Times; Michigan Daily; The University Record; Ann Arbor News; Detroit Free Press
<b>Reports</b>	Affirmative Action Report to the University Community 1982 (Affirmative Action Office, University of Michigan, 1982).
<b>Videos</b>	SCC Tower Takeover; History of Diversity at the University of Michigan

### **Data Coding & Analysis**

This study employed an inductive approach to the coding and analysis of its data. The guiding idea behind the inductive approach to analysis is to allow the salient elements of a study to emerge from patterns and themes found in the cases under examination without making any prior assumptions or hypotheses about what those elements will be (Patton, 1990).

The techniques used in the identification of patterns and themes followed the tenets of thematic analysis developed by organizational behavior scholar, Richard E. Boyatzis (1998). According to Boyatzis (1998), a data-driven approach to analysis encompasses several steps: 1) reducing a body of raw information into synopses, outlines, and summarizations that capture the essence of the larger whole; 2) identifying themes within the more succinct outlines; and 3) comparing themes across cases to locate where the similarities and differences lie. Each of these steps is enumerated upon in the next subsections to follow.

### Reducing the Raw Information

The transcripts and notes that resulted from the interviews with main study participants literally amounted to hundreds of pages. To distill their contents down to more manageable texts, the study relied upon the art of indexing as well as the computer software known as NVivo. Indexing interviews is one of the ways oral historians create a record of the interviews they conduct (Yow, 1994). The idea behind indexing is to provide the researcher with a master map of the interview; tape counter numbers and general topics of discussion are laid out in such a fashion so that the full content of the interview is displayed in a brief but comprehensive listing which can be easily retrieved from the tape if needed.

Appendix H contains two sample pages from the seven-page index that was created for the first interview with Rosa Cortez. The first page, what has been referred to as the “Information Sheet,” contains a brief synopsis of the interview; the details of when the interview took and where it was located; some personal data about Rosa; a brief biographical portrait of her; and some of my initial reflections of the interview. The second page contains the start of the index for Rosa’s interview. It delineates tape side, counter tape numbers, and some of the topics that came up just as the interview commenced.

Creating these indexes for each interview was helpful, not only in establishing a comprehensive and concise mapping of what amounted to hours-long interviews,

but also in identifying initial themes that were common and dissimilar across the six study participants. It was on the basis of these indexes that the first analytic memos were generated to foster further inductive analysis (Strauss, 1987). Memos, otherwise defined as reflective compositions that researchers write to themselves, were used to capture initial reflections of the stories being told and to think about the ways in which to situate the interviewee in larger historical, social, and theoretical contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Identifying Themes

The identification of themes revolved around the general foci Denzin (1989) first outlined as part of the interpretative strategies guiding a study rooted in the interpretative biographical approach. These themes included: life-course stages and experiences; the narratives and stories that are told in the context of these stages and experiences; and structural factors that helped shape the experience of becoming an activist. Additionally, the classification of themes focused upon the identification of epiphanies, particular moments and experiences which Denzin (1989) claims “leave marks on people’s lives” (p. 70). In this respect, I looked for the stories participants told about their lives and searched to locate those moments in which the course of a participant’s life was fundamentally altered.

Much like “start codes” or the initial coding categories that are often generated at the beginning of the analysis process, a set of initial themes was developed in this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Among them were:

- Descriptions of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as well as the social contexts in which these developmental stages took place (i.e. neighborhood, peer groups, school, home life, family interactions);
- Epiphanies, turning points;

- Significant others and their influence both generally and specifically in terms of the process of becoming an activist;
- Positive and deleterious outcomes that resulted from the engagement in activism;
- Protest activities and roles assumed in student social movements on campus; and
- Personal plans and ambitions for college and beyond.

Later, these initial themes were further refined and examined in light of theories and ideas that helped to give them greater cohesion and meaning.

### Comparing Themes across Cases

As Denzin (1989) has noted, interpretative biographies result in the composition of texts that contain three elements: 1) The structural processes in the person's life; 2) various theories that highlight the meaning of these life experiences; and 3) the distinctive and common features of the individual's life.

Because this study focused on the stories of six individuals from three different time points, these elements were examined in light of cross-case and within-case analyses whereby participants' stories were analyzed across varying student movements and within the same movement (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The resulting texts to be presented in the chapters ahead speak to the differences and similarities that exist among study participants on a variety of levels: the historical and social circumstances surrounding their activism, the kinds of stories and narratives they created in detailing how they became activists; and the types of changes and outcomes their activist engagement resulted in, among others.

## Quality & Credibility of the Study

Among others, Denzin (1989) claims that interpretative biographies do not abide by typical conventions of reliability, validity, or generalizability. The interpretative approach does not treat lives, he argues, as “verifiable concerns” that “can be nailed down” (p. 51). It assumes instead that people’s lives are “arbitrary productions constrained by the cultural writing practices of the time” (Denzin, p. 26, 1989).

By what means then, can a researcher claim that their interpretative work reflects both quality and credibility? According to sociologist and social worker Catherine K. Riessman (1993), one of the criteria that can be looked to when trying to determine the trustworthiness of a study in which narratives play a central role is correspondence; the term refers to the feedback process in which study participants are allowed to look over the written accounts and descriptions that were based on their lives and experiences.

For this inquiry, participants were provided with copies of interview transcripts and chapters they were featured in for review. While they were not given greater editorial power than me, they were able to identify what appeared to them in the work as the authentic and genuine representation of their experiences.

Member checking, as this procedure is also known, aided with the important issue of confidentiality as well. Ultimately, what was disclosed in these chapters in terms of identities, names, places, opinions, and viewpoints was subjected first to the review of study participants who helped determined the level of detail that could be provided.

Persuasiveness is a second criterion that Riessman (1993) claims helps to establish the trustworthiness of study and its conclusions. The term denotes a way of knowing whether or not an interpretation is reasonable and convincing. Riessman (1993) claims that the criterion is greatest when interpretations are supported with evidence from study participants accounts as well as when alternative interpretations of the data are considered.



The present study met this particular criterion in several ways. First, it drew heavily from the interview transcripts and notes that were taken during the course of conversations with study participants. As the following three chapters show, the narratives that bring to life the process of becoming an activist are told in great detail through the very words of participants themselves. Their voices are woven throughout the text. When possible, the stories and narratives that study participants imparted were placed against existing archival materials and accounts to ensure that the facts and details they presented were credible.

The same method of triangulation was applied to the study's analyses and interpretations. Numerous frameworks and theories were drawn upon to help explain the different stages of the activist process. The extant literature on the subject of activism was also consistently referenced as a way of highlighting differences and similarities in among previous generations of activists and those included as part of the current inquiry. Though the study did not deliberately set out to verify or validate previous findings, the points at which it overlapped with extant analyses was noted when appropriate.

While this set of criteria was used primarily to enhance the authenticity of the study's interpretations, its use was also motivated by the obligation that Denzin (1989) claims all researchers have to the people into whose lives they look. He wrote, "...We must remember that our primary obligation is always to the people we study...the lives and stories we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us" (p. 83).

## CHAPTER 4

### Web Murphy, Rosa Cortez, and the Michigamua Tower Takeover

In 1932, University of Michigan football coach Fielding H. Yost brokered a quiet agreement between the members of the Michigan Union's Finance Committee and the Fighting Braves of Michigamua, an all-male, secret honor society whose ranks were said to include only the most exceptional young scholars, athletes, fraternity brothers, and student government representatives on campus (Peckham, 1994). The terms were simple: If the secret honor society was willing to incur the financial obligations associated with converting the Union's old, dilapidated water tower into habitable meeting quarters, those same quarters would be endowed to Michigamua forevermore (Michigan Union Finance Committee Minutes, May 9, 1932).

Known among the Fighting Braves as "The Great Scalper," Yost penned an impassioned missive requesting that every Tribe member support the construction of what would be known from then on as the "Wigwam." He wrote:

For thirty-two years, the Tribes of Michigamua have come and gone. Young bucks are now old warriors. Older Tribesmen have become great chiefs in the world's councils. And year after year each springtime sees a new Tribe of Michigamua—but own no wigwam—only rented space. And now Michigamua plans its own home, a real WIGWAM. Up in the tower of the Michigan Union, high above campus, there is a vacant room. Michigamua has been invited to make use of this space—without cost, without rental, without taxes. All that remains is to convert the rough, unfinished interior into a permanent cost-free Council Wigwam for the Tribes to come...If all the Braves of Michigamua will help with a small contribution it can be done and I believe Michigamua CAN and WILL put this across. There is no argument regarding the need of a Wigwam (Yost letter, 1933).

Despite the lingering economic hardships imposed by the Great Depression, Michigamua quickly raised the necessary sum of \$1,250 dollars and within a year renovations to the Union tower were completed. Quietly, the secret honor society took up residence in the tower at the beginning of the 1933-1934 school year. From

that point on, the seventh floor of the Michigan Union was considered to be the private, hallowed meeting grounds of The Great Tribe and its Fighting Braves.

While Yost's 1932 agreement with the University ensured that his beloved Michigamua enjoyed a private sanctuary on the public grounds of campus, it unintentionally gave rise to an ironic and troubling outcome: a thirty year-long legacy of strident protest against the very existence of the Braves themselves. Full-fledged public protests against Michigamua would commence in the early 1970s and continue until the year 2000 with the secret honor society's forced removal from the Tower.<sup>25</sup>

This chapter focuses upon two young heirs of that protest legacy, Web Murphy and Rosa Cortez, undergraduates of color who helped stage the public protest that would ultimately serve in bringing Michigamua's reign in the Union Tower to its final end. For an unprecedented span of 37 consecutive days, Web and Rosa worked alongside a small band of their peers who had infiltrated the secret honor society's meeting space in the hopes of spurring the University to renew its commitment to cultivating an inclusive and diverse learning community. One week into the occupation of the Union's top floor, a student journalist from the Michigan Daily would baptize the event as "The Tower Takeover," naming for perpetuity one of the longest running sit-ins to occur at the University of Michigan in recent memory ("Students of color seize Michigamua office," 2000).

The stories behind Rosa and Web's gradual transformations from student to activist are presented in the pages ahead through abbreviated but richly detailed biographical narratives. Encapsulated in each narrative are the key personal events

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<sup>25</sup> Little has been published on the subject of the historical controversy surrounding Michigamua. The few accounts that do exist mark the start of the struggle against the secret honor society in 1972 when a Native American undergraduate named Victoria Barnes filed a complaint against the University with the state of Michigan's Civil Rights Commission (Barnes complaint, 1972). Officially designated as No. 15156-ED, the complaint referred to Michigamua as a "pseudo-Indian" society that sponsored initiation rites "demeaning and insulting to the Indian culture and heritage" (Barnes complaint, 1972). For a more complete history see LeBeau, 2001.

and experiences that speak to the pair's growth as individuals and activists from the perspective of three broad time points:

- Their lives prior to attending Michigan: As children born to African American and Latino parents, who endure semi-transient childhoods living among predominately white neighborhoods in various western and Midwestern cities, and who as adolescents later attend Jesuit and Augustinian-run high schools;
- The lives they led during their time at Michigan: As young undergraduates learning to embrace their identities as people of color, wrestling with questions of institutional equity and intolerance, and who eventually become campus activists and take part in a pan-ethnic student movement; and
- Their lives after the Tower Takeover is called to end: As young adults engaged in serious reflection of their activism and how it changed them politically as well as personally.

A brief analysis of Web and Rosa's stories and the ways in which they inform our understanding of the individual and shared motivations that guide the process of becoming an activist then closes out each biographical narrative.

### **Web's Story**

The protest known as the Tower Takeover had been over for nearly a year when Web Murphy, one of its supporters, agreed to be interviewed for this study. Nine of those months were spent at home in California, among his trusted family and friends, searching for a renewed sense of purpose and personal balance. The time away from campus was necessary for despite its characterization as a public campus protest, the Takeover had challenged the strength of Web's inner core and then some. His notions of friendship and trust, the affinity and respect he held for his university, his academic standing, and his physical and emotional well-being had all been thoroughly tested. Quite the ironic rub, he admitted, for someone who had

never viewed himself as any kind of serious political actor—much less an activist—before.

Yet even ironic stories have something to teach us. At least Web would like to think so. While he was unsure how others might interpret or evaluate his life choices, he hoped that in some small way, they reflected a larger truth that was important for students of color attending Michigan to understand. He stated:

I want my people, our people, to know that we own some of this [the University]. This is our place to be and we need to recognize that...Don't think that you don't belong here, that you don't deserve to be here. You not only belong here but you deserve to be here just like anyone else...Fight for what's yours and don't stop fighting until you get it.

Here is his story.

■ ■ ■

Unlike those of us who know the stories of our births in fine detail, Web Murphy has little more than a few general facts to frame the tale of his arrival into the world. He knows, for example, that he was delivered in a California hospital where doctors pronounced him to be a healthy, robust infant. He also knows that two weeks later his biological mother signed away her parental rights, granting full custody and guardianship of her son to a small family that at the time consisted of an African American elementary teacher, her husband (a businessman), and their two-year old son.

The other salient details—such the identities or whereabouts of the man and woman who conceived him together—Web has learned to live without. All for one, that is: the true racial identity of his birth parents. “To this day, it’s unclear as to what’s in me really,” he quietly admitted at the outset of his first interview. “I wish I did, but I just don’t know. Racially, I’m black but ethnically I’m mixed. I know that. But I mean, phenotypically, I look like I could be a lot of things.”

The question of Web's racial identity and its uncertain roots would not cast its fullest shadow until his days as a college undergraduate when he would be confronted by classmates and peers who demanded an authoritative answer as to how he defined himself racially. In the meanwhile, Web endured other forms of invasive scrutiny, starting early in his childhood. Not long after his adoption, his family settled in an upscale, white suburban neighborhood where time and again, strangers began publicly registering their disapproval of the only black family in the neighborhood. "Every now and then, there'd be garbage on our front lawn" he recalled.

Like we'd get the whole neighborhood's garbage on our lawn come trash day. We'd get egged at the house too and my mom took it as evidence that people didn't want us living in the neighborhood. I guess it was someone's way of letting us know that they wanted to keep the homogeneity of the neighborhood intact.

Life in the suburbs gradually proved less than idyllic for other reasons. Foremost among them were the marital problems that surfaced between Web's mother and the man he now refers to dismissively as "her old husband." When it became clear that there was no chance for a fulfilling, lasting union, his adoptive father abandoned the family completely, leaving his wife to bear alone the raising of their two sons. "He left in 1981, when I was just a couple of years old," Web said. "And it's been the three of us ever since."

### **Moving Out and On**

A lesser woman, he readily acknowledged, would never have been able to withstand the pressure of having so much responsibility thrust upon her shoulders: Two children to raise, a mortgage to pay, a full-time job to hold down, not to mention a year's worth of credits yet to be earned for a masters degree. Still, Web could not recall a single moment when his mother wavered in her commitment to fully love and care for her two sons. To hear him tell it, she simply took hold of the

family reins and began steering them towards what she hoped would be a more stable, prosperous future together.

In her first official act as head of the household, Web's mother moved the boys from their suburban home to a small, rural community where they lived in a large farmhouse on three acres of land. The family, struggling on just a teacher's meager salary, could not afford to maintain their old suburban lifestyle. Nor did Web's mother wish to continue living with the neighborhood's garbage on her front lawn. From what he remembers, the move to the country was a welcomed change for everyone in the family. "We moved to a beautiful house," he said. "Kind of isolated too. The next house was like a 15, 20-minute walk from ours. But we loved it. We all had our space."

Two years later, his mother would move the family again, this time into a blue-collar, city neighborhood, where they remain to this day. "We moved mainly because of education," Web explained.

My mom was working on her master's degree at the time, teaching at a city elementary school full-time, and she wanted me and my brother to attend this private school that was in the city. The move put us like two minutes away from everything—her job, her classes, and our new school.

### **Big Questions from the Backseat**

The grade school Web's mother had selected for her sons was known as All Souls Parish, a Roman Catholic institution whose student ranks were primarily drawn from the working class neighborhood that surrounded its premises. Of the 600 or so young children who attended school at the Parish every day, Web said, only a handful was African American. "Out of about 600 students, there were about 20 African American students. You know, two to three to every class."

While the blue-collar roots of All Souls often deterred a close scrutiny of Web's personal economic circumstances, they did little to shield him from the prying eyes of his young classmates who were fascinated by his multiracial looks. In an

attempt to understand the attention he received, Web said, he began poring over his own physical appearance and its attributes. “I became preoccupied with the fact that I didn’t look like the other kids in my class,” he recalled.

In moments of great fixation, Web would launch pointed questions about the significance of skin color at his mother from the back seat of the family car, hoping to unearth the meaning behind his distinctive appearance. Why did the other kids care so much that he looked the way he did? Was there anything he could change about himself to look more like them? Who said it had to matter anyway?

These moments were usually followed by others where Web would express his desire to change his appearance. “One time, when we were in the car on our way to school, I kept telling my mother that I wanted to have blond hair like the other kids at school” he recalled.

I associated blond hair with straight hair back then which was totally different than the kinky, curly stuff I had on me. I didn’t know the distinction between the two but I kept insisting that I wanted blond hair. And mom was like ‘No Web, you mean you want *straight* hair.’ I can still visualize having that conversation with her, driving to West Boulevard right before we got to school, me saying that, you know? And my mom driving along, pointing out all the ways my hair was cool the way it was, how much better it was that it wasn’t blond or straight.

### **Finding Community at St. James**

Web’s preoccupation with fitting in among his white peers would subside some after he entered high school in 1993. St. James, as the institution was called, was an all-boys, Catholic high school whose student ranks were roughly the same size as All Souls Parish but more racially and economically diverse. “In terms of class and race,” he stated, “it was real mixed.”

I mean, it was still predominately white but there were a lot of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Blacks, and Filipinos. It had people coming from all over the place. A lot of my friends were from Tijuana, Mexico, from up north, from the more affluent communities around the city, and then just from the neighborhood.”



Almost instantaneously, Web said, he found the sense of belonging that seemed to elude him during his grade school days. “The place was tight from jump,” he recalled.

Right away, I felt a sense of community, a sense of brotherhood. It didn’t seem to matter where you were from or what you had. And everybody seemed to know everybody else, from seniors, freshmen, sophomores, juniors to teachers and faculty, including all the families.

The close, communal feel of St. James was no accident, of course, but the carefully crafted work of the institution’s central caretakers, a small corps of Augustinian priests who had committed themselves to crafting a unified community in the center of a highly multiracial, multicultural neighborhood. It was in the presence of these priests that Web first learned the value of committing one’s self to a greater common good. He described their keen influence further:

Within Catholicism, they’re what you call hard-core—vows of chastity, vows of prayer, vows of poverty—they just were extremely serious. And they built this place that was, you know, very communally minded, where you were expected to sacrifice your own needs for others. They showed us that it’s everything for everyone else and nothing for ourselves. So, like, if you had nothing [money] on you, you still didn’t have to worry about finding something to eat because there was always somebody who’d cover you, take care of you. And you never had to worry about what you wore to school. It wasn’t about impressing anybody. That’s another thing they taught us, this nonattachment to material things. That’s how they lived and taught us to live. And we all did okay. We didn’t have anybody griping about having less than somebody else. It was just understood that that was not the way to live.

Socially, Web thrived at St. James. He took part in all sorts of school-centered activities. “We were about having dances, class barbecues, class t-shirts, cultural celebrations, hip-hop and rap concerts, you name it.” He was also a serious athlete. Fall and winter were devoted to football and basketball; in the spring, he ran track. It was through these activities that Web developed a strong, close corps of

friends. “My friends, me, we were tight,” he recalled. “We were brothers working, taking care of our community, and representing it in any positive way we could.”

High school life was not without its shortcomings, however. In order to offset his costly tuition, Web took on a “worker’s scholarship” attending to any and all odd jobs that needed to be done on campus. “In the morning, it was picking up trash, soldering desks, cleaning bathrooms, those types of things,” he remembered. “After school, it was pretty much the same thing. Sometimes, I’d be the first one to school and the last one to leave.” When coupled with homework, student government duties, and his many athletic practices, Web’s days were often long and taxing.

Sometimes, his peers could exhibit a certain narrow-minded too, particularly when it came to the issue of homosexuality. “It wasn’t something we talked about openly,” Web said.

But after a few friends of mine came out during senior year, I started to see how homophobic we really were. It was in the way we talked—‘you fag, homo, you’re so gay’—and the way we joked with one another. We had a consciousness as far as racial identity went but no real consciousness of sexual orientation.

### **Status-Quo Politics**

For an institution with such strong moral and communal ethics, there was also remarkably little political activity among the young men of St. James. Students often bonded together to challenge the administration and its policies but they rarely attempted to create change beyond the confines of campus. “Political things for us was like, challenging the dress code, getting the Board of Trustees to better fund the music or arts programs we liked,” Web said. “It was localized, very status-quo supporting type stuff.”

Only once did Web try his hand at an organized, formalized kind of political activity. In his senior year, he attended an Anti-Defamation League conference, where students from across the city gathered to discuss the discrimination and

harassment they endured in their high schools and neighborhoods. Web was shocked by the testimony of conference participants. “I heard all kinds of crazy, bad stories,” he recalled.

Kids talking about other kids wanting to start Klu Klux Klan chapters in their schools and the negative, discriminatory attitudes that were harbored by their teachers, college counselors, even campus security. I couldn’t understand how anybody could learn in a place like that.

The conference never translated into greater political involvement on Web’s part during high school but it did solidify the respect and admiration he held for St. James, sentiments that he would continue to possess long after he had graduated. “It’s always a place that I know I can go back to,” he said assuredly.

The connection that I have with that place is a deep one. I still look back on those days and reminisce about it all the time. In retrospect, it was amazing really to see us as men taking care of each other academically, socially, culturally.

### **The Reluctant College Applicant**

Eventually, Web’s affinity for the Augustinian institution would prove to be something of double-edged sword. He had come to love St. James and its people so deeply that he could not imagine putting any kind of distance between them all, even if it meant sacrificing his educational future. As Web remembers it, the notion of going away to college had never fully resonated with him anyway. “I knew that I wasn’t the type who could afford a lot of places [colleges and universities] out there,” he stated. “And I wasn’t into the whole ‘I-have-to-go-to-college’ thing either.” He hoped with some luck (and a good dose of charm) to persuade his mother into allowing him to enroll in the local community college, as his older brother had two years before.

Yet despite the many creative arguments he proffered, his mother refused to change her mind. She had her reasons: As a college graduate, master’s degree

recipient, and public school teacher herself, Web's mother was a true believer in the transformative power of education. She also believed wholeheartedly that her son possessed the requisite makings of a successful college student. "My mom wasn't about to let me settle for less," Web remembered. "If anything, after that, she just became more committed to getting me to college."

The school's college counselor at-large, a priest named Father Waller, also believed Web belonged in college. He began to hound Web relentlessly about completing college applications and readying himself for school in the fall. "He was all over the place, that guy," he stated. "In every classroom of mine, you know, interrupting teachers and announcing deadlines for the different schools out there. He was just very mindful of what it meant to graduate and go further on in school."

Together, the two made a potent tag team, the likes of which Web would never outrun. He tried time and again to subvert the college application process first by refusing to complete his applications and later, by acting oblivious about their due dates. But his plans never worked. "They were relentless," Web recalled. "Fr. Waller would make sure that I had the applications and the deadlines lined up and my mom would make sure that I filled them out. If I didn't, she finished them and took them to the post office herself."

The pair's tenacity eventually paid off. By Christmastime, Web's applications were under review at several institutions including Santa Anna University, Tulane University, Morehouse College, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After considering an offer of admissions from Morehouse College, Web decided to enroll at the University of Michigan.

In the end, his decision to attend Michigan would be based on personal rather than academic considerations. Web's mother had completed her undergraduate degree at nearby Wayne State University and there was still plenty of family left in Detroit, including his grandmother who he visited every summer. Also factoring into Web's decision-making was Michigan's commitment to diversity and community, life-affirming ideals he learned to embrace during his time at St. James. "I kept looking

over the Michigan brochures and the words ‘community’ and ‘diversity’ were everywhere on it,” he said. “I’m seeing it there, I’m hearing the words at orientation, and I was like, ‘Well all right. They sound like they know what these words mean. This seems like the place for me.’”

### **The Transition to University Life**

Like the other 5,534 new undergraduates who were settling themselves into the University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor campus in the year 1997, Web possessed only a partial understanding of the transition from high school to college and what it might entail (“U-M enrollment at record levels,” 1997). His imagination made up the rest, naively rendering the process in his mind as a rather clean and uncomplicated one. Yes, being one of 36,999 other students required some getting used to but he was sure that he and his roommates would become tight, fast friends. Classes at a top-tier school like Michigan were also going to be a challenge but somehow Web would master them all. And just as the admissions brochures promised, he would find a community to call his own despite the fact that the campus was acres big. It might take some time, Web told himself, but eventually everything was going to fall into place.

Reality would serve up an altogether different experience, however. In fact, none of what Web imagined taking place during his first year of college would come to pass until he was a sophomore, after he had weathered a string of significant disappointments. The close friendships he thought he would have with his roommates, for example, never materialized. As Web remembered it, the differences between them were far too numerous to overcome:

I had two roommates. I had requested a triple because it was the cheapest way to live. I was from California and my roommates were from Long Island. I grew up without money and they didn’t. They were interested in rushing a fraternity and I had no idea what that really meant. We had conflicts over music, over what they thought was a mess and what I thought was a mess [in terms of the room]. I did my

own laundry and they paid someone to do theirs. My roommates also didn't understand why I chose to sit with the 20 other black folks in the residence hall at dinner and not them.

Web's desire to become part of a close-knit community did not instantaneously manifest itself as he expected either. Part of the problem he believed, was his peers' inability to think beyond their own needs. Unlike the selfless classmates he encountered at St. James, Web's fellow students seemed to live by an ethic of "rugged individualism" where their individual wants and needs outweighed their commitments to the larger collective. "Everyone around me was so preoccupied with their own agendas," he said.

It kind of strung me out at first. I made sure to be around when others needed me. But when I needed some help it was like 'I've got an exam to study for.' I started to realize that this was the spot where rugged individuals thrive and it's what mattered most at the end of the day.

The genuine sense of belonging he hoped to experience in his first year of college was also thwarted by what struck Web as an unnatural preoccupation with race. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to know who his "people" were and how he identified himself, racially. For someone who had spent the last four years of his life in a community where cross-racial interaction was the norm and not the exception, keying in on the color of a person's skin was not something to which he was accustomed. "Coming from a Mexican, Black, Filipino community, there wasn't any distinction for me between people," Web said. "I mean, like, I didn't see colors, you know, I didn't see a distinction within people of color. It wasn't that I was blind to it. It was just that I didn't see a division between people like that."

With maddening regularity, he found himself in the position of having to explain his social interactions with people who routinely mistook his appearance for one race or another.

People would come up to me, approach me, and start speaking Arabic, you know? Or ask what Native American tribe I was from. And then there was the dynamic with black people who wanted to know why I was hanging out with Asian people. I kept thinking ‘Why are all these assumptions being made?’...There was just a lot of confusion for me in terms of understanding what my community was on campus and where I fit in.

None of these obstacles were formidable enough to stop Web from trying to integrate himself within the University community. He was disenchanted with what he had found at Michigan initially but he was not, by any means, defeated. To quell his disappointment, Web simply tried harder to fit in. He attended home football games, took part in campus parties and social activities, explored the city of Ann Arbor with other residents from his hall, and in general, extended himself in fellowship whenever and wherever he could.

In a way, Web believed he had no choice but to engage in such efforts. Too much else was on the line, especially his mother’s hard-earned money. Although she never spoke of it as a sacrifice, Web knew that the family’s finances were being thoroughly stretched to accommodate the cost of Michigan’s tuition and fees. So he matched her unselfish sacrifice with the only collateral he possessed at the time: a pledge that he would not abandon his academic responsibilities no matter what else might be waiting for him out there in the wider world. “I had to promise her that I would be all about the books and classes. Nothing else,” he explained.

It was in keeping his promise that Web experienced one of the few bright moments in an otherwise dark transition. He registered for Religion 301, a course on religion and the African American experience. “It turned out to be an important course for me,” Web said.

I learned about liberation theology and its relationship to identity development and political rebellion. We read DuBois’ ‘Insurrection in the South,’ and I got totally turned on to the idea of ‘I’m going to live free or die.’ After that, I just knew right away that there was nothing else I wanted to study.

Before the year was out, he would formally declare religion as his major. The classroom, oddly enough, had become one of the few places Web felt certain of himself.

## **Progress**

Unlike his first year of college, Web's sophomore year would unfold in dramatically different terms. Whereas the previous year had been marked by isolation and the inability to connect with other students around him, the 1998-1999 school year offered Web numerous opportunities to branch out socially and become part of Michigan's small but solid student of color community. He would also have the chance to explore his political convictions as a supporter of the anti-sweatshop movement that was growing on campus, marking a significant departure from his typical apolitical behavior. In terms of his coursework, Web would broaden his scope too, steeping himself in sociology courses, many of which were related to the subjects of race, inequality, and structural oppression.

The portal to all of these new opportunities and experiences in his life was none other than a multicultural performing arts group known on campus as Encompass. Although Web did not realize it at the time, his association with the organization would be pivotal in fostering his identity as a person of color and promoting a deeper respect for the notions of diversity, community, and social justice.

His involvement with Encompass was largely performance-based, at first. Web was a dancer, taking part in a special number that had been choreographed by several Arab American students and based on their culture. Dancing soon evolved into what he called a broader "process of cultural interaction," where he began learning about and interacting with students from other racial backgrounds and organizational affiliations on a more frequent, intense basis. "People started coming up to me, approaching me, inviting me to check out the things they were up to," Web recalled. "Socially, my life just became really, really busy."



## **A Burgeoning Consciousness**

As he expanded his social circle, Web discovered a whole, other side to University life that had somehow stood out of view in his first year, one comprised of Latino, African American, Native American, and Asian Pacific American students who were engaged in a wide variety of social, cultural, and educational efforts across campus. “I saw all these cats doing cool things in their communities, for their communities,” he recalled.

Throwing celebrations, bringing speakers to campus that spoke about their issues, working to educate other students at Michigan about their traditions and cultures. It was empowering to see that, to see people embracing their identities and putting them out there like that.

Over time, Web developed close bonds with a small group of African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian Pacific American classmates, all of whom struck him as warm, creative, and best of all, community-minded. These relationships not only provided a much-needed sense of support but also led to several important realizations. The first was directly related to the notion of identity and its expansive qualities. “When we [his friends] were together, hanging out, we didn’t talk about our differences as much as we talked about what we had in common, good and bad,” Web remembered.

And it struck me...I’d been so fixated on finding ‘my place’ here, finding ‘my community’ that I had limited myself into thinking that there was only one spot, only one way that I could belong when actually, there was this much bigger community out there that existed across color lines and I was already connected to it.

Web’s friendships also opened his eyes to the idea of a shared political struggle. The more time he spent with people like Luna, Avni, Jamal, and Roberto, the more he recognized that the difficulties he faced in his first year of college were not unique to him alone but part and parcel of being a student of color on a predominately white campus. “We were all in the same boat really,” he said.

It was just a matter of degree, you know? I struggled with people asking me to identify myself with one racial group all the time while Jamal and Roberto struggled with white people's preconceived notions about Blacks and Latinos. Either way, it wasn't good...everybody making all these racial presumptions all the time.

The most significant realization Web would come to in the company of his friends was the importance of being actively engaged in campus change efforts. The first to introduce him to the importance of being engaged in change efforts were his African American and Asian Pacific American floor mates, Coral and Avni, two young women who strongly believed that the University ought to provide greater institutional support for courses and faculty that focused on the history and experiences of people of color. Often times, Web sat on the floor of their room, quietly taking in their ideas, while the women debated the direction and strategy of the student coalition they intended to build. It was inspiring just to be in their company, he recalled.

Really, I was on the periphery of the work that was going on around the Ethnic and Black Studies Initiative...But even so, I learned a ton. Sitting there, listening to their conversations, and then watching them do their thing on campus...it made me want to jump right in, you know? I wanted to talk like they talked, know what they knew. They made me think, you know, think about how much power there was in connecting across race, and the change that could come out of it all.

When coupled with what he was learning in his sociology courses about structural repression and institutional racism, Web's consciousness of politics, race, and inequality slowly blossomed. He began to actively question the order of the world around him. "I never use to think about inequality," Web explained.

Maybe because I didn't have the vocabulary for it. I don't know. I just know that at some point I started to ask questions. I needed to make sense of things, I guess. Like, why when I'd go visit my rich high school friends did their neighborhood look so much better than mine. I mean, why the difference between the two? Or why like in Detroit,

the city landscape changes once you pass Eight Mile Road, you know, into the more affluent communities...

### **Web's First Protest**

The burgeoning of Web's political consciousness was soon accompanied by a growing desire to try his own hand at making social change. The first opportunity to present itself arrived at the outset of winter, just a few weeks into the new term. Two of his other friends, Luna and Connie, asked him to take part in a sit-in that was being launched by Students Organized for Labor Equality (SOLE), a campus group that was working to push the University into severing ties with clothing corporations which supported sweatshops and exploited the working poor.

Despite an incomplete understanding of the issues at stake, Web leapt at the chance to participate in a real protest. "I didn't have the tightest grasp of the issues," he admitted. "I understood what corporations do in Third World countries in their search for cheap labor but I didn't totally get all the talk of university policies or national labor codes. I participated anyway. I had friends I wanted to support."

The experience would leave him feeling flat and somewhat disillusioned, he later remembered. After three days of occupying the President's office, SOLE members called the sit-in to an end with only a general promise from the President to consider further a living wage agreement that ensured the safety and ethical treatment of clothing laborers. "It was an interesting sit-in," Web said. "Mainly because nothing substantial came out of it, at least not right away."

More disappointing to him was the way in which the organization conducted its change-making efforts. Although he attended SOLE meetings on an intermittent basis, Web presumed the invitation to take part in the sit-in was a genuine attempt to garner different perspectives and input from students of color. Instead, he, Luna, and Connie had been relegated to the sidelines, where their views were rarely solicited. "It [the organization] turned out to be tokenistically multiethnic to me," Web said.

The leadership of the group was predominately white and they couldn't speak to issues of race and identity in any meaningful way. They were speaking from privilege and it came through, you know, in the patronizing way they conducted themselves and the way they treated us. We didn't have much responsibility and nobody ever asked us for our thoughts on how things should go.

### **Michigamua 101**

Despite its lackluster conclusion, Web's participation in the SOLE sit-in hardly dampened his newfound activist spirit. The idea of taking part in a collective struggle to end an injustice still appealed him; the problem was he had no compelling political cause to which he might attach himself or that he felt called to support. Of course, it was not like he was completely free to pursue his political interests. In addition to the demands of coursework, his work with Encompass as its new chairperson, and trying to land a job to help with next term's tuition, Web was quietly nursing a love hangover.

His girlfriend of the past year had called off their relationship, citing irreconcilable differences as her main rationale. Web knew better: Her immigrant parents did not want her to date anyone outside their Indian culture, especially someone they thought belonged to an inferior class of people. For the first time in his life, he said, Web truly understood the deep, personal pain of being unjustly isolated on the basis of his presumed racial identity. "It was one thing, you know, for them to say that 'I want my daughter to date within our racial group,'" he recalled.

I understood that. But it was another thing to hear: 'Plus, you know, you come from dirty people.' That took it to a whole new level. It was totally isolating and it hurt to be isolated as a black person like that.

As the school year wound to a close, Web's preoccupation with his love troubles would be replaced by a crisis of a different sort. That crisis would begin with tale of Michigamua, the very student organization he and his friends would fight to permanently dismantle over the course of the next academic year. In anticipation

of their public initiation rites (which the organization staged publicly every spring on various parts of campus), several of his Native American friends educated Web about the history of the secret honor society and its long-standing association with the University.

The tale painted Michigamua as a one hundred year-old, shadowy, secret honor society that had increasingly exhibited an unhealthy preoccupation with Native American culture, or more accurately, the hackneyed mythology of the noble Indian savage which portrayed Native Americans as brave but also war-like and primitive (see Berkhofer, 1978). Until such behaviors were outlawed by the state of Michigan in the late 1980s, for example, Michigamua's annual initiation rites included the crude public spectacle of young, white men regaled in faux headdresses, war paint and feathers reenacting the taking of Indian land.<sup>119</sup>

Also highlighted in the story were the varied efforts of the campus' Native American community and their attempts to prevent Michigamua from continuing with its demeaning portrayals of indigenous life. In the early 1970s, several Native students filed lawsuits against the secret honor society alleging cultural ridicule, racial discrimination, and discrimination on the basis of gender.<sup>27</sup> Defended by the University's General Counsel, Michigamua never endured any formal penalties or sanctions, continuing in subsequent years to openly portray itself as an exclusive, all-male tribe. Fifteen years of protracted debates, public skirmishes, and heated disagreements ensued between the two parties before Michigamua would finally relent and promise to drop all references to Native American culture.<sup>28</sup> The secret

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<sup>26</sup> See LeBeau (2001) for a detailed description of the activities and rites that marked "Roping Day," Michigamua's annual initiation of new members (p. 113).

<sup>27</sup> See LeBeau (2001) and the Michigan Daily's September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1988 Weekend Magazine article "The Tribe of Michigamua" authored by student reporter Donna Iadipaolo for a chronicle of the lawsuits filed against the secret honor society and the University of Michigan by Native American and women students.

<sup>28</sup> In reality, Michigamua had no other choice but to make such a promise. In 1988, the Michigan Department of Civil Rights issued a report calling for the eradication of all Native American nicknames, logos, and mascots within secondary and postsecondary schools across the state. The report proffered a serious warning: "Continued use of blatantly derogatory

honor society did not, however, concede its Indian-sounding name or its possession of the Tower atop the Michigan Union.

Web's initial reaction to the tale of Michigamua was one of complete surprise. "It was unbelievable to me, that there'd be this kind of group on campus, and that the University would be supporting it," he said. Not too soon after hearing about Michigamua, the tale appeared to come alive before his very eyes. One warm, spring night, while sitting with friends on the steps of the Michigan Union, Web witnessed one of Michigamua's main Roping Day rites. "It was crazy," he remembered.

People were on the Union steps, eyes closed, standing in a circle, chanting weird things about being part of a pack and stuff, doing this call and response thing. They were basically being sworn in right there on the steps of the Union.

The friends he was sitting with began hurling insults at the initiates assembled on the stairs. "Jane and Luna started yelling 'Sell out!' and 'Racist!' Web recalled. "Man, were they pissed! That's when I realized how strongly people were offended by Michigamua."

As it happened, Web also noticed a member of Encompass standing among the group of new inductees. While he was not as fully acquainted with the workings of the secret honor society as he would be in the coming year, Web knew well enough that a person could not take part in a group that celebrated diverse cultures and a group that appropriated culture at the same time. After several conversations with members of Encompass' executive board, Web found himself delivering an ultimatum to the young man who had been inducted into Michigamua. He recalled:

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names and symbols may violate Section 402 of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act" (Michigan Civil Rights Commission Report, p. 28, 1988). Twisting under the real threat of a lawsuit it was clear they would not win, Michigamua promised members of the campus' Native American community that it would drop all references to their indigenous culture and heritage (LeBeau, 2001).

Everyone in Encompass was like ‘Yeah well, now you have to talk to him about that because he can’t be in both organizations.’ So I had to ask him to make a decision. I said ‘You can’t do both.’ He would take away from the positive vibe we were into creating. It wasn’t an easy thing to do. I was hyped about having him in the group. He was a beautiful orator but...He was upset with me, he was really upset with me for forcing him to make a choice, but he chose to stay with Michigamua. To this day, I still don’t understand that.

### **Another Rough Start**

Despite the gains that had been made during the previous year, the opening of the 1999-2000 fall term—Web’s junior year—would find him struggling once more with some less than auspicious circumstances. After pounding the pavement for weeks on end during the last semester, Web landed a job at a local pizzeria, working the 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. shift as a delivery boy and cook. When coupled with the heavy course load his advisor had scheduled for him, Web estimated that he went without adequate sleep every Sunday afternoon through Tuesday morning just to complete readings assignments and statistics homework that were due at the start of every week.

These obligations, in addition to some unexpected peer conflicts, eventually led him to end his association with Encompass as well. “Physically, I was drained already and the school year hadn’t even really begun,” Web remembered.

Even emotionally, things were tough. I was having trouble with certain officers in Encompass who felt I overstepped my bounds when the whole Michigamua thing came up. I got depressed and started feeling distant from everything else going on campus. Plus, I still had all these questions I wanted answers to, about my racial identity, about the whole mixed adoption thing, about my political awareness, just everything.

### **The Formation of a Student Coalition**

As a way of dealing with all that was going on in his young life, Web turned inward and began writing poetry. “It became my point of departure into self-

exploration,” he explained. While he maintained intermittent contact with friends, his kept mostly to himself and spent the bulk of the fall term working, attending classes, and writing what he referred to as “really young poetry where all of the syllables rhymed.”

Had he been paying closer attention to University life, Web would have found his friends engaged in the building of a broad-based, pan-ethnic student coalition among students of color on campus. All across campus, they staged town hall meetings and forums to discuss the most pressing issues facing their respective communities. From these conversations eventually emerged the Student of Color Coalition or the SCC as they referred to themselves, a political alliance among African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian Pacific American students who wanted to improve the quality of life for students of color at Michigan.

The idea for the coalition had bubbled forth from a growing awareness of the tenuous presence students of color maintained at the University. The effects of an anti-affirmative action lawsuit filed against Michigan in 1997 were beginning to make themselves known in a way that Web’s friends could not ignore: They now constituted just 11 percent of the total student population, roughly 4,300 of the 37,846 who had enrolled for the 1999-2000 school year. In the span of four years, their representation had declined from 15 percent in 1995 to 11.3 percent in 1999 (“Minority enrollment decrease,” *Michigan Daily*, 1999).

When coupled with the platform of other long-standing issues the Coalition had compiled—including insufficient staff and financial support for multicultural student services and the inadequate representation of people of color among Michigan’s faculty, administrative, and staff ranks—these disappointing enrollment figures represented compelling evidence of the University’s failure to comply with its mission of fostering a racially diverse student body. Web’s friends decided that the time was ripe to force a conversation with campus administrators.

In anticipation of a meeting between the two parties, the SCC spent the months of November and December creating a 14-article list of demands that



outlined a series of specific changes they wanted implemented. Including the University's support of Michigamua, the list covered a broad range of institutional terrain: student affairs, housing, the curriculum, financial aid, administrative recruitment and retention initiatives, and public safety.

It was not until the second week of January, however, that Web even became aware of the political organizing in which his friends had been engaged. By chance, he had run into Coral, one of his old floor mates, while preparing to leave campus for Christmas break. She invited him to attend the meeting that would ultimately determine how and when the SCC would make itself known. "It was a simple invitation. You know, 'Yo, come to this meeting at Trotter House we're having as soon as we get back,'" Web remembered.

Web could not provide many details about the meeting itself; he only remembered how he felt, sitting in the room listening to his peers speak passionately about their intent to change the University. "I was impressed and outraged at the same time," he recalled.

I knew from our talks before that we were all struggling at Michigan in some way. But I didn't know the half of it really. I didn't know we were in such dire straights as a whole community. From ethnic studies, to the condition of the comprehensive studies program to the minority peer advising program that Housing wanted to nix to MESA [the Multiethnic Student Affairs office] that was in complete turmoil, I just had no idea. I felt this anger, resentment start to rise up inside of me. What's going on here? What's up with this place? At the same time, I felt proud, honored to be sitting there with Coral and Grace and everyone else. They knew their stuff. And they were serious. I remember thinking 'If anybody can fix this, it's them.'

Through their words and stories, Web's friends had somehow managed to crystallize his understanding of the many issues facing students of color at Michigan. They had also ignited his resolve, cementing in his mind the notion that he had no other choice but to join them—Luke, Connie, Jesse, Roberto, Jamal, Grace, and

Coral—in challenging the University. “All I could think about afterwards was ‘O.K., now we’ve got to do something about it. We have got do something serious about it.’”

### **A Petition Drive**

The first course of action Web and his friends agreed upon was the staging of a petition drive so that other students of color (as well as their white student counterparts) could endorse the goals and demands the SCC had put together. They hoped that the drive to collect signatures would also signal a strong showing of pan-ethnic unity to the wider University community. “We camped out in the Union, in the Multicultural Student office, everywhere, trying to get people to sign onto the petition,” Web said. “We wanted to show our commitment to each other, that we came together because as isolated communities, the university knew how to deal with us. But as a pan-ethnic front...who knew if they could deal with that?”

To show the seriousness of their intentions, Web and the other members of the SCC also decided to disrupt the main campus convocation held annually in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. He explained:

We decided to use that space, the day that everybody’s in Hill auditorium, faculty, staff, students, the President, as a means of presenting what we had to say, our feelings, putting the University’s commitment up against King’s commitment and showing the discrepancies between what he talked about and putting them up against what the University was doing.

After then-President Lee C. Bollinger gave his opening remarks, Web, Connie, Luke, Jesse, Roberto, Jamal, Avni, and Grace took to the stage, interrupting the convocation proceedings. Coral read a short statement introducing the SCC, their activities, and presented a short, stirring speech about the hollowness of Michigan’s commitment to its students of color (“Protestors disrupt King Day event,” 2000).

As intended, the disruption itself lasted only a few minutes. In Web’s memory, however, it would live on as the single moment when Web’s commitment

to the SCC would be permanently forged. “I know it sounds strange. It really wasn’t much of anything, I mean, in terms of a physical protest,” he recalled.

But for me it was huge. For the first time in my life, I stood up in front of thousands of people for what I believed in. I’d never done anything like that before. I was in all the way. Whatever was going to happen with the Coalition, I was going to be right there in the middle of it. I was committed.

### **Taking Over the Tower**

The next step in the Coalition’s plan was to deliver the petition and signatures they had been steadily gathering through the month of January to various campus administrators such as the President, the Vice President for Student Affairs, and the Provost. Attached to the petition, Web said, was a brief warning. “It basically read like “Yo, if we don’t hear from you in such and such time, something is going to go down.”

That “something” would occur much sooner than anyone, including the members of the Coalition, ever imagined. In the course of trying to hand-deliver the petition, Web, Avni, Jamal, Roberto, Luke, and Connie were nearly arrested by campus police on charges of attempting to illegally occupy the President’s office. A secretary had mistaken the group for a band of protestors intending to take over the office and summoned the police. Although the incident was quickly resolved, it fueled a weekend of intense emotional reflection for Web and his friends, each of whom had left the President’s office feeling deeply humiliated and shamed.

By Sunday morning, the group unanimously decided that there would be no waiting for a formal dialogue with campus administrators about the issues facing their communities. Instead, they would launch a sit-in from the private meeting quarters of Michigamua, a space that no one but its privileged members was allowed to enter. The sit-in was meant, Web said, as both a retaliatory measure and a means of highlighting how contradictory and inconsistent the University was in its commitment to students of color.

What went down in Bollinger's office was so degrading...we got treated like second-class citizens, you know? It was hard to wrap your head around it. I mean, it's the new millennium and I can't be seen with a group of my friends without someone thinking that we are up to no good? What? That was wack. Way wack. And the more we thought about what had happened, the angrier we all got. The more we wanted to fight back. What better way to bust the University in public than show the rest of campus what they supported in Michigamua. I mean, you can't say you're for diversity and you respect other cultures and then support a group that discriminates against Native people at the same time. You just can't.

The Tower Takeover, as it came to be known, would begin in the quietest and most docile of ways: the simple turn of a key in the lock of the only door that led to Michigamua's meeting space. To this day, no one—except for Coalition members themselves—knows exactly how Web and his friends came to possess the key to the Union Tower. All that Web would reveal was that they entered the space some time in the early morning hours of Monday, February 7, 2000. A member of Michigamua discovered them poring over the contents of the meeting room several hours later. By mid-afternoon, the word was out on campus: The Student of Color Coalition had taken over the Tower.

### **37 Days**

From what Web remembers, the group's first minute in the Tower was accompanied by a palpable surge of adrenaline that seemed to run from one person right into the other. Did they feel suddenly heroic having crossed the forbidden threshold? Or valiant, perhaps? Quite the opposite, Web admitted. "We were freakin' out to be honest," he stated.

I mean, it isn't like we were used to trespassing, much less into a space that we had absolutely no business in. Not only that but no one had any idea of what we'd find up there. Or if anyone would find us first. We took a big gamble but we weren't sure if we were even right to do it.

It was only after a member of the group had turned on the Den's lights that Web and the others would realize the righteousness of their decision. The room was decorated from floor to ceiling with Native American artifacts, symbols, and artwork, articles that were not only racially offensive but directly in violation of the hard-won 1989 agreement between the University's Native American student community and the members of Michigamua. According to that agreement, Michigamua was to drop all references to indigenous culture and tradition in exchange for the right to retain its Indian-sounding name as well as the right to maintain its meeting place in the Tower.

The condition of the meeting room the day Web and his friends entered it revealed that Michigamua had more than failed to keep its word. "It looked they hadn't even tried to keep their end of the bargain," he said.

There were arrow heads lying all over the place, fake peace pipes, rubber tomahawks, feathers everywhere, these racist illustrations of Indians hanging all over the walls...a ceiling mural with Native symbols all over it, just all sorts of shit that wasn't supposed to be there.

In that moment, everything seemed to change. "We weren't going to go anywhere," Web recalled. "With the room the way it was, how could we? That's when it was decided that kicking Michigamua out of the Tower was going to be our number one priority." Still, no one anticipated that the Coalition would spend the next 36 days trying to convince Michigan officials that the secret honor society deserved to be ousted from the Tower.

So how exactly did the Takeover become a thirty-seven day affair? In part, it was a matter of perspective. Like generations of students of color before them, the Coalition defined the secret honor society's existence in the Tower as a pressing moral and racial issue, borne of excessive privilege, indifference to the plight of Native Americans, cultural ignorance, and institutional hypocrisy. Ending Michigamua's reign atop the Union was their way of putting to rest what they called the "offensive and culturally destructive appropriation of Native American culture"

(“Coalition reps occupy Union tower,” February 15, 2000). “They couldn’t play racist Indian games behind closed doors if there were no doors for them to hide behind” Web explained.

Michigamua, on the other hand, saw the Takeover as an unwarranted act of trespass, committed by confused individuals who misunderstood the organization and its activities. Throughout the course of the protest, their lead spokesman, senior Nicholas Delgado, would argue that the Coalition and allies had mistakenly assumed that its current generation of members operated by the rules and traditions of its older patriarchal counterparts, young men who had lived in different times and by vastly different social rules. “There’s a historical context that’s being misused here,” Delgado would often be quoted as saying (see “Students of Color Coalition seize Michigamua office,” February 7, 2000). “Theirs [the Coalition] is in the past, ours is in the present.”

In typical administrative form, University officials opted for the safe and neutral middle ground, choosing time and again to address the issue in the race-free contexts of campus space allocation policies and free speech. Ten days into the Takeover, President Bollinger would issue his first public statement in relation to the protest, what eventually became the administration’s party line on the subject of the Tower. He wrote:

Any conversation must have its starting points. For a University, a fundamental principle is that, with rare exceptions, faculty and staff must not be treated differently because of their beliefs or the expressions of those beliefs. That principle has direct application to this controversy. Some have argued that one of the societies using the Union tower space, Michigamua should be stripped of its University affiliation and lose its exclusive use of that space because it has a history of practices that demean and degrade Native American culture and spirituality. Under our principles it is clear that student organizations must not be recognized or de-recognized, or suffer any other penalty, because the ideas they espouse or beliefs they adhere to are offensive, or even dangerous, to our community (“Statement by Lee C. Bollinger,” 2000).

Clearly, all three parties defined the crux of the situation differently from one another. As a consequence, no one was on the same page, making it nearly impossible to establish a basis for genuine dialogue or negotiations much less compromise. Nowhere was this more evident than in the chain of proposal-swapping that occurred between Michigamua, the Coalition, and University officials from the middle of February through the first weeks of March (see “Michigamua proposes steps toward solution,” 2000). The major sticking points were always the same: Michigamua had no intentions of willfully surrendering its coveted space atop the Union while the SCC had no intentions of vacating the premises until the secret honor society would relinquish its Indian-sounding name and cut ties with the University forevermore. “Administrators kept telling us to dialogue, to talk,” Web said. “But we’d been through that before, plenty of times and look where it got us.”

Of course, there were other factors at work beside the divergence in perspectives. No one, including University administrators, was clear on the legitimacy of a leasing agreement that had been forged nearly 100 years before (see “U’ puts responsibility on MSA,” 2000). Additionally, neither the President nor his administrative cabinet seemed to possess the appropriate social capital to convince the warring parties that a truce was in order (see “Storming the tower: It takes action to be heard,” 2000).

Fresh out of ideas as to how to move the sluggish process forward, the President urged both organizations to retain formal legal counsel hoping, no doubt, that professionals schooled in the art of negotiations might be able to establish some much-needed common ground between the two parties (“Legal counsel continue meetings,” 2000). It was the only piece of advice from the President that they followed to the letter but with few measurable results. “None of us were too keen on hiring a lawyer,” Web admitted. “We only did it because Michigamua did. But for us, it was community issue and we felt that the community should have a say in how everything was resolved. Not the lawyers.”

In the interim, the rest of the world weighed in on the controversy using a variety of means to show their support for the Takeover or their dissent from it. The editorial pages of the Michigan Daily, for example, were filled with opinion pieces, both for and against the Takeover (see “Michigamua is inherently racist” 2000; “Close-minded people run the SCC,” 2000). Other students adopted less cerebral means engaging in protests of varying sorts: book-checking, where nearly 3,000 titles would be borrowed in less than three hours (“Protestors check out 3,000 books,” 2000); running counter-protests from the stairs of the Michigan Union (“Meeting, protest address takeover,” 2000); and interrupting public lectures and gatherings (“Members storm lecture on free speech,” 2000; “Protestors crowd Bollinger’s lawn,” 2000).

Despite the differences of opinion and viewpoint, it was clear that the Coalition had put some compelling, relevant questions on the table: Could an institution created to serve the public good grant private access to an organization known for its cultural insensitivity? Should it? And what did it mean to have an elitist organization live atop the one public space that was supposed to be open to every student in the University?

As campus administrators, students, Michigamua, the SCC, and the rest of the Michigan community debated the answers to these questions (not to mention all of the events, tactics, and perspectives surrounding them), minutes turned into days, days turned into weeks, and weeks turned finally into a month-long, protracted protest.

### **The Tough Life of an Activist**

To hear Web tell it, the 37 days he spent in the Tower were some of the most trying days of his young life. There were all kinds of challenges to be faced as an activist, few of which he fully considered before crossing the threshold of Michigamua’s meeting quarters. “I didn’t know what we were getting into,” he admitted.



I mean, I can't talk for anyone else in the group, but I would be shocked if anyone else said that they really knew what we were taking on when we went up into the Tower. The possibility of spending 37 straight days in that room never entered our minds.

In the early stages of the Takeover, the challenges Web and his friends in the Coalition faced were largely physical. Michigamua's meeting quarters were small and cramped, without any of the amenities upon which a typical undergraduate would regularly rely. There were no televisions, no stereos, no video games, no telephones, no microwaves, and perhaps most distressful of all, no running water for showers or toilets. The room was not well heated either, Web said, making the notion of a sound nap or a good night's rest nearly impossible. "Those first couple of days we were sure that they had turned off the heat to the room, it was so cold," he recalled.

Things only got worse as time went on. It seemed like we were always hungry, cold, tired, wanting a shower. Plus there was all this fake Indian shit lying around all over the place. It wasn't good for the spirit, you know? There was just no way to feel comfortable in that space at all.

Eventually, these tough living conditions gave way to challenges of a more emotional nature. Their ambiguously timed circumstances (no one knew with any certainty when they would leave the Tower or under what conditions) and the fear of reprisal produced a keen sense of anxiety among certain SCC members. Roughly ten days into the protest, several of them began to openly fret about the consequences of their actions. What would happen to their grades? Would they be arrested after all? What were their parents going to think? "Not knowing what was going to happen next was tough on all of us," Web remembered. "Some of us were just more honest about showing it. Me, I worried all the time in my head. What is my mom going to think? What about my classes? How is this all going to end up?"

Feelings of paranoia and mistrust began to emerge, triggered in large part by the isolation the group often experienced as they waited for University administrators to respond to their demands and proposals. SCC members had agreed earlier that the

Tower could never be left unattended; classes and jobs were to be no exceptions. The fear was that Michigamua members would try to take back their meeting quarters and if successful, the Coalition's only bargaining chip would be lost.

Sequestering themselves in the Tower, however, left the Coalition vulnerable in that they could be left behind in it at any moment, cut off from the rest of the campus and the outside world. According to Web, this happened more often than they appreciated. "There were days when we didn't hear from anyone in the administration," he said.

Like the first time they came to visit all we got was this we'll-be-in-touch sort of thing. Almost a week and a half went by before we heard from them again. It was like being stuck in limbo. What's going on? Who's talking to who?

Frustration, anger, and resentment soon became part of the emotional repertoire one drew from as the Takeover limped along over the course of the next several weeks. For Web, these emotions had numerous sources: the pride and haughtiness Michigamua members exhibited; the unwillingness of administrators to embrace the larger moral imperative behind the protest; the inability of the SCC to move other parts of its agenda forward because of the fight over the meeting space; and perhaps most difficult of all for him, the decision by some of his peers to end their participation in the protest before it was even over.

Unable to reach a consensus about when to leave the Tower, the group decided that it would be left for every individual to determine on their own when they could no longer take living in the meeting quarters. In theory, Web said, that seemed like the fairest and most respectful option to extend to one another. In practice, it was another story altogether. He recalled:

About a week and a half into it all, people started leaving. Avni [a Coalition member] was the first to go. I wasn't mad at her for it. I was surprised but I'm sure she had her reasons. We've never talked about it but I know that she had her reasons...But when she left, this crazy dynamic in the group seemed to take over. We started eyeing each

other, wondering who the next one of us would be to leave. And there were some of us in the group who didn't expect to leave at all. They were going to go down with the ship, you know? And that started this talk. Are you really down? Or are you not? Was Avni really with us? Or was she just playing us?

He explained further:

That was one of the insidious things about Michigamua. The way they tore us as a community of color apart. There were actually people in our communities who accepted Michigamua's invitation to be part of the "Tribe." For the rest of us, it was like stepping across that line in the sand. I know who aren't in relation to me anymore. It doesn't matter that we were friends before, that we might have been tight. You choose to take part in a wack group that engages in cultural ridicule and now I know who you really are and where we really stand. Apart. Not together. Not as friends. All of sudden there's this different dynamic to the relationship, hurt, frustration, and then just anger because people think you sold out to something you shouldn't have. It was the same way when people started dropping out of the protest. It was hard not to feel betrayed, not to feel like you got sold out. We didn't talk about it this way, but honestly I think that people had a problem with other people leaving because it also made us more vulnerable too. We didn't look like the tight, close group we had been 10 or 12 days before. We started to show some cracks in our armor and nobody thought that was any good.

### **An Uncertain Role**

Like everyone else in the Coalition, Web buried himself in work, tackling any and every job he was asked to undertake. He had numerous assignments: writing press releases, creating flyers, documenting the protest by taking photographs and shooting video of the room's contents, and helping to compose newsletters, all of which spoke to Michigamua's troubled existence as an organization that engaged in the cultural ridicule of Native Americans. It was largely public relations work, Web said, but necessary given the public's general unfamiliarity with the secret honor society. "Most of the stuff I was engaged in wasn't that deep really," he recalled. "I mean, it still had to be done. We couldn't bring people to Michigamua. Not like we

wanted to anyway. We had to bring Michigamua to the people and let them know what had been going on.”

Two days into the protest, the group had hit upon the idea of giving tours of the Tower as a way of letting people experience first-hand what the Coalition believed was so objectionable about Michigamua and the University’s support of the organization. Web sat in the background during these tours watching people’s faces, listening to Jamal and Roberto teach them about the history of the group and what they saw as its twisted traditions. It was something he was happy to do at first but soon left him feeling as a bit of an outsider. “I wanted to support my friends” Web said. “And I wanted everyone to know I was totally committed. But yeah, there were times when I just felt like a spectator to the whole thing.”

Increasingly, Web wrestled with the question of whether or not he was truly helping the cause; he also wondered if the Coalition would ever fully achieve its aims. Time was ticking away and there was still no viable resolution or compromise in sight. How long were he and the rest of his friends supposed to stay in the Tower? What about the rest of the agenda items they had committed themselves to advancing? Were they going to simply let them go?

As much as he disliked admitting it, Web also struggled with his role in the Takeover as time wore on. He remembered:

My role in the protest was never clearly defined. I mean, I had assignments that I carried out but even then...I felt like I was stuck in this cycle of always having to look for a new reason to stay committed, you know, beyond the fact that Michigamua was a dirty, racist organization that needed to be kicked to the curb. That became a problem for me after a while. Not because I wanted to be some big leader or anything like that instead of making copies or handing out fliers. I wasn’t ego-trippin’. But because none of what I was doing seemed like it was making that much of a difference. We weren’t moving forward fast enough, making the change we wanted to make.

Was he the only one to experience such doubt? Hardly, Web said. Many of his female counterparts struggled with the same issues, though theirs were rooted in

gender differences more than anything else. The women of the SCC were rarely asked to give tours of their own or given responsibilities that required any sort of significant leadership. “They read statements from time to time, but that was about it,” Web recalled. “I suppose I didn’t think about the sexism that was going on mainly because I don’t think I wanted to. But it wasn’t good. There was definitely this division in power between the guys and the women. It just went unsaid.”

Why did he stay on then? “My friends,” Web answered simply. “I couldn’t leave them. We were supposed to support one another and we promised each other that we would do that. I was sticking to my promise.”

### **Cool Moments**

While the sit-in served up more trying challenges than Web ever wanted to contend with, it was not entirely without what he later referred to as its own “cool” moments. Since its inception, the protest had been strongly rooted in Native American spirituality, an aspect that appealed to his background as a religion major. After news of the Takeover had been broadcast on several local television stations, representatives from different tribes across the state of Michigan traveled to campus to offer their support and thanks. “It was such a powerful experience in that way,” he said. “We’d look out the window and on the steps of the Union, different folk would be out there drumming, singing, sending us their blessings.”

When coupled with the groundswell of support that the SCC received from other students of color on campus (as well as a personal visit from former civil rights activist, the Reverend Al Sharpton), Web realized how deeply the Coalition had touched others with their efforts. “It was eye opening. It was heart opening,” he recalled.

There we were in this tiny meeting room, thinking lots of times that no one would even care if we died up there but that wasn’t the truth at all. The truth was, we were trying to do the right thing and people could see that.

Despite all the stress and strain that marked their daily interactions, Web took pleasure in his friendships, enjoying them most when they were collectively engaged in certain shenanigans. “We were also looking for ways to piss off Michigamua or mess with administrators,” he said.

“We played Native American drumming CDs full blast, with the speakers out the window. You could hear us from the Diag, the Law School, the Fleming Building. We even had our own alternative Spring Break. We invited a bunch of people to sleep in the hallway outside the door of the Tower and threw ourselves a party. We played music so loud that campus police showed up. It didn’t help us at all in terms of furthering our cause but at that point nobody cared. We needed to blow off steam. And we just wanted to make sure that people hadn’t forgotten we were still in the Tower. My personal favorite was throwing a barbeque on President Bollinger’s lawn. He didn’t see that one coming at all.”

### **The Maintenance of Privilege**

Unfortunately, University administrators grew tired of the Coalition’s antics as well as Michigamua’s own stubborn refusal to compromise. Convinced that there would be no resolution of the conflict between Michigamua and the Student of Color Coalition until the Tower had been rendered off-limits to both parties, they committed an abrupt about-face. On March 12, 2000, after weeks of allowing Web and his friends to illegally occupy the top floor of the Michigan Union, the President sent word that all members of the Coalition would be arrested if they did not leave at the start of the next day. Less than 24 hours later, after performing a sunrise ceremony with a Native American elder, the Coalition vacated the premises. “I was so tired by that point that there really isn’t much I remember about the moment,” Web said. “I was just like ‘Peace out.’ I walked to my residence hall, crawled into my bed, and fell asleep.”

Despite the Coalition’s lengthy attempts to call attention to the long-standing legacy of cultural ridicule that had been perpetuated against Native Americans on campus, the University’s Division of Student Affairs eventually chose to resolve the

issue of Michigamua's presence in the Tower as a procedural matter. A three-person panel was formed in order to consider the suitability of existing space allocation procedures that determined how offices and meeting rooms were distributed among the campus' student organizations ("Harper names panel members," 2000). "It was so typical of them [the administration]," Web said disgustedly. "To take a struggle that was about someone's culture, someone's humanity, and bureaucratize the whole thing."

Coalition members would have more to be angry about in the month of April. After convening several public hearings and forums, the panel released a preliminary series of recommendations for regulating the student space allocation process ("Bollinger carries out office space allocation rulings," 2000). Its final report suggested that all student organizations (including Michigamua) be subjected to a periodic assignment process every two years; further, no student organization would be allowed to occupy any University-owned space on an indefinite basis.

To the Coalition's astonishment, two and half months later, President Bollinger would announce that while he was in agreement with the panel's recommendations, Michigamua would automatically be granted office space for the next two years despite the fact that they had not gone through the same application procedure that had been mandated for other student groups on campus.<sup>29</sup> "They got the rules bent for them again," Web said. "So from where we [the Coalition] were standing, nothing changed really. All that struggle and fightin' and they still got to hold on to their privilege, the special treatment."

## **Crash & Burn**

March 13, 2000 officially marked the end of the Tower Takeover. And while archival records may characterize the date as the final closing of a stormy period in

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<sup>29</sup> The student newspaper, the Michigan Daily, would later report that the Division of Student Affairs approved spending in the amount of nearly \$6,000 for renovations to Michigamua's new space ("U' aids Tower societies in move, 2000).

University student history, within Web's biographical archives, the day heralded the start of yet another tumultuous chapter, one that would prove to be every bit as stressful and challenging as the protest itself. Less than twenty-four hours after vacating the Tower, he would become entangled in the difficult process of reconstructing his young life and attending to all of the relationships and responsibilities that had been shelved the moment he had infiltrated Michigamua's meeting space.

The first order of business was to attend classes. "The day after I came down," Web recalled, "I had to take an exam in sociology." By the end of his first week back on campus, however, he would come to recognize that there was to be no returning to his former life as a private undergraduate. Too much had changed in the course of a month, most especially his own self. Usually easy-going and relaxed, Web found himself suddenly engulfed by resentment, frustration, and anger. And despite his best attempts to mask these feelings, he could not suppress them completely.

No matter how much fun Web was having in his job as a resident advisor hanging out with students on his floor, for example, the minute someone mentioned Michigamua or the Tower, he could feel a fierce resentment begin to roil beneath his skin. He would become even angrier if someone poked fun at the Coalition or the protest itself. "It got to the point where I was just angry all the time," Web admitted. "I just walked around everywhere angry and disenchanting with everything." It did not help that his dorm room provided a clear, unobstructed view of the Tower. "The Tower was right outside my window. And I would have to look at it every day and be reminded of what went on there every day."

To a certain degree, Web's angry emotional state was a natural consequence of being overly stressed and burned out. Life in the Tower had been hard on him physically as well as mentally. Now that he no longer had to hold his tongue for the sake of compromise or good relations, Web could release all of the pent-up frustration and anger he had been required to swallow before. "I'm not a very vocal person to begin with" he explained.



I tend to keep a lot inside. But that doesn't mean I didn't have things to say, you know. There was a lot to be pissed off about...the lying Michigamua did, the covering up for them that the University did, the way we got judged by people who didn't know the first thing about racism or how it felt to be discriminated against. And I don't know, it just all started coming out of me. There was a lot of crying, a lot of anger, I mean, it was all from being in and around the Tower, you know? I started wrecking relationships because I was so angry. Man, I said really, really, really painful things to everyone, to my mother even...It was so hard to convey what was going on inside.

The ambiguous end to the Takeover did not help matters much either. The Coalition's evacuation of the Tower ended the protest but plenty of salient questions remained unanswered. What would become of the Union Tower meeting space? What about the group's misappropriation of Native American culture? Would Michigamua ever cease with their racist traditions? Would the University sever ties with the secret honor society as students of color believed it should? And what was Michigan going to do about the dwindling enrollment of students of color on campus?

These questions preoccupied Web's thoughts, running in a continuous, frustrating loop. In addition, he searched repeatedly for the sense of relevancy and purpose he had worked so hard to cultivate prior to the Takeover. "I kept asking myself 'Why am I here?'" Web remembered. "What I am doing all this for? And I couldn't find any answers. Nothing seemed to matter anymore, not school, not classes, not anything."

Luckily, the school year was drawing to a close, allowing Web to escape the confines of campus and return to the one place he felt safest: St. James, where he picked up work as a reading tutor to young 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys from the neighborhood. Time and distance had allowed the healing process to begin and by summer's end, Web felt strong enough to make the trip back to campus in the fall of 2000. His return would be short-lived, however. Two months into the term, he decided to drop out for the remainder of the school year. "I just couldn't go through with it," Web revealed.

I thought I could at first. But I found myself doing things I knew weren't good, skipping class, handing papers in late, not showing up for T.A. sessions. I was wasting time going through the motions and for what? I couldn't function as a student, as a person in a relationship, as a friend, you know, because I wasn't centered. That's what it came down to. I couldn't offer any love, I couldn't offer any support because I wasn't lovin' or supportin' myself. And that had a lot to do with me being off-center. And me being off-center had a lot to do with what went down months prior, you know? So I went back home at Thanksgiving and didn't come back. I told my mom, 'Mom, I need to come home.' And she said 'O.K.'"

### **New Perspectives**

Web would spend the next nine months tutoring, reestablishing his close relationship with his mother, and perhaps most important of all, seeing a therapist with whom he could explore questions that he had long carried with him but never fully addressed; the social implications of his multiracial identity, his adoption, his stepfather's abandonment of the family, as well as his participation in the Takeover.

Web felt an immediate kinship with this therapist, in large part because he too had engaged in protest as a college student, under the banners of Black Power and greater educational equity. The personal and academic struggles he experienced after the Takeover, Web's therapist explained to him, were hardly surprising. Confronting structural racism was an arduous, exacting task, he said, that would have tested anyone's fortitude, black or white. The therapist would also remind Web that establishing a stable, healthy identity was a life-long process and not something one typically achieved (on a permanent basis, anyway) in their twenties.

These therapy sessions, in addition to the much-needed time away from campus, provided Web with the opportunity to reflect upon his actions over the course of the last year as well his life in general. When he returned to campus in the fall of 2001, he brought with him some new understandings about his own political self-concept as well as the process of making social change generally.

Indications of the Takeover's durable influence on Web's life were revealed in both his interviews and his responses to questionnaire items. Though brief, his questionnaire responses spoke volumes about the manner in which his activist efforts had affected him both personally as well as politically. In terms of ideology, for example, Web had been content to characterize himself as a political centrist prior to the Takeover; on a scale from one (radical right) to ten (radical left), he ranked his ideological orientation as a six, indicative of a moderate political perspective. Post-protest, his orientation had clearly shifted to the left; he ranked himself as an eight on the ideological scale, representative of more radically liberal orientation than the one he had held previously (See Appendix E, question three under Section V for the scale and specific wording of the question.).

Web's questionnaire responses also indicated that the Tower Takeover had served to solidify certain values of his while also signaling the need to develop others. He still cared to label himself as an "idealist", for example, but because he had not fully established a clear, guiding philosophy of politics, he referred to himself as "ideologically confused" although no longer "ideologically immature." Where he once considered himself "unconscious," he now claimed to be "very young" intellectually as well as politically.

Web explained the change in his development from someone who was politically and culturally "inconsiderate" into a "considerate" individual:

...Before [the protest], I didn't take into consideration different struggles that people had. I just didn't take into consideration the identity development of a different person. You know, I didn't take into consideration the political needs of different communities. Now I know that you need to think about those things...you have to critically study political situations from other vantage points too.

These shifts in political self-concept were also accompanied by adjustments in his perspective of social change and its makings. Thirty-seven days in the Tower had taught him about the fluidity of protest and the continuous reformulation of tactics it

required. “Looking back, what we thought we were doing was really very cookie cutter-like,” Web said critically.

You know: Assess problem. Demonstrate. Solution. Speaking for myself, I didn’t understand that conflict was dynamic, and that as it grew and developed and manifested itself in different ways that you had to reinvent your approach on how to combat those things. I thought all right, assess problem, demonstrate, get solution down, done. I understood that. What I didn’t understand was how to determine what else needed to be done, how much other growth needed to occur, what other strategies to use.

His perspective of the University endured an even greater level of change; he was keenly disappointed with the place, viewing it as a bastion of betrayal and manipulation. Web’s hopes that Michigan would fully embody the communal values and ethics it had always touted had been thoroughly dashed during the course of the Tower protest and he could no longer bring himself to believe in the place as he wanted to just a few short years earlier. The University was neither welcoming nor supportive in his eyes. And Web deeply doubted its commitment to students or the ideals of diversity and multiculturalism.

It was in his final interview that Web spoke of his struggle to come to terms with his affiliation to a school that he no longer felt any loyalty to embrace. “You know, I have this anguish of conscience now,” he admitted.

I know I’m not doing everything that I can in response to the issue of cultural misappropriation and racism, mostly ‘cause I’m burned out. I mean, yeah, I’ll speak out about it [Michigamua] but it’s a trip to have to do that every year. You can’t do that once a year. On top of that I also have to grapple with the idea that my mother pays tuition to a place that I know is institutionally racist, straight up, you know? And I ask myself: ‘What does that mean? What does it mean for me that I, in going to Michigan, am contributing in some way, supporting, perpetuating the existence of a place that is really messed up? What am I doing?’

Web did admit, however, that he would never denounce his ties to the institution on a permanent basis. “I’m so disenchanting,” he said.

And it’s because I feel this way about having to leave this institution having done what I’ve done here that I am going to be part of the Alumni Association. I mean, there need to be some of us in the Association too. We [people of color] have power too and we have to exercise it in this place.

### **Web’s Story and the Path to Activism**

So what are we to make of Web’s story? Ultimately, what are we to understand about his transformation from student to activist and the overall unfolding of that process? Of all the interpretations that might be rendered, perhaps no other deserves fuller recognition than the critical role identity—and more specifically, the search for identity—can play in the formulation of a commitment to activism. For Web, the former clearly fueled the latter, revealing how closely intertwined the personal and the political can sometimes be.

On its face, it is somewhat of an obvious claim to make given how thoroughly and consistently Web himself referenced the notion of identity during the recounting of his life story; it was a constant, reoccurring theme with him, one that he invoked often in the midst of his storytelling. Nearly every story he rendered—whether it concerned his childhood, his educational experiences, his peer relationships or his troubled love life—referred to how Web’s inner sense of self had been shaped and molded through time, leaving the indelible impression his identity had always been a subject of paramount importance to him and perhaps always would be.

And yet, to contend that Web’s activism was driven by something as primal or basic as the need to define his inner self is still a complex assertion. As adherents of the social psychological approach to the study of social movements have long warned, defining the role that people’s identities play in the formulation of their activist political behavior is no easy task. In addition to the political ideologies and

social movements they embrace, we have to take into consideration where people stand in terms of their self-concepts, the social structures and locations they inhabit, and the nature of the social interactions and the relationships they have established in the course of their lives (see Stryker, Owens, and White, 2000).

At the age of 21, Web was just beginning to forge the basic foundation of these elements in his own life. He had ideas, of course—lots of ideas—about how he wanted to be perceived by the outside world; the kind of community he wanted to be a part of; and the types of people he hoped to one day call his friends. Still, he lacked a full, definitive sense of his place or his larger purpose in life. His storytelling reflected as much; Web's accounts of his early college years, for example, mostly depicted his struggles to fit in and find acceptance among his campus peers with whom he felt little connection. Perhaps it was this disconnect, this lack of alignment between his idealized notions and his actual experiences that fed Web's quest to establish himself as a purposeful, young man of color more than anything else.

One thing we know for certain: Web's desire to define himself was no momentary dalliance but rather an all-encompassing preoccupation. As his story further revealed, he seemed to look everywhere at Michigan for the opportunity to confirm that he belonged to a larger, communal whole, including among the campus' African American, Latino, and Asian student communities, an Arab dancing group, and even female floor mates.

Sociologists often refer to this kind of seeking behavior as a form of self-verification striving or the active attempt to establish relationships and create social environments that are consistent with one's self-views or social identity (Pinel & Swann, Jr., 2000). Those engaged in the search for self-verification continuously seek confirmation from the outside world, hoping that others will see or define them in the same way they want to see or define themselves. The quest to be confirmed by such external forces is believed to enhance feelings of "predictability, control, and coherence" among self-verification strivers who, for one reason or another, feel

compelled to try and continually manage the world around them (Pinel & Swann, Jr., 2000, p. 133).

It is an apt characterization to apply to Web's behavior, particularly if we consider other elements of his life story. Take, for example, the ways he described himself as a first- then second-year college student. By his own admission, he was intensely sensitive to questions about his racial make-up, unusually angst-like and confused at having no definitive answers to these questions, and overly conscious of what he perceived to be harsh scrutiny from his peers. While these descriptions could easily be attributed to an overly emotional, insecure personality of sorts, they also reflect Web's struggle to be seen and embraced both as he wanted and in a manner he thought others would accept.

Consider too the stories he rendered in relation to his origins, including his anonymous birth parents, the troubling confines of the first neighborhood he lived in, the semi-transient nature of his childhood, and his struggles to fit in as a grade-schooler. These stories highlight the difficult circumstances of his early life, to be sure, but we might also see them as the context behind Web's striving, how he came to it in the first place. Clearly, it occurred naturally, as a matter of life circumstance rather than some deliberate behavioral choice. It may even have been a way for him to cope with the alienating conditions he had been thrust in time and again as a young, multiracial child.

The notion of self-verification striving also reveals something critical about how Web found his way to his activism; his path was no direct, ideological march to protest but a winding, complicated process that had as much to do with identity and self-acceptance as it did campus politics or institutional change. Had it not been for his quest to confirm his identity and his larger place in the world, Web might not have encountered what would prove to be one the most influential forces behind his activist transformation: his peers.

These engaging, community-minded individuals not only fed Web's need for belonging but also spurred the growth of his consciousness about a number of key

political issues: racism, structural oppression, educational and institutional inequality, as well as the methods that could be used to combat their perpetuation. In addition, these peers would invite Web to take part in their protest against Michigamua, offering him the rare but critical opportunity to translate his growing political convictions into direct, concrete action. Web's self-verification striving, then, was a critical part of his activist transformation.

That he was guided to the place of activism by a pathway constructed primarily of identity needs rather than politics or ideology may be problematic for some. And yet, save for a few references to his sociology coursework, he offered no other indication that anything or anyone else had exerted as tangible or lasting an influence as his peers and his search to define himself had when it came to his activist development.

Even if Web's pathway to activism were constructed primarily from an ideological or political foundation, it is difficult to imagine how we might explain other critical aspects of his story, specifically his disinterest in continuing to support the student labor movement or the great psychological burnout he endured once the Takeover had been called to an end. Why profess to being disappointed and frustrated with SOLE—a student movement focused on eradicating inhumane sweatshop labor practices and the exploitation of the working poor, no less—because of the inability to “connect” and “see” oneself in the larger scheme of the organization and its adherents? Would not any student movement or cause suffice, so long as their politics were consistent with Web's own? And why suffer such intense, personal despair and loss at a protest's end if the stakes were simply political in nature?

There is also Michigamua to consider. Of all the political causes and pressing social issues he might have supported, why did Web choose to participate in the protest against the secret honor society? Clearly, Michigamua had more than failed to uphold its end of the 1989 agreement; unlike other student organizations on campus, they were also endowed with special meeting room privileges likely to offend any



individual with an abiding sense of fair play. But as his story revealed, procedure and institutional policy were only part of the Coalition's grievance with secret honor society; the larger fight they had launched was morally and culturally based, formulated to a greater degree because of Michigamua's long-standing misappropriation of Native American culture and its embrace of stereotypes.

No, there was something deeper and more elemental at work in Web's case. Maybe Michigamua's relevance as a social protest cause was because of what it represented by its nature. For someone like Web who wholeheartedly embraced the notion of community and who had spent most of his young life struggling to fit in, Michigamua was the embodiment of all that offended him: exclusivity, insidership, self-aggrandizement, elitism, and most troubling of all, an identity derived from the base characterizations of another group. To protest the secret honor society was to confront by proxy the alienation, outsidership, and unfair scrutiny he had endured in his own life.

Perhaps this is the larger point that we should take away from Web's story overall. For some of us, the path to activism is not paved solely by the desire to see justice carry the day, but also by the essential desire to know one's self, to know where one belongs. Perhaps there is a fundamental need that goes beyond politics, a personal prerequisite of sorts, that is required before one can make the commitment to creating social change in one form or another. The causes that we champion are critical as well; if they do not speak to some fundamental aspect of ourselves or our values, we may not be able to forge a long-standing connection, one capable of withstanding the challenges and pressures that accompany a protest.

To be sure, there were other influences at work in Web's activist transformation as well. Web's mother and the priests of St. James, for example, collectively imparted a set of sensibilities and ideals that he would later draw from when faced with the opportunity to transform the University into a more equitable and tolerant institution. Prompted by both circumstance and choice, Web's mother worked diligently to instill in him a healthy sense of agency as well as self-respect.

The Augustinian priests of St. James introduced him to the ideals of community, empathy, and selflessness. In both instances, these individuals provided Web with a foundation that allowed him to recognize the injustices and privilege that Michigamua's represented as well as believe that he was capable of creating significant institutional change.

We should also acknowledge the influence of other forces including the pre-college environments of school and the neighborhood, places that taught him extraordinary lessons about the possibilities of true harmony and community, not to mention the ability to look beyond skin color. Historical and social conditions require recognition as well. The declining enrollment of students of color, the perceived lack of institutional commitment to diversity, and the cold, unwelcoming campus climate that marked Web's tenure as an undergraduate also helped to substantiate the necessity and righteousness of his engagement in activism.

### **Rosa's Story**

The Tower Takeover had been over for some time—nine months, in fact—when Rosa Cortez agreed to be interviewed for this study. She was a senior scheduled to graduate in the coming month of May; presuming, of course, she successfully completed her coursework for not one but three majors: Anthropology, American Culture, and English.

A self-described “people's studies junkie,” Rosa had spent the first three years of college attempting to transform herself into a genuine student of human culture. Until the Takeover occurred, that is. In that moment (as well as all of the others that surrounded the protest), Rosa's commitment to her schoolwork would be overshadowed by an even deeper dedication to the causes she had been steadily reared by her parents to embrace, namely, social justice and educational equality.

Unbeknownst to her then, however, thirty-seven days would prove to be more than enough time to seriously derail the strong record of academic achievement Rosa had so diligently cultivated in years prior. After multiple class absences and

missed assignments Rosa was required to make several academic concessions, both entirely uncharacteristic for her: She had to drop two courses from her schedule and accept a grade of “D” in another from a professor indifferent to her political activism.

Despite all of the extra time and effort it would take in the coming months to ensure that she would graduate according to schedule, Rosa remained unrepentant about her days as a member of the Student of Color Coalition and the protest it launched against Michigamua. “It felt like this was my defining moment or something,” she said. “I had never done anything in my life to date this big....there’s been nothing comparable to it. And I think about that. I miss it.”

This is her story.



To hear Rosa tell it, the early years of her life were like a game of musical chairs; her family was constantly on the move, circling around and into a different city neighborhood or suburb every couple of years from the time she was born until she entered high school in 1994. Remarkably, the family rarely moved far beyond Chicago, the first place Rosa’s parents had settled with their own respective families after emigrating from Mexico. Her father was eleven years old when he first arrived in the City of Big Shoulders; her mother all of three.

The family’s travails began in 1980, not too soon after she was born at Iowa General, the same hospital where her father was assigned to carry out his residency as a psychiatrist. Within the year, he changed his mind about fulfilling his residency requirements in Iowa and moved the family back to Chicago, the place where he and Rosa’s mother were first married.

Several years later, with Rosa’s sixth birthday looming, they relocated to a different section of the Chicago suburbs, a neighborhood known as Ridgedale, where her father ultimately completed the last of his residency requirements. Once he was done, the family moved again; this time beyond the city limits to the southern part of

the state. “I was seven and in the second grade,” Rosa said. “It was a really isolated, little town with very few minorities, and very few people in general, so it was pretty hard on me socially speaking.”

Put off by the social isolation, Rosa’s family quickly returned to Chicago the following year. “Living in southern Illinois was rough,” she remembered.

My only friend in school was this little Vietnamese boy. We were always hanging out together, which I’m sure people found interesting. But it wasn’t like I had a lot of choices, especially when it came to playing with other kids of color.”

In 1988, roughly twelve months after settling back into the city, Rosa’s parents would move for the sixth time to yet another suburb, located on the southwest side and known as Riverview. “We actually moved one more time before settling into the neighborhood where we are now,” Rosa admitted. “We’ve been there since I was a freshman in high school. But yeah, for most of my childhood, it seems like all we did was move.”

Why so many changes in residence, she could not say. Nor did Rosa remember much about the neighborhoods or schools she lived among as a young child or the people who inhabited them. In some ways, she said, they appeared to be all the same to her. “The places we lived were mostly white neighborhoods, with lots of white people,” she said. “No real diversity, you know?” These places appeared to evoke the same sense of detachedness in Rosa too. “I was always the outsider, the new kid,” she stated. “And I knew it.”

One time in grade school—I was in third grade—we were talking about the presidential elections. And the teacher asked us if we knew which party we belonged to. Everyone else except me and like, one other kid said they were Republicans. We said we were Democrats. Not that any of us really knew what that meant at the time, being third graders and all [Laughs.] But even then I stuck out, for one thing or another.

## **An Activist Family**

Despite her parents' transient ways, they operated as a close-knit and loving unit, taking deliberate care to provide Rosa (and later, her brother George) with a home life that was not only safe and emotionally stable, but also politically empowering. "They were very involved in politics in the 1960s and 1970s...with the Chicano movement and everything," Rosa recalled of her parents' personal histories. "And I think they wanted to make sure that they passed that on to us."

Rather than subscribe to some stringent program of political indoctrination, Rosa's parents set out to instruct their children in the political ways of the world first by ensuring that they embraced their identities as Mexican-Americans. "My parents were very proud of being Mexican," Rosa said. "And they wanted me and George to feel the same way... they wanted us to be proud of who we were and where we came from." They steeped the children in Mexican culture and tradition and taught them about their indigenous roots as descendents of the Apache and Yacqui tribes as well. "We'd go to powwows and dances, all sorts of cultural events," she remembered.

As Rosa and her brother grew older, her parents took a more direct approach, insisting that their children keep themselves informed about current political events and take part in the various political events and programs that were occurring around the city. "We started going with my parents to rallies and lectures, stuff related to Latino politics mostly and civil rights" Rosa said. "My dad would even schedule family meetings where we'd talk about what was going on in Mexico or in America or wherever."

Perhaps most importantly, they shared their own stories of political empowerment with their children, weaving together narratives that were as much about themselves and their life as a couple as they were about politics. Rosa's parents had both been undergraduates at the University of Southern California. Her father was a pre-medicine major, her mother an anthropology major. Each of them had been inspired by the political works of Chicano leader Cesar Chavez and his attempts to negotiate fair wages and living conditions for the country's growing body of

migrant workers. In following Chavez and the social movement he was building, they had found each other and soon fell in love. “There’s a picture that goes along with this story,” Rosa revealed.

In Chicago, for Mexican Independence Day, there’s a queen that is chosen and she goes on a float and everything...Well, my mother was chosen one year. I think she was 20. It was like ’72 or something like that...during the time of the Grape Boycotts and stuff. Well, I guess she saw from far away that there were people boycotting. She jumped off her parade float in her dress and crown (laughs) and joined them. She started boycotting with these people right there in the middle of the parade. My parents have a photograph of the two of them in the street, because she and my father were seeing each other at the time. And she’s in her fancy dress and tiara and there’s people in the back of her holding a grape boycott sign.

Equally important to Rosa’s parents was the idea that their children always cast a critical eye on the arguments and interpretations being presented in the news, in their classrooms, or in the books they read. Rosa’s father, a genuine history buff, made sure to counter Rosa and George’s history lessons with an alternative perspective or two, particularly if they related to the subjects of Native American history, social movements, or civil rights. “Dad was always telling me to think about what was in my books,” she said. “How history was a matter of perspective, and it was important to keep in mind whose story was being told and whose wasn’t.”

Rosa’s mother would also remind her children that their own cultural beliefs needed critical examination from time to time as well. She recalled:

... In my mother’s family there tends to be this kind of idea, you know, that lighter [skin] is better. My mom didn’t agree with that especially since I’m darker...So we talked about it how important it was to question what we were taught rather than just accept things at face value. She didn’t want that kind influence coming down on us, being an anthropology major and all.

## **Life at Loyola Academy**

Despite their developmental soundness, the parenting efforts that Rosa's mother and father put forth were still not enough to keep her from experiencing the same sense of social distance she had endured as a young child. The truth of the matter was Rosa had spent much of her youth in places that offered few opportunities for genuine cultural exchange or interaction, a fact that would increasingly weigh on her as she grew older.

Perhaps nowhere in her early life was this made more obvious than during her time in high school. At her father's behest, Rosa applied to and was accepted at his alma mater, a Jesuit Catholic institution called Loyola Academy. It was considered to be one of the most academically rigorous secondary schools in the city, and in the Midwest. Rosa had been happy to enroll at the Academy, in particular because of the intellectual challenges that lay ahead. Her father had regaled her with story after story about his Jesuit instructors, men who were known for their tough teaching and their commitment to academic excellence. "I looked forward to going to high school," she said. "I wanted to be challenged."

Rosa also welcomed the opportunity to familiarize herself with the city and walk among the diverse neighborhoods that surrounded the school's downtown premises on a daily basis. "Having moved around a lot, I didn't get to know the city the way I wanted to," she said. "It was such a different place compared to the ones I lived in. Just the people alone, the experience of having so many different types of people around you and nobody looked the same."

The chance to explore and experience life beyond the white-washed confines of the suburbs she lived in would be quickly cut short, however, by the most innocuous aspect of daily life: the commute to and from school. Right before Rosa was to attend high school, the family made a last move to a suburb known as Illey Park, a neighborhood that stood a considerable distance from the city.

To get to Loyola, I was stuck making this commute that was about 45 minutes long. I'd have to get a ride over to the train station and then I

would take the train into Chicago. That was about a half-hour ride. Then from there I would take a bus over to the West side. That took another 15-20 minutes.

The near two-hour journey seriously circumscribed Rosa's ability to fully partake in the life of her new school like she wanted. "The only friends I could make were the ones who commuted with me," she said.

Which meant that I spent a lot of time with, you know, middle class, White, suburban kids again. Even in terms of school, it was hard. For the first couple of years I was there [at Loyola], there was nothing I could do outside of school. Because of my dad's job and my mom not having a driver's license for a long time, and the logistics of just picking me up later, it was just too hard to manage.

When set against her parents' steady insistence that she engage the world fully and critically, Rosa's limited capacity to move about freely produced a kind of social dissonance, a nagging sense that her life was not as full as it might be. "I felt like I was missing out on the whole urban experience, of life beyond the suburbs," she said. "Not to mention being with other Latino students like myself."

This sense of emptiness would abate--if only temporarily--by the time Rosa became a junior in high school. Somehow, she and her parents found a way to navigate the demands of her commute to and from school, freeing her to join the track team, volunteer for an afternoon tutoring program, and eventually, explore the city with friends who had grown up in its neighborhoods.

None of these activities held Rosa's attention for long, however. By the time she was a senior, all Rosa could think about was leaving Loyola behind and getting to college. "I was ready to leave even before it was time for me to leave," she admitted.

I just felt like there was little left for me to do there [at Loyola]. And my friends weren't really doing it for me anymore either. I wanted to explore my Latino roots and get to know other Latinos, to know that part of myself. My White, Loyola friends didn't really get that.



## College Bound

As the daughter of two college undergraduates (a doctor and a free-lance writer, respectively), the possibility of attending college had never been in doubt for Rosa as it once had for Web. What remained to be determined were the specifics: Which college or university would she go to? And what would she major in? True to form, her parents pushed her to consider the choices they personally found most appealing. For her dad, that meant an Ivy League school with strong mathematics and science departments. Her mother, on the other hand, insisted on schools closer to home with reputable fine arts, English, and anthropology programs.

To appease them both, Rosa applied to a range of institutions, public and private, in close proximity to and far away from home: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Illinois, the University of Iowa, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Michigan. Her own private hope was that she would be accepted to Stanford where she imagined she would become a writer, and perhaps best of all, live among the hundreds of thousands of people that comprised the state's growing Latino population. "It was a long shot but I really wanted to go to Stanford," Rosa recalled. "I wanted to go live on the West Coast and experience what it was like to live somewhere where Latinos were in the majority, not the minority."

How did it happen then that Rosa came to choose the University of Michigan? To hear her tell it, attending Michigan was a fairly random, if not accidental occurrence, prompted mostly by circumstance. Stanford rejected Rosa early in the college application process. "My grades weren't good enough for them," she explained. Several East Coast schools, Yale and Princeton, had indicated they were interested in Rosa but she knew in her heart that she would not step foot on either of their campuses regardless of whether they offered her admission. A trip to visit both institutions during her sophomore year of high school convinced Rosa that these Ivy schools were far too stuffy and uptight for her own comfort. "I just felt like I would never fit in there," she stated.

Michigan emerged as the front-running choice only after she had been formally accepted. Wholly unfamiliar with the University just a few months earlier, she had applied nearly by whim, after an admissions representative had visited Loyola and impressed Rosa with her presentation. “I didn’t know much about the campus until the admissions rep came to Loyola for a visit,” she said.

Then I looked at different guidebooks and you know, it looked like a good school so I just went ahead and applied. After I got accepted, we came out to check out the school and thought it was nice. I also wanted to get out of Illinois and it was the perfect distance from home. Not too far away where I wasn’t close to my family but just, you know, far enough away. So I said, “This is it.”

### **In Search of Community**

In the weeks leading up to Rosa’s departure for Ann Arbor, Michigan, she and her mother poured over the University’s course catalogue for the coming fall term, weighing the kinds of classes she might take and attempting to align them with her flair for writing as well as her interest in studying different cultures. The task excited the serious student in Rosa and intimidated her at the same time. “I had no idea that there was going to be such a variety of courses to take,” she recalled.

I think a lot of college first-years go in assuming that they are there to learn what their career is going to be about. Me, I didn’t know that yet. So when I saw the pages of classes I might take, I just got very overwhelmed. It was exciting but overwhelming too.

Not wanting to pressure her further, Rosa’s mother advised her to spend her freshman year exploring a range of disciplines and subject matter. So long as she thought of little else other than her schoolwork, Rosa’s first year of college would be a successful one. “My mom told me not to worry about anything but my classes,” Rosa remembered. “The rest would take care of itself.”

Privately, however, Rosa yearned for more than a collegiate life dominated by coursework and grades. She not only wanted to find her way around campus and get

a handle on her classes but to fit in, to belong, in particular, to a community that included other Latino students. On a campus of 36,000 students, there was more than a good mathematical possibility that she would eventually encounter people who shared her cultural roots and traditions “Having mostly white friends in high school made it very difficult for me to develop any sort of connection to being Latino” she said. “So when I came here [to the University of Michigan] I wanted to do that right away. I felt I had been missing out on that for so long.”

### **A Challenging Start**

Although she did not know it, Rosa entered college at a time of considerable public optimism and trust in higher education. Nowhere was public faith more evident than the unparalleled growth in enrollment the system was experiencing. The National Center for Education Statistics would report that for the year 1997—her first year at Michigan—14.9 million students were enrolled in 6,252 postsecondary institutions across the country (NCES, 1997).

Rosa was not without her own optimism and trust when she stepped foot on the University’s Ann Arbor campus. She looked forward to making new friends, learning her way around the campus, and of course, being in the classroom. She knew better however, than to expect that the transition from high school to college would go off without some hitch or another. Rosa would maintain a positive attitude but remain cautious at the same time. “I told myself that I would try to get as broad of a perspective as I could of the school without overstepping my limits,” she recalled.

The process of acclimating herself to the University would prove more challenging than her careful imaginings accounted for initially. On an intellectual level, she understood that she was going to be part of a student body whose ranks traditionally included some 36,000 other undergraduates and graduate students. In reality, it turned out to be quite a different experience actually *being* among them and having to navigate an institution that spanned two campuses, each acres-big and with

their own set of academic halls, buildings, and libraries. “The school was so huge to me,” Rosa remembered. “The whole look of the place was overwhelming.”

### **Making Friends**

In an attempt to make the University feel less imposing, Rosa reached out to two young women whose acquaintance she had made during summer orientation. “I’d gotten somewhat close to them, close enough anyway to call my first week on campus and say ‘Let’s meet up,’” she said. The geographical distance between Rosa and friends, however, put an end to their friendship before it even had a chance to blossom. “We weren’t living anywhere near each other,” she stated.

They were on North Campus, up on the hill and I was at Central Campus. We got tired of going back and forth pretty quickly. It made it hard to do simple things like hang out and have lunch with each other. So the friendship between us phased out pretty quickly.

When coupled with the general anxieties she was experiencing in relation to the size of campus and the demands of coursework, the end of the friendship triggered a serious case of homesickness, made all the more intense by the fact that Rosa had somehow been assigned to a single room in an all-women’s residence hall. Without roommates, she was literally on her own. “I was just very overwhelmed with everything” she said.

It was from all the usual stuff, you know, classes, being away from home, not knowing anyone...It wasn’t good because it didn’t make me interact with anyone, having a single and all. So I just kept to myself. I didn’t feel like I could just knock on anyone’s door and talk or anything like that.

Luckily, Rosa would meet two other young women, Sajal and Saroj, during a floor meeting that she ventured to attend after missing several others. The three became fast friends, in large part because everyone mistook them for one another. “We look a lot alike,” she explained. “The same dark, long hair, the same dark

complexion.” Cases of mistaken identity were especially frequent at the fall dance parties they were soon attending together. “People would assume that because I was out with my Indian friends that I was Indian like they were.”

It worked the other way around too. We went to this Latino dance and everyone there thought we were these three new Latinas on campus. It was funny the way people would come up to us, asking Sajal and Saroj all night if they were Puerto Rican or Mexican, and if they spoke Spanish.

Rosa’s bonds with Saroj, in particular, would be further cemented by the fact that they shared the same academic interests. Both young women intended to major in American Culture and English, exhibiting similar curiosities about literature, writing, and cultural studies. Soon, the two were spending hours not only discussing the contents of their lectures and group discussions but the roles that seemed to scripted for them in these public spaces. “We both started to notice certain discrepancies,” Rosa said. “Like in our classes, there weren’t that many Latinos or Asians.”

And when it came to a minority-focused question, professors would look to us or the one other Black person in the class to answer it, you know? Like we were their representatives or something. That hadn’t really happened to either of us before and it was kind of disconcerting.

Still, Rosa was appreciative that she now had someone in her life at the University with whom she could share her observances, someone who would puzzle over their meanings as she often did on her own. “We ended up talking a lot about the different issues between different groups of people, like between our own communities,” she stated. “And it was good. She understood where I was coming from and I understood where she was coming from.”

In between their discussions of race and community, Rosa and her new friends would also pursue the traditional collegiate lifestyle that seemed to appeal widely to their other peers. They went to football games together, took part in

residence hall activities, and attended various campus functions with their floor mates. “I did my fair share of the typical freshman stuff,” Rosa remembered. “I had season football tickets and cheered on Michigan, stuff like that.”

Eventually though, she, Sajal, and Saroj would grow tired of the hoopla surrounding student life and athletics at the University. Yet they never grew tired of each other. They spent the remainder of the year living as their own informal triumvirate, always together or in close proximity. Rosa, who had begun her University experience alone, now had two constant companions.

### **La Voz & The Campus Climate**

The start of Rosa’s sophomore year began the same way it ended, in the close company of Sajal and Saroj. This time around, however, the three women were not just floor mates but official roommates, living in a “triple” (a three-bedroom space) that was part of a larger residence hall known as West Quad. As they had the previous year, Saroj and Rosa planned on taking American Culture and English courses together while also intending to branch out and register for introductory courses in anthropology and women’s studies. “My mom’s penchant for people’s studies finally caught up with me,” Rosa explained. “I decided it was time to enroll in some basic anthropology courses too.”

Rosa’s second year at the University was also to be marked by her support of and participation in *La Voz* or *The Voice*, one of the few Latino student organizations on campus. Her involvement in the student group would not only provide Rosa with the Latino camaraderie that she believed she had been missing out on for so long, but perhaps more importantly, act as a critical point of departure for the exploration of questions she possessed in relation to race, identity, and the bridging of values with action.

Rosa was no stranger to the organization by the time her sophomore year had commenced. She had been to several of the group’s meetings the previous fall and winter terms. Then, Rosa said, *La Voz* appeared to be more of a social organization

than anything else. “I’d gone to the meetings because it was one of the only ways I knew of to meet other Latino students,” she said. “Most of what people talked about at the meetings were how to draw in other Latino students, you know, the parties people wanted to have, the speakers we should bring to campus.”

Perhaps Rosa had been too overwhelmed by homesickness in her first year or maybe she had been too preoccupied with her classes to notice, but suddenly it seemed to her, the tenor of La Voz meetings changed. “Being a first-year and all, I didn’t always know what was going on,” she admitted. “But when we came back from summer break, things were different. You could totally tell. People in La Voz definitely had race and politics on their mind.”

Gatherings that had once been dominated by conversations about speakers and social dances were now politically charged discussions where issues of race, discrimination, and inequality were laid bare on the meeting floor. “It wasn’t like we sat around swapping opinions or anything like that,” Rosa explained further.

People were telling stories about how hard it was to be at the University. The racism they put up with, the ignorant ways they got treated. How they were being questioned by White people who thought they had a right to know what kind of grades they got.

Not everything Rosa heard came as a surprise to her. She knew through her own experience how uncomfortable the classroom could become when the topic of race surfaced. And she had been to enough social events to know that there were double standards when it came to the supervision of activities sponsored by Latino and African students on campus as opposed to those put on by their White counterparts. “I didn’t think people were pulling things out of the air,” she said.

Yeah, some of what I heard was like, word of mouth. But there were things I noticed on my own too. Like, whenever there were parties in the Union, Black or Latino student parties, there were always a lot of DPS [Department of Public Safety] officers around. Sometimes, they wouldn’t even let us go through the front of the building to get in. We had to get in from the back of the Union which I was always thought

was shady and inappropriate. The Greek boys, the white boys partying next door never had to do that.

## **Jumping In**

Why the sudden change in the tone of these meetings? In many respects, the La Voz meetings were simply a reflection of the larger political circumstances that were unfolding in the group's midst. One month into Rosa's first year at the University, a conservative law firm known as The Center for Individual Rights (CIR) filed a class-action lawsuit against the University's College of Literature, Science, and Arts challenging the use of affirmative action in its undergraduate admissions process ("Firm files lawsuit challenging University's admissions policies," 1997). Shortly thereafter, a second lawsuit was filed by CIR, this time against the University's law school, alleging that the use of racial preferences in its admissions process unfairly discriminated against white applicants ("Law School challenged," 1997).

These lawsuits sparked widespread campus speculation about the legitimacy of Michigan's admissions processes and its future ability to educate a multicultural corps of students. They also seemed to revive an intense preoccupation with students of color, the merit of their admissions, and the legitimacy of their presence on campus. Students' of color like those who attended La Voz meetings were suddenly thrust in the glare of the public spotlight and they resented the invasive scrutiny and inspection.<sup>30</sup>

When coupled with reports of the previous year's decline in the enrollment of their peers, the lawsuits galvanized the members of La Voz, inspiring them to lay plans for the construction of what they hoped would be a comprehensive and compelling student agenda detailing the needs and requirements of the University's

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<sup>30</sup> According to Evelyn Hu-DeHart (1998), students of color across the country were being subjected to callous scrutiny and harsh criticism by a well-oiled conservative movement committed to extending the cultural wars that first emerged on campuses in the 1980s. Instead of the curriculum, Hu-DeHart claimed, conservatives were now targeting students of color directly and attacking their very presence in higher education in a way that was neither deserved nor fair.



larger Latino student community (see “Latino/a, Native American enrollment drops,” 1997). Rosa found herself volunteering to help in any way she could. “I wanted to be part of the process, you know, helping set the agenda and making sure some real change would come out of it. So without really thinking about it, I just jumped in,” she said.

### **A New Consciousness**

She would benefit from this small act of volunteerism in ways she never imagined. Working among a team of La Voz members responsible for gathering the background reports and statistics that were to inform their agenda, Rosa soon made new friends, each of whom she quickly came to view as intelligent, witty, and perhaps most importantly, solidly secure in their identities as the sons and daughters of Latino immigrants. “Roberto, Daniel, Angel, Christina...they were incredible people to me,” she recalled. “So smart and funny, with good heads on their shoulders...and totally proud of their roots, you know, of being Latino.”

In time, Rosa would also start to develop a consciousness of how unique a collaborative, collective approach to political action could be. La Voz, as it happened, was not the only University organization looking to mobilize its members in light of the lawsuits and the troublesome climate they spawned on campus. Other student of color groups had been organizing themselves in response to the lawsuits as well as a host of other issues: labor equality, the curriculum, the decline in representation among faculty and students of color, and the top-down decision-making structures of the University that operated without genuine student input (see, for example, “Latino/a, Native American enrollment drops,” 1997; “Nike releases factory locations, 1997).

Rather than compete with these organizations for the University’s time and attention, La Voz opened its doors to their representatives, offering its support as a committed ally. “Our meetings were about so much more than what was going on within our own community,” Rosa recalled.

They were about what was happening to students of color all over campus. Every week, there was some representative from another group sharing information with us, telling us what they heard or knew... I was really struck by that. We both wanted the other to be prepared for whatever might come up. It wasn't about us [La Voz] getting what we wanted at somebody else's expense. So we were sharing, they were sharing...I'd never been around that before. It seemed special.

The organizing efforts of her peers in La Voz awoke Rosa to the harsher realities operating beneath the surface of University life as well. Because of the challenges she faced in her first year, Rosa knew better than to believe that Michigan could fully live up to all of the caring and communal characterizations it had put forth in its glossy brochures. But the stories her peers recounted had exposed a troubling side to the institution she had not anticipated. "I knew everything here wasn't all good or all fair," Rosa said.

But I didn't know that there were things that were immediately wrong with the place either. I had no idea until everyone started talking about how hard life was for them here. There was stuff going on that just shouldn't have been, people being harassed, discriminated, and not just by other students but professors too. It wasn't isolated cases either. It cut across all of our communities.

Perhaps most importantly, Rosa would gain some critical insight into how one bridged their values with their actions. Her parents had made sure to raise her with a consciousness of social justice but the limits of life at Loyola and life in the suburbs had restricted her ability to fully realize how she might act on these values and transform them into concrete political change efforts.

At Michigan, there was no shortage of examples for Rosa to consider. Time and again, she saw her peers' work diligently to broaden University life and have it reflect the diversity and varied lifestyles of the many students it was supposed to serve. It was in the midst of mass meetings, agenda-building sessions, student mixers, and organizational gatherings that Rosa was able to recognize the forms her own efforts might take. She recalled:

Being part of La Voz and watching people organize, bring other students together to create an agenda around social justice was an amazing thing to me because up until that point I'd always had it in my head a kind of value system for social justice but, you know, I never knew what to do with it. And with the group it was like, 'Oh, so that's what you do.' You move on your values, you take action. You turn it all into something that people have to pay attention to. You just don't sit on what you feel.

### **An Unfortunate Revelation**

One of the organizations La Voz had opened its doors for was the Native American Student Association, otherwise known on campus as NASA. Established in the early 1970s, NASA consisted of a small number of Michigan undergraduates and graduate students with formally recognized ties to various Native American tribes. Just like their other peers of color, the members of NASA had also been moved to begin organizing themselves. Their agenda hardly differed from those being constructed by students of color in other communities save for one particular item: NASA also wanted the University to cut ties with the secret honor society known as Michigamua.

Rosa had been unaware of Michigamua's existence for over a year when Luke Koenig, NASA's president, asked to make a presentation about the secret honor society at a La Voz meeting. The end of the school year was approaching and he wanted to inform the larger student of color community as to the honor society's racist spring rituals which, by tradition, were staged publicly on various parts of the campus. For decades, Michigamua had subjected Native American students to its own version of "playing Indians" in front of the rest of the University Luke said; there was no reason to allow them to continue to do in peace, unobstructed and unchallenged. He hoped that La Voz members would attempt to disrupt the initiation rites any way they could.

As Rosa remembers it, Luke's talk with the group was straightforward and factual. There was no attempt to pull at heart strings or embellish; he delivered the

story of Michigamua's origins and its problematic appropriation of Native American culture in a calm but resolute voice. His words provoked Rosa nonetheless.

I didn't know it [Michigamua] existed before Luke had come and talked to us about it. I remember him passing out information packets that he had printed up and copied...The longer he talked, the more upset I got. I thought 'Oh my God, this actually goes on here?' I can't believe it! It just struck me as being so outrageous.

That night, Rosa would repeat the story of Michigamua to Saroj and Sajal. "They couldn't believe it either," she recalled. "Especially the part about all the years the University had been supporting Michigamua."

Later, in Saroj's company alone, Rosa would admit to not only being angry about what she had heard earlier in the night, but to feeling guilty as well. While her parents had taken her to powwows and dances, she had not truly cultivated a full appreciation for her Native American roots, at least not to the same degree she often displayed in relation to her Latino roots. "It bothered me that I was so clueless about Native politics, Native history," she said. "It was my own history after all...I felt bad, especially when Luke started talking about how long Native students had been discriminated against. There was so much I wasn't aware of."

As fate would have it, Rosa would get the chance to become better informed about Native American history and politics a few short months into her junior year. Most remarkable of all, she would get the chance to challenge one of her Native American peers' biggest rivals, namely, Michigamua.

### **A Compromising Start**

For all of the furor and controversy that engulfed its predecessor, the 1999-2000 academic school year opened in an uneventful, quiet manner. In Rosa's own specific case, the start of the school year was nearly identical to the one that had come before it. She, Sajal, and Saroj were still inseparable, choosing once again to occupy a triple and live as roommates. Her academic focus remained unchanged as

well; Rosa's new planner was filled with a cluster of courses in the same disciplines she had steeped herself in a year earlier including English, American Culture, and Anthropology.

Roughly five weeks into the term, however, the relative calm that marked the opening of the school year would be shattered by the news of yet another decline in the enrollment of new students of color. The figures painted a grim picture: Over the course of four short years, the number of students of color enrolling at Michigan had dropped four full percentage points. Students of color now represented only 11 percent of the overall student population at the University, a scant 4,300 students out of a corps that typically included some 38,846 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students ("Minority enrollment decreases," Michigan Daily, 1999).

La Voz's political agenda-making activities, temporarily suspended by the onset of summer, went into high gear, triggering new rounds of campus meetings, organizational gatherings, and planning initiatives. This time, however, Rosa chose to stand back from all of the organizing efforts swirling around her. The fast pace of the organizing, the hours required for meetings and research, her own lack of expertise in mobilizing people, and her incomplete understanding of racial politics at Michigan made her think twice about jumping in as she had before.

There was also her schoolwork. Now formally majoring in not two but three subjects, Rosa feared the idea of being unable to fully attend to her academic responsibilities. "Don't get me wrong," she stated. "I wanted to be out there helping La Voz and my friends."

But I was overwhelmed. I was seriously confused about how to commit myself to these two big things at the same time... And I had my doubts about what kind of help I could give, what I would bring to the table. Everyone else that was involved in all the planning stuff had been involved with these issues for a long time. I didn't want to get in the way of all that.

As a compromise, Rosa committed herself to attending La Voz meetings when she could; in the times between, she would rely on two of the organization's

key leaders, Roberto and Daniel, to keep her informed, upperclassmen who had taken a keen liking to her from the moment they all first met during her freshman year. “Roberto and Daniel took me under their wing right away,” she remembered. “And our friendship sort of built from there.”

The compromise itself had been forged after several discussions between the three of them. Rosa did not want to imperil their friendship in any way; she also wanted them to know that she still supported La Voz and its causes. “We spent time having some long conversations about the stuff that had been going with the lawsuits and everything,” she stated.

And they knew that I wanted to stay updated about what was going on because I felt the same things they felt. The difference was I lacked the experience and I lacked the knowledge that they had. Plus with all my classes, I didn’t think I’d be all that helpful.

Roberto and Daniel made no negative judgment about her decision. “They weren’t mad or anything like I thought they might be,” Rosa recalled. “It was like ‘Hey, we get it. You have to do what you have to do. Join us when you can.’”

### **The SCC Petition Drive**

One of the first updates that Rosa would receive from Roberto and Daniel was the news of an all-campus petition drive, the brainchild of a newly-formed political coalition that had been forged between the four main umbrella organizations representing the whole of the student of color community at Michigan: La Voz, the Black Student Union, the Native American Student Association, and the Asian Pacific American Association. The emergence of the coalition—who called themselves the Student of Color Coalition or the SCC—was predicated upon what its founding members saw as the University’s inability to provide its students of color with an inclusive, tolerant, and respectful learning environment.

The two young men were instrumental in establishing the Coalition and they wanted to make sure that their friends in La Voz, including Rosa, knew of its plan to

push the University into addressing student of color issues they believed it had long neglected. The agenda that had been devised in conjunction with the other student leaders of color was an amalgamation of general and community-specific needs. One item, for example, called for the increased recruitment and hiring of faculty of color within every one of the University's schools and colleges; another item, submitted on behalf of Native American students, called for the University to sever all ties with the secret honor society Michigamua.

During the months of October, November, and December, the Coalition worked steadily to broaden its base and garner support for its petition. Rosa's vision however, remained focused on the successful completion of the term's course requirements. Despite her promise to Daniel and Robert, she had been unable to attend La Voz meetings, even on an intermittent basis. "I didn't go to the meetings because I couldn't," she explained. "I didn't have time. My life was all about classes and papers."

### **Jumping In (Again)**

The month of January would prove how tenuous Rosa's self-imposed distancing from the political activities of her peers actually was by nature. On a walk through the lower floor of the Michigan Union, she came across what had become the Student of Color Coalition's main petition drive headquarters. It was bustling with bodies and energy. As she scanned the tables that had been cobbled together to accommodate the petition drive, she saw her friends and peers of color engaged in all sorts of activities: talking about the petition, looking over the SCC's agenda, reading through various University reports, and perhaps most importantly of all, engaging in dialogue with one another about the kinds of change that needed to happen on campus. It made for a compelling, captivating scene, Rosa said.

There were all these people from every community, talking to each other, exchanging ideas...Everybody really seemed to care about what the SCC was trying to do. They actually seemed passionate about it. I

remember thinking that this wasn't some ordinary student thing going on in front of me. It felt like it was the start of something big.

In the midst of all of the activity surrounding the petition table, Rosa felt the same sudden impulse to jump in, to throw herself into thick of things like she had once in her sophomore year. Just as listening to her peers' stories about their struggles to fit in had opened her eyes to the realities of University life, Rosa's experience in the Union had suddenly crystallized for her how important it was to be a part of the Coalition and its work. She now knew, in an inescapable, up-front manner, exactly what she had been missing.

From that point on, Rosa committed herself to helping with the petition drive, trying to talk with other students and passersby in the hopes that would also lend their signatures and show their support for the Coalition's activities. "I was always on somebody about going to the Union and signing the petition," she said. "It almost didn't matter who, after a while. I just wanted the Coalition have the signatures it needed to make some changes on campus."

### **The Tower Takeover**

The second update Rosa would receive from Roberto and Daniel was more cryptic than the first one they delivered. As fate would have it, the news they shared was also to be far more consequential. After securing several thousand signatures in support of their agenda, the key leaders of the Coalition decided to hand-deliver them (along with a letter requesting a meeting with administrators) directly to the President and his administrative cabinet members.

In the course of trying to deliver the petition, the President's secretary tried to have Coalition leaders arrested, mistakenly presuming that they had gathered in the foyer of his office to begin a protest. Rosa, who had not been present at the time, would hear of the incident from Daniel later that night. "It was a Friday night and I met up with Daniel on campus," she recollected.



He said he just wanted to keep me informed about what had been going on...They had gone to the Administration Building to deliver the petition and the secretary locked it down instead. The campus police showed up and everything. I was just completely shocked. I didn't believe it. And I said, 'You know if you guys need anything, I'm willing to help. These issues are big and people need to know what happened.' Daniel said that that might happen sooner than anybody expected.

The following night, Daniel would hint again to Rosa that their near-arrest would not go without some sort of serious retribution. She recalled further:

Then the next night, Saturday night, there was a dance in the Union and I saw Daniel again. He told me that I should be sure to look up at the Tower when I walked by it on Monday. That's all he said. And I was like 'What? What are you guys up to?' And he said he didn't want let anything out of the bag. 'Just make sure to check out the Tower' he said. And I was like 'O.K. then.' But I had no idea what they were planning to do.

Rosa's final clue that something "serious" was in the works would come in the form of a chance meeting between her, Roberto, and Luke. "It was late Sunday evening and I was on my way back from the Union going to West Quad," she recalled.

I saw Roberto and Luke walking together. It looked like they had just come back from the store. They had their hands full of bags, food and stuff...I was looking at their bags and trying to look at them but they weren't making any eye contact with me. They were like 'Oh, hi, um' and that's when I knew something serious was going on. They'd never been dodgy with me like that before.

Rosa would find out less than twenty-four hours later what her male friends had been planning all along. Daniel, obviously too excited to wait for her to make her own discovery, issued a phone call in the early morning hours of Monday, February 7, 2000. "I was still kind of sleepy when I answered the phone," she said.

It turned out to be Daniel. I was like ‘What’s up? What’s going on?’ And I was just about to ask him about Roberto and Luke when he said he had something important to tell me. I said to him, ‘Where are you?’ I heard some other voices in the background and that’s when he said ‘We’re in the Tower.’

### **Going on Instinct**

Even in a half-drowsy state, Daniel’s admission of trespass was the last thing Rosa expected to hear. “I was shocked, really shocked,” she admitted. “Nobody could get into the Tower but Michigamua and they [the SCC] were in it?” Rosa quickly tried to press Daniel for a rationale. “I was like ‘Why? What did you do?’” she said.

And he said ‘You know, we’re all just tired of it. And we were angry about the whole thing that had gone down at the President’s office.’ Even though they wanted to start addressing different points on the petition first, I guess they felt this would make the biggest statement right off the bat.

Before she could probe for further details, Daniel began signing off, asking Rosa to visit soon and to bring any supplies she could spare. “He said they didn’t have much up there with them,” she remembered. Without much thought, Rosa began rummaging through the contents of the room she shared with Saroj and Sajal, collecting various items that it seemed Coalition members might need. “I grabbed things I thought they could use,” Rosa stated. “You know, food, blankets, stuff like that...”

Hours later, Rosa and Saroj made their way to the Tower together, intending to check in on their friends, drop off their supplies, and hopefully, learn for themselves what the long-standing controversy behind the Tower was all about. “We really had no other intentions than to go up there, you know, bring some blankets, look around, and get a better idea of what was really going on,” she said.

What Rosa had not anticipated was how deeply she would be affected by the Tower’s holdings. Like Web, she was shocked by the blatant racist characterizations

that lined the meeting space's walls. "I remember looking around the room, slowly scanning it...I can't even describe what it was like. I mean, I remember my stomach kind of dropping...It was all kind of overwhelming," Rosa stated.

...It was like everywhere you looked there was all this racist junk lying around, fake peace pipes, plastic dream catchers, all these pictures of red men in loincloths and headdresses...It wasn't the boring, old meeting room like Michigamua had been claiming it was.

The appearance of her Coalition friends also unnerved her. Rosa recalled:

Everyone else in the room looked really tired and stressed out. I'd never seen them that way before. Usually, they were way more together but it was obvious that they didn't want to be in there either. It was all over their faces. And who could blame them? The whole situation was crazy. I'd never seen anything like it before, the room was just full of racist, stereotypical stuff laying around everywhere.

After they had taken in the room on their own, Daniel, Robert, Luke, and the others provided Rosa and Saroj with an impromptu tour of the meeting space, highlighting its problematic elements in greater detail. It was in the midst of their private tour that Rosa felt a subtle but perceptible tugging at her conscience, urging her to join her friends in the Tower. "I just got this feeling," she said.

I felt like I just had to do this. I had to be up there with the rest of them. It was my big moment and I knew I had to take a risk. I just couldn't walk away and leave my friends behind to do all the work.

She quickly approached Daniel, asking him if there was enough room in the Tower for one more person. "I said, 'I think I can stay up here, if there's a place for me to.'" Daniel gently declined Rosa's offer, at first, worried that she did not fully understand what was to occur. "Daniel kept telling me 'You know you don't have to do this. You can support us in other ways. This is going to be tougher than you think,'" she recalled. "But I told him that seeing them up there, doing what they were

doing, was really important to me and I felt like it was something I needed to be part of.”

It was only after a talk with Luke, who had been elected group leader earlier in the day, that it was decided Rosa could stay. Her work with the petition and the studiousness she displayed when it came to the background research that had informed some of the Coalition’s demands had impressed him. “Luke actually said I would be good for the group given everything I had done for the Coalition petition drive up to that point. I could help out a lot, writing, maybe researching stuff if we needed it” she stated.

Well acquainted with her roommate’s stubbornness, Saroj could only offer to run back to the residence hall and gather some of her belongings. Once again, Rosa had jumped into the fray, where she would remain until the protest ended some thirty-six days later.

### **Life in the Tower**

Not unlike Web, Rosa would remember her time in the Tower as one of the most daunting, exacting periods in her days as an undergraduate. Yes, she had bravely followed her instincts and joined the protest; enacting them, however, would test her in ways she neither expected nor imagined. “When I think back to those days in the Tower, it’s true, none of us really knew—or had any way of knowing, honestly—what we were getting into,” Rosa admitted.

There had been no way to foresee, for example, just how tough the day-to-day living in the Tower would be in actuality. From the start, Rosa found it difficult to establish a sense of physical comfort in the small, confined space. “I remember that the room was really cold, like there was no heat coming in at all,” she said.

We had blankets and sleeping bags but that didn’t help much. Plus, we were sleeping on hardwood floors and benches. We didn’t have any real food with us, either, other than junk food and basically, like, cold pizza. The worst thing had to be that there were no showers or even a

sink. You couldn't do the small things like brush your teeth or wash your face. We all starting feeling kind of gross after a while.

Differences in personal habits also created friction between among Coalition members, conditions which had not been anticipated either. "We weren't used to living with one another," Rosa confessed.

Everyone had different clocks, biological clocks if you know what I mean. Some of us were night people and some us were day people. Then some of us preferred to do work in the mornings while some of us worked better in the evening. Our styles just clashed, you know? But there was no way to accommodate what everybody needed."

And then there was the room's décor. Without expecting it to, the Tower's design weighed heavily on Rosa's sense of well-being. "Everywhere you looked, there was something that made you mad," she recalled.

"We were living in the middle of rubber tomahawks and pictures of white people dressed up in loincloths, stuff that was incredibly racist and just plain stupid, to be honest. And there wasn't anything we could do about it. Having the stuff around made our case stronger for why Michigamua deserved to be thrown out of the Tower so we couldn't take any of it down. But there were lots of days when looking at it just made me physically sick to my stomach.

The toughest aspect of living in the Tower? According to Rosa, it was maintaining a sense of cohesiveness and common purpose among members of the group; a task that became increasingly difficult once people began to recognize the limits of their commitments. "It was probably like the second full week we were up there," she remembered. "And it started dawning on people that we could be in the Tower for a very long time."

I think what set people off was not hearing back from administrators right away. We went like 10 days or something before they showed up to talk with us in the Tower. Folks in the group started feeling cut-off. It was like, did they forget about us? Are they coming back? What's

the deal? And that's when things started changing, I guess you could say. People just started falling off...They wanted definite answers about how long we'd stay and what we'd settle for but none of us had any answers. We just didn't know. And some people freaked out about that. They didn't want to be stuck in the Tower for the rest of the term.

As a result, Rosa says, membership in the Coalition gradually became more fluid and loose. Those who could withstand the pressures of the protest and its ambiguous circumstances remained; those who could not, left. "It was like a revolving door kind of thing," she explained. "Somebody would leave and then there would be this new person asking to take their place."

She explained further:

That part of it was O.K., at first. We needed the bodies. But it also caused a lot of questioning. Who was with us? Who wasn't? The people who left us. Did they really believe in what we were doing or were they just playing us? It was hard not to feel betrayed when someone jumped ship. Everyone got paranoid, wondering all the time about who could be trusted and who couldn't.

### **Jack-of-All-Trades**

Like everyone else in the group, Rosa looked to distance herself from the anxiety and friction that marked life in the Tower by focusing on the organizing work that needed to be done in order to keep the protest moving. In its earliest days, she operated as a jack-of-all-trades, conducting a mix of public relations and advocacy work: writing letters to news organizations, taking photographs, making phone calls, soliciting support from other student of color organizations on campus, and cataloguing the many artifacts that remained in Michigamua's meeting space. "I spent a lot of time on the computer and the phone at first," Rosa said. "It was fine with me because it meant I didn't have to spend every minute in the Tower."

Every so often, Rosa would assume the role of sounding board, offering feedback to Luke, and the others in regards to strategy and tactics. Sometimes, she

was even required to play the role of foil, openly challenging the group to think about the ways they would conduct themselves at meetings. “We never knew what Michigamua was going to throw at us or anybody else really,” Rosa explained.

That’s just the kind of protest it was, you know? So we had to spend a lot of time talking about how we would react, what we would do if ‘Situation A’ came up or what we would do in ‘Situation B.’ When we needed it, I got to play the devil’s advocate too, you know, questioning what the group was doing like I was an administrator or the president.

When she was not engaged in organizing or strategizing, Rosa often acted as the Coalition’s unofficial caretaker, always looking to ensure that her friends’ spirits never lagged as deeply as they might have given their trying living circumstances. “Living in the Tower sucked big-time,” she said.

And we needed someone to be checking in on us really. Things were that rough. So I did what I could to try and make everyone feel better. I played music, listened to people when they needed me to, shared my blankets, you name it. I think it helped too that I was the youngest of the bunch, kind of like everyone’s kid sister. People let me get closer to them for that, I guess.

## **Second Thoughts**

Despite the certainty and resoluteness she had displayed in asking to move into the Tower alongside the other members of the Coalition, there were moments when Rosa questioned the logic of her impulsive decision. Yes, she had bravely followed her heart into the protest but her head had yet to wrap itself around the fact of all that she had left behind in the process: her beloved roommates; the creature comforts of a bed, a shower, and warm meals; not to mention the safe routines that marked her campus life like attending classes, completing homework, seeing friends. “Sometimes, when things were quiet and we were waiting to hear from someone—Michigamua or Student Affairs people—it would hit me,” Rosa recalled. “I would think, ‘What did I do?’ ‘What did I get myself into?’”

As it turned out, these were the same questions her parents would ask, posing them with greater frequency and in more condemnatory tones the longer Rosa remained in the Tower. When they had first heard of her protest participation, her mother and father expressed support for her efforts to create a more tolerant campus. By the end of Rosa's second full week in the Tower, their perspective of the protest and its utility changed dramatically; they began pushing her to leave and to try save what little remained of her academic year. These were the hardest moments of all, Rosa admitted. "I would second-guess everything we [the Coalition] did, and what I did. I felt like a failure who made all these big mistakes."

My parents and I are close. So when they found out what was going on with the protest, they got worried. They didn't know how I was going live up there, what was going to happen to my academics. It was confusing for them. But they understood that I felt I was doing something I needed to do. They agreed that it was wrong, what Michigamua was doing. And they understood that I was only doing what I felt like I needed to do. It was later on that they changed their minds about things. I was supposed to go home for Spring Break and I called to tell them that I was spending it in the Tower instead. My mom got pretty upset. She was like "You've been up there for two weeks! That's long enough! What are you doing? This is going to look really bad, you know, you not caring about your grades and doing so bad this semester." That's when everything would just wear on me. There were lots of times when I would get down, just get very, very sad after talking to them. It felt like everything was going to fall apart.

### **An Activist Romance**

To get herself through these moments, Rosa would turn to Luke for comfort, understanding, and renewal. Of all of the varied personalities that made up the Coalition, his was, by far, the calmest of the bunch as he was less prone to anger and frustration than some of the others. "We would all get into arguments, especially towards the end [of the protest]," Rosa said.



I hated it because everyone would be yelling and shouting, stuff I just can't stand. But not Luke. He'd be sitting there, calm, collected, waiting for everybody to simmer down. He was the one who kept our heads on straight.

Their first meaningful conversation took place minutes after Rosa had spoken with her parents. Their phone call had gone badly with both her mother and father demanding that she return home. Rosa refused and before she could proffer a rationale, the line went dead. "I was a mess after that," she remembered. "Luke found me crying."

They spent the night sharing stories about their families and friends, their school lives, and perhaps most importantly, the fears and anxieties they carried with them in relation to the Takeover. Luke, as it turned out, was also unhappy about the glacial pace at which the protest was unfolding. Still, he was not prepared to walk away. There was a debt he owed to the other Native American students who had come before him and he intended to see that it was paid. Rosa explained further:

The whole thing was entirely personal for Luke. I mean, it was for all of us, but for him especially. He knew the group [Michigamua] inside and out. And he knew they would just go back to all of their crazy racist traditions if we quit because we were tired and couldn't take it anymore. He said he couldn't give in because he felt like he would be letting down all of the other Native students who had paved the way for him before he got here [to the University]. He had to stick it out for them.

Impressed by his commitment and the steady way he carried himself, Rosa began actively seeking Luke out whenever she needed to unburden herself of all the frustration, fear, and anxiety she endured. Before long, Luke began to do the same. "We started confiding in each other," Rosa explained. "Sharing how we really felt about everything that was going on but not to anyone else. We stayed up late and would talk and talk and talk. I just knew I could trust him. And he felt the same way about me."

Soon, their late-evening conversations became a ritual that Rosa looked forward every evening. “Sometimes, I couldn’t wait for the day to end because I knew we would have some private time together to talk,” she admitted. “It got to the point where I just wanted to be with him all the time.” A genuine romance would eventually blossom between the pair but only after the Takeover had been called to an end and summer was in full bloom. In the interim, Luke would provide Rosa with the emotional support she needed to stay in the Tower and fight against Michigamua. She would do the same for him.

### **An Abrupt End**

From what Rosa could remember, the end of the Tower Takeover came more quickly than she or anyone else in the Coalition ever expected it might. Spring Break had passed with no word from Michigamua or campus administrators as to a viable resolution, misleading everyone in the SCC to believe that they were in for several more days of Tower confinement, if not weeks. “We started talking about what we were going to do if we couldn’t go home for the summer,” she stated. “We really thought they [University administrators] were going to leave us up there for that long.”

Just days after classes had commenced, however, the President issued his ultimatum: Everyone was to be out of the Tower in 24 hours or they would be forcibly removed by the city’s police officers and formally charged with trespassing. The news was a complete surprise to the Coalition, including Rosa. “We were all like ‘What is that?’” she recalled. “You don’t talk to us, make us stay up there for weeks on end and now we have to go? Plus you’re going to sic the cops on us if we don’t do what you say?’ It was insane.”

The ultimatum set off a heated debate among Coalition members, half of whom were ready to surrender and the other half who had no intentions of leaving without a fight. Rosa fell into the camp who believed they should not leave the

Tower, despite its cold, cramped interior. “There were some people in the group who thought we should have tried to fight to stay up there,” she remembered.

I was one of those people. I just didn’t like leaving the situation without knowing what the immediate outcome was going to be. And I didn’t know what it would be. I wasn’t even sure about going down, you know...like I was afraid of what was going to come next. I thought ‘Okay, we go down, so what? Does anyone take us seriously anymore?’ And someone else in the group said ‘Well, at the very least there’s the work we did keeping Michigamua out of their space.’ But it still wasn’t clear whether or not they would get the space back and that freaked me out.

The debate might have continued well into the following day had it not been for a visit made by a Native American elder and his wife, both of whom had followed the news of the Takeover closely, even driving across the state to show their support of the Coalition. They had asked for a tour of Michigamua’s meeting space. Everyone stopped fighting long enough to oblige. Rosa remembered:

This couple came and they looked around for a long while. His wife did too, asking us questions about how we all lived up there in such a small space, how did we eat... We told them about Bollinger’s threat and how we didn’t want to leave but didn’t want to stay either. They both got real quiet and then the man sat down at the table...He just looked at all of us, one by one. Then he said real quietly ‘You know it’s time for you to go. It’s time for you all to go. You’ve been up here long enough. You’ve done your piece. And we thank you for that.’ It had a real calming effect on us. It was like we had been given permission to finally let go and leave, something I think we all wanted but were afraid to admit. They stayed with us a while longer. The next morning they performed a sunrise ceremony for us and then we picked up our things and left.

Rosa returned to her residence hall, exhausted and emotionally spent. Her part in the Takeover was finished. After some good long sleep, she would begin thinking about how to put her young college life back together.

## **A Rough Reentry**

Rosa knew better than to expect a calm, quiet reentry back into campus life. On more than one occasion, she had sat in the Tower taking stock of all the people and circumstances she would have to contend with once the Coalition's work had come to end. The list, she imagined, was going to be extensive: There would be parents to soothe; roommates to reconnect with; professors to answer to; to say nothing of the steps she would have to take to avoid all of the peers she knew she had angered with her act of trespass.

While she had never extended her calculations to include the specific details of the many resolutions she would need to forge, Rosa always presumed that they would unfold in the backlight of Michigamua's ouster from campus. Some how, some way, the Coalition would prevail and the secret honor society would no longer enjoy its privileged affiliation with the University.

It may have been this unconscious presumption that upended Rosa's reentry to campus life more than anything else. Without a concrete measure of success to point to, there seemed to be no satisfactory way to convince anyone in her life that the Takeover had been of any significant value. "It was rough," Rosa stated. "My friends, my family, everyone was like 'You took over the Tower. So what? What did you really accomplish by being up there? What do you have to show for it now?'"

The judgment and condemnation bubbling beneath these statements deeply frustrated her. Instead of focusing on her relationships and her coursework, Rosa became preoccupied with the Takeover and the Coalition all over again. Every choice, every tactic, every decision that had been made in the course of the 37-day protest, she mulled over, searching for the critical missteps that had prevented the Coalition from achieving its aims. "I second guessed everything," she said.

Rosa's predicament was not helped by the fact that the Coalition itself teetered on the verge of collapse. "We were all over the place," she said. "One minute, we were clinging to each other, the next minute we couldn't stand to be around one another." Rosa explained further:

It was just very isolating because no one had gone through what we had gone through, so we all felt really close but it was kind of twisted the way we felt we needed to constantly be around each other, because we didn't know anything else. We were very paranoid and worried about what was going to happen to us. Most of us didn't even have the motivation to go back to classes or anything like that because we saw that we were already basically messed over for the semester. But then, there'd be an argument or somebody would get mad at somebody else and it would be like 'Oh, I can't take being around you people anymore. You're driving me nuts!'

Soon, exhaustion, doubt, and the demands of reentering campus life splintered the group into fragmented pieces. "There was that half of us being completely exhausted and there was the other half of us who were like 'We need to keep moving,'" Rosa recalled.

I was part of the group that felt like we needed to keep doing what we were trying to do, tackling the next thing. There were still emotions for all of us to go through and that like, was continuously exhausting for everyone. But we also had the Michigan Pow-Wow coming up and a lot of us felt like we needed to help with that because we felt like we owed the Native American community...But even getting people together for that was tough. Some of us started getting evicted and there was rent and bills and things like that to worry about too. We were just all over the place and there wasn't anything anybody felt like they could do about it after a while. We all just floated in different directions.

The days that followed the Student of Color Coalition's relinquishment of the Tower would prove how prescient she was in her doubts about leaving without any clear-cut resolutions in hand. A few short weeks after the protest had been officially called to an end, the University's Student Affairs Division announced that a three-person panel would examine existing student space allocation procedures, determining in the process what would become of Michigamua's meeting room. "It was out of our hands then," said Rosa. "The University was basically telling us we no longer had any real say in the matter."

## Moving On

The announcement of the panel investigation convinced Rosa that it was time to pull back from the circumstances surrounding the Takeover and refocus her attention on the other aspects of her life that she had ignored for the sake of the protest: reviving her academic record; securing employment for the summer; and reconnecting with her family and friends. The decision to “let go for a while” as Rosa put it, had not come easy. “I struggled with the way things ended,” she admitted. “We didn’t really go out on our terms. That did not sit well with me at all. But after they [University administrators] came up with the whole panel thing, what else was there to do?”

Rosa would spend the next several months working odd jobs around campus and studying in preparation for what she certain was going to be a challenging fall term’s worth of coursework. She would also begin formally dating Luke. “We went from being friends to being more than friends after the Takeover ended,” she recalled. The only downside to their new relationship was the distance that separated them throughout the week. Weary of campus life, Luke had taken a job back home several miles outside of Ann Arbor; he and Rosa commuted back and forth on the weekends to see each other. “It wasn’t the best arrangement but we tried to make the most of it,” she said.

It was during these commutes that Rosa often thought about the unusual circumstances that had brought her and Luke together. Some times, she marveled at her own development and how much she had changed in such a short span of time. “I became a different person through the Takeover,” she said. “I can’t really explain it...On the outside, I looked the same but inside I was different. I just know that I wasn’t the same person I was when the school year started.”

As difficult as it was for Rosa to put to words the ways in which she had changed, she conveyed a sense of growth and development through her questionnaire responses. From the perspective of ideology, for example, she initially ranked herself as a six, a moderate political orientation prior to her engagement in the Takeover;

afterwards, she considered herself an eight, representative of a more radically liberal orientation (See Appendix E, question three under Section V for the scale and exact wording of the question.)

In terms of self-concept, Rosa claimed to grow considerably in her own level of internal possessiveness. Once green and gullible, she claimed the protest had shaped her into someone who could be critical of the world around her; who knew to carefully weigh other perspectives and who could more readily defend her beliefs and ideas. Overall, Rosa felt that she had also become less trusting of authority since her part in the Tower Takeover.

As for her perceptions of the University, Rosa did not rule out ever taking part in its campus life again, particularly in the role of alumnus. Michigan had not proven itself to be the moral, supportive institution she once took it for; still, the school's standing in the wider world meant that she needed to continue to push for greater access and equality on campus. "You know, my loyalty, my pride, that's all very marginal now," she stated. "No I don't think it's the greatest experience for students of color to come here but we have to be realistic about things. We need to be represented on campus."

### **Rosa's Story and the Path to Activism**

Much like that of her Tower ally Web Murphy, Rosa's activist tale also stands as testament to the remarkable influence that identity possesses when it comes the shaping of the engagement in activism. Her activism and her identity were linked too, albeit with one key difference: Rosa's transformation was not borne by a fundamental need to define herself so much as it was borne by a desire to more fully engage her already-established identities as a Latina and as a Native American.

As the stories of her childhood days made clear, Rosa had been raised early on to know who she was and from where she came. There were no unanswered, lingering questions about her indigenous roots; no uncertainty as to who her real

parents were; nor was there any confusion about the cultural and political perspectives she was to maintain as the oldest daughter of two former activists.

The core developmental challenge before her was derived from a different source: the overwhelmingly White, homogenous schools, neighborhoods, and classmates, none of which allowed for any significant cultural exchange or genuine exploration of a non-white identity. The increasingly untenable nature of these culturally narrow surroundings would reach its peak during her high school days. Many of the stories she rendered in relation to that time—including her long commutes to and from home; her circumscribed network of peers; her desire for a more “urban” experience; her eventual readiness to leave Loyola Academy; and her secret hope to attend Stanford—highlighted her dissatisfaction with these people and places.

Eventually, this dissatisfaction would manifest itself as the keen desire to live in more culturally diverse setting. It would also manifest itself as a core expectation of her college-going experience. No matter where she enrolled, the college or university she would attend would have to support a more diverse student body. More importantly, it had to provide her with opportunities to forge connections with other Latino students on campus, allowing her to explore in greater depth her own identity as a Latina.

Sociologists sometimes classify these types of intimate yearnings and expectations as expressions of identity amplification or the desire to more fully enact one’s identity (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). According to social movement scholars, Snow and McAdam (2000), identity amplification can play a key part in social movement participation. It is believed to work in the following way: When some core aspect of how we define ourselves suddenly becomes more essential than the other identities we possess and there exists, at the same time, a social movement whose collective identity is consistent with the identity that has reemerged, we are likely to try and connect with that social movement (p. 49). In the words of Snow & McAdam (2000): “Metaphorically, the individual moves from the sidelines to the



playing field via the restoration of an existing but previously nonsalient identity” (p. 49).

It is a fitting way to characterize Rosa’s transformation from student to activist, given the kinds of stories that she relayed. While her stories represented her life experiences, they were also emblematic of larger conceptual ideas associated with the process of amplification, including identity, identity salience, and the linking of individual identities with the collective identity of a social movement.

Take, for example, Rosa’s stories about her childhood and adolescence. On the one hand, they revealed the circumstances of her origins, the people and places that she encountered during her family’s travails in and around the Midwest. On the other hand, however, these stories reflected the contexts under which Rosa’s desire to amplify her identity originated from, the places that set the stage for her need to plumb the depths of her Mexican-American identity.

As her story further revealed, Rosa’s need to more fully enact her Latina identity would prove to be a critical step in her activist development primarily because it put her in contact with her peers. Without them—especially Roberto and Daniel—and the many lessons they imparted in relation to organizing and agenda-setting, it is hard to imagine how Rosa’s activist engagement would have unfolded otherwise. Save for her friends (and to a certain degree, her parents) there appeared to be no one else in her life moving her towards activism.

Consider as well the two stories that she told in relation to the inconsistency she exhibited when asked to support both *La Voz*’s and the Student of Color Coalition’s campus organizing efforts. More than once, Rosa backed out of these base-building activities in order to focus more directly on her coursework. On the surface, it appeared as though Rosa was simply trying to attend to her academic responsibilities in a mature manner. From the perspective of identity amplification, however, we might also view her actions as emblematic of a more intimate struggle, an internal tug of war between the saliency of her identity as a student and the saliency of her identity as an activist.

One of the key ways Rosa defined herself was as a serious student. Her firm embrace of this identity was reflected in her memories of the time she spent with her mother pouring over class offerings before the school year began; the exhilaration and fear she felt declaring three majors; and the compromise she forged with Roberto and Daniel, agreeing to support La Voz and the Coalition from the sidelines. What Rosa clearly had not anticipated was the effect of seeing her peers working together to build the Coalition. As she revealed in her story, the sight of everyone engaged in the petition drive suddenly resonated deep within her, urging her to immediately leap in and lend a hand. Perhaps that was the moment when Rosa's activist identity was finally engaged, when it had skyrocketed in salience, and ultimately overtook her student identity.

The idea that Rosa possessed a latent activist identity is not far-fetched. She had, after all, admitted to possessing a "value system" for social justice most of her young life. We must not forget either, the many years she spent being socialized by her politically engaged, activist parents. Rosa's mother and father had taken considerable measures to cultivate a family atmosphere where politics were openly discussed; where their children were expected to have their fingers on the pulse of current world events; where the ideas and perspectives presented in their books and classrooms were openly questioned; and where they learned, not only of the traditions and customs of their Mexican heritage but of the historical oppression their people had faced through time.

Latent activist identity or not, Rosa would have remained on the sidelines instead of the playing field had it not also been for the Student of Color Coalition and its change-making efforts. The SCC offered Rosa the unique opportunity to create change in an institution that sorely seemed to need it and in conjunction with people she deeply admired. From the perspective of identity amplification, the appeal of the Coalition could be also defined in terms of what it offered in the way of identity fulfillment. Through her participation in a single protest, Rosa had the chance to link not one but three salient identities to the larger collective identity of the Coalition: as

a committed, conscious Latina; as a Native American; and, of course, as a student activist.

The rarity of these identity-based opportunities may also help shed light on the stubbornness she exhibited at the end of the Takeover. We know from her account that Rosa struggled considerably with the vague, ill-defined terms under which Coalition members had abandoned the Tower. While her unwillingness to abandon Michigamua's meeting space could certainly be interpreted as a form of extraordinary commitment and resoluteness, it could also be seen as Rosa's inability to walk away from a major source of fulfillment for her, the one place where the identity needs that had been forged in difficult, years-long circumstances were finally satisfied. Though she never admitted it, perhaps what Rosa truly struggled with was the uncertainty of her identity once she left the Union Tower. She had jettisoned her student self (as well as all of the academic responsibilities that went along with it). If the Takeover ended, she would not be the full-fledged activist she had been before. Who was she going to be then?

Questions of this sort underscore an important lesson inherent in Rosa's story. Who we are, or more accurately, who we wish to be is as critical an influence when it comes to the engagement in activism as any political ideology or movement agenda. For some of us, the path to activism is paved not by our politics but by the elemental need to enact our identities, to give full play to the inner selves we feel reflect who we truly are at our core. Attention, then, must be given not only to the collective agendas and political systems but the inner aspects of a potential activist identity.

Of course, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the host of other influences playing upon Rosa's activist engagement: her peer, her parents, the unjust institutional conditions that did not allow for the full diversification of the student body, among others. As Rosa's story revealed, however, the influence of these other elements was mediated by the degree to which they reinforced or challenged the capacity to fulfill her identity needs.

## Chapter 5

### **Ennis Campbell, Esme Rodriguez, and Their Efforts to Establish a Racism-Free University**

On February 4, 1987, student disc jockey Ted Sevransky asked listeners of his program to call in to the University's campus radio station, WJXX, with their favorite racist jokes. More than one of Sevransky's listeners obliged and soon the campus airwaves were awash in derogatory and degrading characterizations ridiculing African Americans ("Racist jokes aired over 'U' radio," 1987).

"Tenacious Slack"—Sevransky's on-air moniker—and his call to openly engage in racial derision would not go unnoticed by members of the very group he had deliberately targeted for ridicule. Several African Americans, like graduate student Robert Sellers, picked up his show on the radio and decided immediately to record the duration of the program on tape ("Racist jokes aired over 'U' radio," 1987).

Within the span of two short weeks, the young disc jockey's sophomoric antics would become the talk of the campus. Students as well as University officials expressed their outrage at the insensitivity and cruelty evidenced by Sevransky's radio broadcast ("Expel Slack," 1987; Shapiro unveils minority project," 1987). In the midst of a two-month sabbatical leave, then-University President Harold T. Shapiro would be prompted to issue a public statement in relation to the incident. He wrote:

I am appalled to discover that in the midst of all the exciting things that have been going on at the University, several incidents of overt racism have also occurred...This is a matter of profound concern to The University of Michigan community. Every incident of racism or bigotry—whether blatant or otherwise—undermines our aspirations and diminishes the ideals of our community. Each such incident is a cause for grief and dismay for us all. The values upon which this University rests are tarnished by actions that demean the worth and integrity of any one of us. For these reasons, discrimination, harassment, exclusion, abusive or insensitive language, or any other manifestation of bigotry or racism are unacceptable and will not be tolerated ("Statement by President Harold T. Shapiro," 1987).

Ted Sevransky would ultimately be fired from WJXX<sup>31</sup> but not before his racist radio broadcast helped fuel the emergence of a new key activist organization on campus called the United Coalition Against Racism (UCAR). As one of the main torchbearers in the quest to establish a racism-free University, UCAR would later serve as an integral base of support in the revitalization of yet another Black Action Movement (BAM III) on campus.

This chapter focuses upon the experiences and memories of Ennis Campbell Esme Rodriguez, two students of color who commit themselves to working on behalf of UCAR coalition and the third wave of the Black Action Movement. The stories behind Ennis and Esme's transformations from student to activist are presented in the pages in richly detailed biographical narratives. Contained within each narrative are the key personal events and experiences that speak to the their growth as individuals and activists across three broad time points:

- Their lives prior to attending Michigan: As children born to African American and Latino parents, who grow in city and suburban neighborhoods in the Midwest, and who as adolescents later attend elite high schools;
- The lives they led during their time at Michigan: As young undergraduates learning to embrace their identities as people of color, who endure a rash of openly racist attacks, and who eventually become campus activists in the fight to establish a racism-free university; and
- Their lives after the Tower Takeover is called to end: As adults engaged in serious reflection of their activism and the changes it has wrought both personally and politically.

A brief analysis of Ennis and Esme's stories and the ways in which they inform our understanding of the individual and shared motivations that guide the process of becoming an activist then closes out each biographical narrative.

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<sup>31</sup> See "Ex-DJ apologizes for racial slurs," 1987.

## Ennis' Story

Ennis' days as a college student activist had been well behind him when he agreed to be interviewed for this study. His days as a change agent, however, were still unfolding although with less success than he had hoped. For over 20 years, Ennis has worked as a college administrator, training undergraduates in the arts of dialogue and conflict resolution. When he took the job, Ennis was certain he would be able to affect change, at both an institutional level as well as an individual level. Lately though, Ennis was feeling defeated by the general apathy the undergraduates on his campus displayed and his institution's failure to move forward on key issues of educational access, tolerance, and multiculturalism in general.

It did not help that he was turning the corner on 40 or that his three teenage girls were now actively dating. Late at night, Ennis said, he found himself missing those moments he had known as a young activist when the world brimmed with the possibility of great social change. Ennis' own activist efforts had been tied to the University of Michigan's anti-apartheid movement on campus as well as the third Black Action Movement. They were the two political causes that had changed him forever. From time to time, he found himself envying the youth and innocence of the few college activists he came across in his work.

Ennis also admitted that it was becoming increasingly difficult to accept that change he once believed he would create had not come to full fruition. Yet as these words taken from Ennis' last interview revealed, he was slowly coming to grips with his place in the larger process of social change:

When I was a student, I believed in a sprint. You run as hard as you can. You know, you just give it your all. I realized that this work is not a sprint. I went to a place where I realized maybe it's a marathon and I have to have endurance. And about two years ago, I realized that it's not a marathon either. It's really a relay race. I'm running at a part where I may not cross the finish line. My part is to run with the baton until I find someone I have to give to baton to. Then I've done my part. That's it...I don't really know if I was the first leg or the second leg but I know I'm not the last leg.

Here is Ennis's story.

■ ■ ■

Ennis Campbell was born in 1967, the one bright spot in his young parents' short-lived marriage. "My mom dropped out of college when she met my father," he explained. "They had me and then went their separate ways some time after that." Home for most of Ennis' young life was a small house on the northwest side of Detroit, situated in a middle class community composed primarily of African American families with a sprinkling here and there of Polish, Ukrainian, and Irish immigrants.

Unlike most of the families in the area, his was one of the few maintained by a single parent, his mother. Not long after she and her husband divorced, Ennis' mother would train to become a police officer. While the job provided the good, steady income they needed as a small family, it also meant irregular shift work and long hours. Ennis quickly became the man of the house, in charge of its upkeep. "My mother worked crazy shifts," he remembered. "It was just she and I in the house. While she was at work, it was up to me to care for the house, you know? She had her job and I had mine..."

While he did not always enjoy the role, Ennis understood that he needed to help when and where he could. "My mother had a lot of responsibility on her shoulders," he said.

Me, the house, the job. And she was doing it for us, so that we could have the things we needed. I will always respect her for that, you know...She wanted us to be a strong family. But it was going to take some teamwork.

Ennis mother was also committed to ensuring that her son possessed a serious respect for education. She passed that lesson on, largely by modeling her own commitment to school. First, she re-enrolled in college and earned her bachelor's

degree. Later, when Ennis was older, she returned to college once more to earn a master's degree in criminal justice. "She worked so hard," he said.

I remember that. The long shifts at work and then her coming home to me and the mountain of reading, writing, papers that needed to get done. The funny thing was she loved it. She loved school. She loved learning. And she'd tell me, 'Education is everything Ennis. Don't ever forget that.'

### **"Mr. Catholic"**

Ennis' mother was also a deeply spiritual woman who believed firmly in attending church and praying. Rather than send him to one of the local public schools, Ennis' mother managed to enroll him in a private, Roman Catholic grade school known as St. Andrew's. "My mother was able—I don't remember how—to get me into Catholic school," he recalled. "I know we got help with tuition or else we would have not been able to afford it."

From what he remembers, Ennis took to St. Andrew's and its Catholic traditions like a duck to water. First, he became an alter server. His reliability and attentiveness to every aspect of Mass, soon made him a favorite of St. Andrew's priests. "I would get asked all the time to serve at Mass," he said. "Whether it was regular Mass or Sunday Mass or a wedding or a feast day, I'd be there. I don't know why really but as a kid I loved it."

Later, he would be asked to serve as a student catechism leader, helping his grade school peers memorize the commandments and learn their prayers. His proficiency in this role would pave the way for his nomination as student-leader of several of St. Andrew's youth programs. "For a kid, I was very caught up in my faith, in being Catholic," Ennis explained. "I no longer think of myself that way but at that point there was nothing I strongly identified with more than as Catholic. I was like 'Mr. Catholic.'

In addition to his spiritual pursuits, Ennis also proved himself to be a talented student in the classroom. His mother's love of books and school had clearly rubbed



off. “I liked school, even as a kid,” he said. “I was good at it too. I always came home with good grades, especially in religion.”

### **St. Regis High School**

Had it not been for another scholarship, Ennis might not have found his way to St. Regis High School, a Jesuit Catholic high school that was known throughout the city of Detroit for its elite academic standards as well as the all-male composition of its student body. “The opportunity came up to go this Jesuit high school and I jumped at it right away,” he recalled. “It was a lucky break really, otherwise I would have had to go to public high school like everyone else.”

Ennis was excited about the chance to attend St. Regis in large part because it would give him a chance to explore the possibility of becoming a priest. More than once during grade school days, he had entertained the idea of life as Fr. Ennis. “I gave a lot of thought to being a priest, especially during Mass,” he remembered. “How it would feel to be saying Mass, not just serving at it. Pursuing the priesthood as a Jesuit struck me as the perfect blend for me of, you know, the academic pursuit and faith.”

Ennis was also excited about the opportunity to attend an all-male school. “Maybe it had to do with the fact that my father wasn’t around when I was growing up,” he said. “Maybe subconsciously I missed that father influence. But I liked the idea of being around a lot of other guys.” To gain a foothold in the student community of St. Regis, he signed on to play football. In the spring, Ennis would also join the school’s bowling team.

Did he have the chance to interact with other African American students? “Yes and no,” Ennis said. While the school’s student body was composed primarily of White students, each class year had a small population of African American students in it. “There were like 15 of us in every class,” he recalled. “So it wasn’t like we were bumping into each other.”

Most of the young African American men who attended St. Regis, however, chose to stand on the outside fringes of the institution, participating in its sports teams but rarely anything else. The limited involvement his peers exhibited puzzled Ennis throughout his first two years of high school. “I just kind of threw myself into the place,” he said. “That’s just how I am. And I ended up getting teased, especially by the older Black students who were like ‘Man, what are you doing? Don’t you know how screwed up this school is? Just wait.’”

### **Passed Over**

Ennis would find out how prescient those words were during his junior year of high school, when he would be dealt a crippling blow in the place it hurt the most: his faith life. Not long after he entered the halls of St. Regis, Ennis had heard about an early training program its Jesuits sponsored on behalf of the young men they considered to be strong, potential candidates for the priesthood. He was certain he would be tapped.

As fate would have it, however, Ennis was passed over without so much as a word even though he had made it known to several of his Jesuit teachers that he hoped to one day join their ranks. In the following story, Ennis recalls the pain and betrayal he felt when he came to the realization that the priests had never seriously considered him in the first place.

...I learned at the beginning of my junior year, that there were certain students that the system—I mean, I know it sounds crazy to apply that [term] to a religion, to an organized religion but—that the system was promoting kids who identified with the priesthood and I wasn’t one of them. And I really wondered what was it about me that was separating me from that group of students. It wasn’t academics. It wasn’t my passion for the school. It wasn’t my commitment to working for the church. I worked a lot in the church. But I was definitely not getting mentored or tracked to go into the priesthood.

Crestfallen, Ennis returned home to tell his mother about his unfortunate revelation. All through the night, he said, the two talked about the harsh realities of racism and discrimination. “It was really the first time my mother broke it down for me,” Ennis recalled.

I mean, it wasn't like I didn't know about how racist people could be but this was the first time it was directed right at me. I lost out on something big because of my skin color and the fact that they couldn't see past that part of me. And man, did that hurt. My poor mother, she tried to put me back together but at the same time, I think she knew she couldn't. She knew that I wouldn't be the same. So she just said, ‘You have to keep moving forward, that's the only way to get through it. Just keep moving forward.’

### **A Religious Skeptic is Born**

After he had been passed over for Jesuit training, Ennis started to look at his Jesuit teachers with a more critical eye. They were no longer the godly and infallible men he had taken them to be but flawed human beings with their own unfortunate limitations. “Talk about falling from grace,” he explained. “I put those guys on such a tall pedestal. I mean, I worshipped them. I did. But after they passed me over...I recognized that they weren't all that and probably never were.”

Ennis' passing over would also spark his skepticism of organized religion, something he has yet to overcome even as an adult. “I started to wonder about the Catholic Church, the priesthood, everything I believed in from the start,” he said. “If the Jesuits could get it wrong, what else might not be true? Just how deep did racism go in these places?” Ennis explained further:

So, really there started my dissatisfaction with organized religion and where I really started to question what either my personal characteristics were or my—you know I know the term for it now but I didn't then—social identities were that was separating me from other folks and did not allow me to have the same access or were distancing me from other people.

## **Told You So**

When Ennis' African American friends heard the news, they offered no sympathy. Instead, they chided him for believing he could break the predominately white ranks of the Jesuits in the first place. "It was one big 'We told you so' session," he recalled.

... I always defended the place...from day one they [his African American friends] had an attitude like "This is place is messed up. It's classist"—which it was—"it's not for us. Our parents are just trying to get us some opportunities so we can make it.' And I'd always been the one like 'Guys, no, no you have to invest in the place. You get out of it what you put into.' And they got a great deal of satisfaction out of it [his being passed over]. I mean, when my experiences started to mirror their experiences, they were in there kind of blowing on the sparks too, you know like 'Yeah, we told you this place was wack.'

## **The "Angry Black Man" Attitude**

Ennis's rejection would prompt a personal transformation in the way he carried himself through the hallways and classrooms of St. Regis. "I started taking on more of the 'angry Black man' attitude," he explained.

It was the seed of rejection that had been planted in me. I was feeling on the outside and not wanting to do whatever was going to be necessary to be in the inside. You know, it was like I had done what I could to be accepted and it wasn't good enough. So I just walked around giving off this hard 'Screw you Whitey vibe' in class, to my teachers, everywhere I felt like it. I think that's where a lot of my 'I have to carve my own way, figure this out for myself, no one's going to come along and help me figure this out' attitude came from too.

## **Doing a 180°**

Ennis also began implementing what he later referred to as a process of "detachment," removing himself from the center of social and religious life at St. Regis. He recalled:

I was still a good kid for the most part. But I did do a kind of 180.° I dropped out doing mostly everything at the church. The only thing I was interested in was going away to college. My involvement in the school went to zero where I was very involved before. Church was the same thing. I was like ‘Screw this. I gotta get out of here because I’m not feeling affirmed at all’...

When his mother began noticing these changes in his attitude and behavior in her son, she made space for the new Ennis to emerge though there were plenty of moments when she wished the old one would reappear. He remembered further:

My mother was very supportive even when I know I was tough to live with. I think she understood what I was going through and I think she, in some ways, fanned the flames a little bit. She asked very provocative questions and she didn’t sugarcoat things for me. It was very much kind of, you know, ‘Sweetheart, I’m sorry that you had to deal with this in this way now but this is the real world. This is life. And better that you find out this way now than later, in a harsher way.’ She never kid or made excuses for what I was experiencing...She let me be me, her angry Black kid for as long as I needed to.

### **Looking to Escape**

By his senior year of high school, Ennis’ “angry Black man” attitude had given way to a complete and total “screw it all” outlook. This approach had been prompted by his final determination that he would not call out his Jesuit teachers for their racist practices. More than once, Ennis had flirted with such an idea but never acted it. “What good would it have done in the long run?” he asked. “I wasn’t going to be a Jesuit anyway, even if they tapped me. And I doubt after calling them a bunch of racists that they’d even think of asking.” He chose instead to focus on the future and the possibility of a new start in college. “I was like ‘Screw it, let’s go away to school’” Ennis remembered. “This was only for a moment anyways.”

After exploring a series of schools, Ennis had refined his search to consist of three institutions, Brown University, Georgetown University, and the University of Michigan. The determining factor, he told himself, would be the offer of a

scholarship. “Even though I was in my ‘angry Black man’ mode, I was still doing my schoolwork and keeping up with my grades,” Ennis said. “So the possibility of earning a scholarship was not out of the question.”

### **Choosing Michigan**

Ennis was strongly leaning towards Georgetown University despite its Jesuit Catholic affiliation. Several of his friends had enrolled there and were happy with life in D.C. with its large African American community on campus as well as within the city. The foil to his becoming a Georgetown man was one Father Morgan, the only Jesuit that Ennis would ever come to trust or respect.

Father Morgan taught Ennis’ senior English class and was the one teacher who had been able to permeate the thick crust of defensiveness and cynicism that he had built around himself after being passed over for priestly training. Ennis recalled:

I had such respect for this guy. I mean, he was something else. He looked like Marlon Brando. I really always tried my hardest to impress this guy, you know? His nickname for me was ‘Big Boy.’ He’d go ‘Big Boy, you’ll never go to Michigan if you don’t examine things in a more critical nature...’ It was him who made me really want to go to U of M. He always talked about it like it was the Holy Grail or something.

His words carried weight, Ennis said, because of Father Morgan’s authenticity and utter lack of pretense. “Father Morgan got it in terms of social issues,” he said.

He just got it. He wasn’t so ivory tower like the other priests that we had then. And I felt he respected me because of my work in his class. It wasn’t about my race at all. I was just Ennis to him. Ennis who wanted to go to a good college and who needed a scholarship. He was all about helping me do that.

A few months after he had applied to the University of Michigan, Ennis would receive an acceptance letter as well as an offer of a four-year scholarship. He briefly considered Georgetown but at Father Morgan’s

insistence, he decided to attend Michigan instead. Ennis spent the remainder of his senior year preparing to move to Ann Arbor and start over again.

### **Fitting Right In**

Ennis would enroll at the University of Michigan in 1984. From what he remembers, the initial transition from high school to college occurred without a single hitch. “I just fit in, no problem,” he said. It helped, of course, that Ennis had taken part in the University’s Bridge Program, a pre-college summer program that introduced entering students of color to academic and social life at Michigan. Weeks before he was to officially move onto campus, Ennis had completed several courses and spent a considerable amount of time learning the names and locations of its many academic buildings. “I had lots of time to figure out where everything was,” he recalled. “So when I got to campus, I already knew the lay of the land.”

It also helped that Ennis was used to both taking care of himself and being in a predominately White environment. “I was always a very responsible kid, being an only child and my mom having to work long hours,” he stated.

I knew how to take care of myself. I knew how to be by myself and not feel lonely...I had the immersion thing down too. I had always gone to school with kids of all kinds, you know, especially White, old money and the like, so it was like O.K., whatever. I know what kind of place this is.

### **A Hostile Campus**

It was not before long, however, that Ennis would encounter a less warm, welcoming University than the one he had experienced as a Summer Bridge participant. Like most other colleges and universities in 1984, Michigan was beset by an intrusive preoccupation with skin color that often ended in some form of racial intolerance (see for example Farrell, 1988; Boyer, 1990). “The overall campus was hostile, really hostile,” Ennis remembered.

It kind of amazed me really. If I think of the backlash against affirmative action now that students go up against it was the same thing except very out in the open. Open and out. You could feel it and see it. Everyone looked at you like ‘Why are you here? And who invited you?’

The attention from well-meaning White peers was also difficult to manage, Ennis said. “Even the cool White kids were like ‘Wow, look at the Black kid.’ It was like you were on display, you know. What a novelty. You know, the whole ‘I’m going to meet me a Black kid and be friends.’”

A large part of the campus’ unwelcoming climate was due to its lack of resources for students of color. “Just imagine,” he said.

We didn’t a minority affairs office. We didn’t have any real institutional advocates. We didn’t have an active Black Student Union. No one did anything with it. Trotter House was like it was abandoned. There was this distant history of student activism from the 1970s that we heard about but that was non-existent then. Even among the other students of color, there wasn’t a lot of interaction between us all. It was pretty segregated.

### **Meeting Michael**

Had it not been for the older undergraduates and graduates that had befriended him during his first year of college, Ennis claims he would have spent the rest of his time at Michigan like the other students of color around him seemed to, disengaged from the University and segregated from one another. “I probably would have done what every else was doing, keeping to themselves and just going through the motions of classes, papers but not really getting involved in anything” he said.

Ennis’ connection to these older students would come through his relationship with a Summer Bridge Program counselor named Michael, a young African American law student that had impressed him with his intelligence, his humor, and his extensive experience traveling and living abroad. “Michael’s parents were from Africa,” he explained. “He was born here [the United States] but he very



much had this international world view and was really into international politics. He'd seen the world.”

Michael was also one of the first people to greet me when I was moving into the residence hall for the Bridge program. God, he was so cool, you know, so together. He actually came looking for me during my first year. It turned out to be a good thing. He introduced me to a bunch of other engaged Black graduate students. They were a real community at a time when there wasn't a lot of community around to be had.

Ennis was convinced that others on campus wondered about his association with an older group of students. He continued further:

As a seventeen year-old I'm sure it looked odd that I was hanging out with all of these 25-year olds. But I did. And the reason was they let me hang out with them. And they weren't condescending to me either.

Why did he seek out this group of older peers over and over again? One reason, Ennis said, was that they fed his identity as African American man, prompting him to think deeply about his responsibilities to his community. “Hanging out with the guys really made me think,” he recalled.

They were true critical thinkers at a time when I and the rest of my friends were just accustomed to thinking about social stuff like parties, dating, that kind of thing. They'd start talking and I'd be like ‘Screw class. I'm staying here with them.’ And then we'd settle into these amazing conversations that I had never had before. About what it meant to be a black man in a global context, what it was we stood for as Black men, where our powers were in changing a world that we knew was unjust...how we might overthrow the institutions that intended to keep us down.

Another reason lay in the way these men were actively engaged in trying to change the cold, intolerant ways of campus life. “In a lot ways, the graduate students of the middle eighties on the Michigan campus haven't really gotten their fair due,” Ennis stated. “Undergraduates were just foot soldiers.”

I mean, we were just people to mobilize. Graduate students like Michael and the rest of the guys were the ones doing all of the work, strategizing, talking to administrators about how students of color needed more than was what being provided. They didn't just have their noses buried in their books. I know some of them took forever to get out of Michigan because they were taking care of University business, you know, pushing people to recruit us, support us, make sure we were successful...

Not only did these individuals open Ennis' eyes as to the kinds of campus change that needed to be fostered, but they also awoke in him the desire to try his own hand at being a leader for change. "I got politically active in my residence hall," he remembered. "I ran for hall government and I won. That meant I now had access to money and I had a big say in how it got spent. The guys stood behind me the whole time."

### **Building a Reputation**

The 1985-1986 school year, Ennis's sophomore year of college, would find him continuing to engage in a number of campus-based activities. In addition to being a member of the Michigan Student Assembly's Minority Affairs Committee, he wrote for the magazine Black Perspectives while also assuming the position as one of the central chairmen of his residence hall's governing body, a group who referred to themselves as the "Bursley Family."

Though he derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from these activities, he rarely lost sight of the fact that for most of his African American peers, such activities were hardly an everyday occurrence. "Honestly, there wasn't much for Black students to do socially in those days," he explained.

We weren't part of the Greek system, you know, we didn't have our own house or anything like that. We didn't have much money between us all, and there were so few of us on campus, it was like those of who could had to take advantage of every opportunity available to make a social life for ourselves."

In the process, Ennis said, he would become known among his peers as someone who knew how to navigate the University and get what he needed from it. “I was building a reputation,” Ennis said.

I was becoming what other people recognized as someone who knew how to deliver the goods, how to get things done on campus. I mean, I managed to get to know the Vice President of Student Affairs and I could get anything out of him after a while. Anything. If you gave me a chance and gave me money, I could pull people together and I knew how the place worked well enough that I could something done.

### **Changing Majors**

One of the unintended consequences of Ennis’ deepening engagement in campus activities was that he soon began to question the relevancy of his engineering coursework. “My mind was always someplace else,” he stated.

I mean, I’m sitting through statics, I’m sitting through thermals, and I was thinking about my identity, the Black man I wanted to be, what kind of change I wanted to make in the world. And I was like ‘What am I doing in engineering? What’s the point?’

At the start of fall term, Ennis would formally petition to change his major from engineering to psychology. “What resonated more with me than engineering was building relationships and watching how people came together and interacted,” he recalled. “I was getting into the whole psychology behind people and what makes them tick.”

Changing his major was a hard sell; his mother tried for weeks to convince him to complete his engineering studies. He remembered further:

It disappointed my mother, my wanting to change career paths and changing out of engineering into psychology. I think she thought ‘In four years my son will be able to get a job for this amount of money and that will be that.’ And it was hard because you feel like your parents have invested so much in you and to disappoint her that way

was tough. I realized thought that I just wasn't going to live that life. I wasn't going to be in a cubicle with a slide rule. That just wasn't me.

Psychology, as it turned out, was a subject Ennis felt he mastered quite easily. "Psychology was a breeze," he said. "I think it actually made me a better critical thinker too. Being able to engage in psych discussions and being able to simultaneously consider different schools of thought, I mean, that was easy for me." Part of the reason that Ennis took so thoroughly to psychology was its close resemblance to the kinds of networking he had been engaged since his first days on campus. "It was what I had been doing all along," he stated.

I was in organizational psych and thinking 'Yeah, this stuff about group dynamics, it makes sense. It's what I see all of the time.' It gave me a framework to analyze and understand what was going on around me. 'I'd be sitting in class thinking 'O.K. if we put these groups of people with these groups of folks, what would be the outcome?' I just flourished in that setting.

### **Becoming Political**

Beyond changing majors, Ennis had no other expectations for his sophomore year of college. "I thought I'd take my psych courses, you know, and do my social stuff, networking, getting money for activities..." he said. By the end of the year, however, Ennis would participate in a major campus protests known as the "Diag Shanties," a series of public demonstrations held throughout the month of March and intended to raise the campus' consciousness of the apartheid system that still plagued South Africa (Peckham, p. 352).

Ennis remembers being somewhat surprised by the announcement of the demonstrations. "Michael was the one who had to tell me about it," he recalled. "I was like 'What? When did all of this start happening? Where was I?'" Part of his puzzlement, Ennis said, was due to the lack of real political organizing and solidarity among African American students who attended Michigan in the mid-1980s. The idea that his peers were trying to establish a campus movement was not news he was

used to hearing. “The truth of the matter was we weren’t tight when it came to politics,” he said.

There were people doing things here and there but there wasn’t a lot of solidarity, a lot of cohesiveness to it. As a community, we just weren’t together like that. Like I think we all knew about the first Black Action Movement...I know I did but it was in a kind of vague way I have to admit. But for most of us, it was still distant history when Michigan was a different place.

Ennis would later learn that the demonstrations had been organized by members of two predominately white student organizations, the Free South Africa Coordinating Committee and Amnesty International. Both groups championed international causes such as divestment, an end to apartheid, the release of South African leader Nelson Mandela, and the revision of American policy as it related to Central and Latin America (Peckham, 1994). “I’d heard of these groups before,” he recalled. “They were kind of interesting.”

It was mostly White graduate students who were in them. There were Black graduate students too but not as many. When it came to the South African stuff, these guys would call Michael and some of my other graduate friends and say ‘Can you come talk about apartheid or Mandela?’ And Michael and the guys would do it. They would get up and talk about seeing Mandela freed, that kind of stuff.

This unique collaboration, Ennis said, would become par for the course during the Shanties protest. “I started to notice this interesting pattern to how Black and White students cooperated,” he said.

What the white students brought to the mix was they had the organization, they had the resources, and they could take more risks...But they didn’t have the right faces, you know, out in front. So when they’d hold a rally or a demonstration, they would get the speakers and the mike and then they’d get a brother to get up there and make a speech. That’s how it went. It wasn’t anything deep between us as White and Black people but just like more convenient.

It was through this unique form of convenient, political reciprocity that Ennis' first foray into the world of protest eventually would be borne. "Looking back, it was kind of a weird set of circumstances that led to me becoming an activist. But it happened. My sophomore year was definitely the year I became political."

### **Living in a Shanty**

Ennis participation in the Shanties protest began with a simple invitation. "I don't even remember who it was that invited me to take part," he stated. "But I remember being asked to help build some shanties in the center of campus—the Diag—and then stay in them overnight." The idea of the protest was to raise the campus' consciousness of South Africans and their quality of life. "We wanted to show other students what the living conditions were like for people in South Africa and draw attention to the injustice of apartheid."

Ennis' role in the protest was simple. After helping to construct the shanties, small hut-like dwellings that typified the underdeveloped housing in South Africa, he would live in one for several days until another student would take his place. "I ended up living in a shanty for four days, three nights," he recalled.

Just me, some books, and a sleeping bag. Believe me, it was not at all comfortable. I slept on hard ground mostly. I didn't go to classes. I didn't run around from meeting to meeting like I usually did. I didn't do anything but sit there and talk to people who were living in other shanties next to mine or who came up to me to ask questions.

Looking back, Ennis was not certain how effective the protest had been at raising people's consciousness of South Africans and their lives under apartheid. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think it was as big a thing although we tried to make it seem like that." In terms of his own consciousness, however, there was no question in his mind of the powerful effect his shanty experience had wrought. For three days, Ennis was provided with the rare opportunity to step away from the bustle of campus

life and reflect upon his identity and his purpose in life rather than his social or academic responsibilities.

It was still empowering. I was slowly coming to realize my own power, my own agency. I started developing a self-concept of ‘O.K. what personal power do I have and what access have I been given and what needs to be applied to those things I care the deepest about.’

Ennis’ consciousness of himself as a young African American man would also be boosted by the time he spent living in and among the shanties. Michael and some of his other graduate school friends had visited him every day of the protest, often spending hours at a time conversing about their ties to Africa. “We got caught up in the stories of people—our people—being jailed for decades, being murdered, massacred,” he recalled.

It got a lot of us thinking about who we were, and what we stood for, to ask what our powers were when it came to changing the world. I remember talking to Michael and the rest of the guys, all of us trying to grapple with this intense need to do something for our brothers in Africa and to reclaim our Africanness.

### **A Mother’s Response**

How did Ennis’ mother—herself a former Civil Rights activist—react to the news of his participation in the Shanties Protest? Interestingly enough, Ennis did not tell his mother about the protest until it was nearly finished. She was able to piece together the story of the Shanties only after he had mailed home a copy of an article he had written about the protest for the campus magazine, Black Perspectives. “She called one day and said, ‘Uh, Ennis, what’s all this?’”

You wanna tell me about skipping classes for three days? We ended up having a great conversation about how I felt I was growing, changing. I think she was happy to hear about that even though I hadn’t told her about my plans first. But it was just one of those things, you know.

You talk about it after you've done it because in the moment you aren't really thinking of anything else."

### **A Warm Campus Response**

Ennis was quick to point out that the Shanties protest did not draw the kind of public criticism and scrutiny the Black Action Movement III protest would a year later. "Everyone reacted really positively," he recalled.

The whole campus seemed to. We didn't have a whole lot of people counter-demonstrating or people coming by giving us a hard time with 'What the hell do you people think you're doing?' How could they? I mean, their reaction would have to be a bit crazy. 'Hey, I'm for public apartheid!' The University shouldn't cut ties with businesses that support public apartheid!' You'd have sounded crazy.

He also believes that the warm response from campus emboldened students of color to directly tackle the issue of racism. "The Shanties protest was a big confidence booster," Ennis explained.

Had it gone south in some bad way, I don't know if people would have been up to take on other causes. But it turned about to be a win-win situation. And I think that made a difference for us later on. We felt braver, more confident about putting ourselves out there.

### **Under Attack**

Ennis and his friends would continue to grapple with their questions about identity and social change through the summer and into the fall of 1986-1987, his junior year of college. In comparison to his two previous years at Michigan, however, his third year of college would prove to be unlike the others that had come before it. Overall, Ennis said, it would be the year that African American students on campus would "wake up" to the fact that they were "under attack." It would also be the year that Ennis would translate his growing political convictions into direct protest.



From what he could recall, there were several events that set both of these processes in motion. First, was the perceived lack of progress the University showed when it came to diversifying the student body. “I don’t know what the numbers were exactly,” he said. “But I know they had to be really low. All you had to do was look around you once or twice. You could probably count the number of people of color you saw on one hand.”

Historical records well substantiate Ennis’ memory. In 1984, Esme and Ennis’ first year in college, the enrollment of Black students stood at 5.1%, roughly 1,595 students of an overall population whose ranks topped off at little more than 31,000 students (“Black enrollment at Michigan,” 1987). Although this figure represented the third highest enrollment among all Big Ten universities, it indicated a significant decline from the 7.7% of Black students who had enrolled at Michigan in the year 1977 (“Black enrollment at Michigan,” 1987). By 1987, the enrollment figures had increased only slightly to 5.3%, not nearly the kind of institutional progress that was once promised (“Black enrollment at Michigan,” 1987).

Second was the growing presence of bigotry and incivility that increasingly marked student relations. In 1983, for example, the year before Ennis entered Michigan, several watermelons had been deliberately smashed against an ethnic mural that was housed in the Mary Markley Hall (“Students protest racism,” 1987). By his junior year, such events were occurring with greater frequency and intensity, including the posting of a flyer announcing “open hunting season” on African Americans (“Students combine to combat racist incidents,” 1987); the distribution of posters declaring the establishment of “White Pride Week” (“Racist flyers surface again,” 1987); and the publishing of an editorial cartoon by the Michigan Daily depicting African Americans as thieves and murderers willing to kill for designer clothes (“Racism: Our University’s shame,” 1987).

When coupled with the racist, on-air antics of student disc jockey Ted “Tenacious Slack” Sevransky in early February of 1987, these incidents produced a keen sense of vulnerability and threat among Ennis and his African American peers.

“We felt like we were being singled out,” he said. “And we were, you know. We were. When people are calling for a hunting season and you’re the target, there’s no way you’re not being singled out, that’s it’s all just in your head somehow.”

### **The Formation of the United Coalition Against Racism (UCAR) and the Black Action Movement III (BAM III)**

According to Ennis, Sevransky’s radio broadcast would quickly lead students to organize themselves into two activist groups. One was known as the United Coalition Against Racism or UCAR as it was soon called. The other group was an off-shoot of UCAR assembled by students who called themselves the Black Action Movement III or BAM III in homage to the first two BAM movements that had been launched by African American students in the early and mid-1970s.

There were some significant differences between the two groups in terms of their scope, their membership, and the ways they conducted themselves. “Most of the leadership in UCAR was biracial or mixed,” he explained.

The same thing with their members, I mean, they were open to anybody who was down with fighting racism. And they were more into world politics, you know, not just Black politics but the Chicano movement, Central American politics. UCAR had a political sharpness about it, I guess you could say. They were theorists, intellectuals. So when it came to framing the issues, they could do it from the standpoint of history, of economics, of theory...They were more well-rounded. And they gave people, other than Black people, a way to contribute, to be part of fighting the racism and hostility that was running rampant on campus.

BAM III was a different political animal, Ennis said. “BAM III was all Black people really.”

Very, very, very Afrocentric, very Pan African. And very, very hostile. I mean, BAM III was just mad. Mad and aggressive, and totally self-interested. It was off-putting for a lot of campus, I know. BAM III was very polarizing but also very galvanizing for the Black students. They made a great fuss in terms of the institution, telling administrators

'Look, you are not going to negotiate with anybody but us.' That was their approach. They thought the fight was all about them.

Because of these differences, the two groups would never form a tight-knit, unified front. They would establish, however, an uneasy alliance, collaborating when necessary. "Honestly, BAM III had more legitimacy out in the yard but I think they recognized that they would need all the help they could get," Ennis recalled. "That's why they worked with UCAR and kept them in the loop."

Which group did Ennis support? "Both," he said.

I was one of the few students who moved in between BAM III and UCAR. I was trusted by both sides, I guess. But I wanted to be in both groups because I thought each of them brought something good to the table. I saw how they fit together even when they didn't.

### **The Black Action Movement III Begins**

Unlike its predecessor, BAM I, which had slowly gained momentum over the course of several months, BAM III came to a head quickly (Peckham, 1994). Several weeks after Sevransky's racist radio broadcast, UCAR would sponsor the first all-campus protest against racism at the University on March 4, 1986. That same day, they would also march to the Fleming Administration Building and present then-Provost James J. Duderstadt with a list of "anti-racist proposals" that called for a series of new initiatives including:

- A detailed plan for substantially increasing in Black student enrollment;
- The establishment of a minority student affairs office;
- Mandatory workshops on racism and diversity for all incoming students;
- The creation of a minority student lounge;
- Tuition waivers for all underrepresented and economically disadvantaged minority students; and
- Full observance of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday ("UCAR demands," 1987).

Provost Duderstadt and the rest of the University administration were given a two-week window in which to respond to the proposals.

The very next day, March 5, 1986, Michigan State Representative Morris Hood (D-Detroit) would convene a hearing of the Higher Education Subcommittee in the Michigan Union, an unprecedented fact-finding mission of sorts to determine how pervasive racism had become on the campus of the State's flagship institution and what the University was doing to combat it. According to the campus newspaper, *The University Record*, the four-hour hearing drew an audience of 600 people, 60 of which recounted their own personal experiences with racism on the University campus ("University to follow up on racism charges," 1987).

Ennis was one of the 600 people in the audience that day. And though he did not stand before a microphone and offer any personal testimony, he had his own stories to tell. "I could definitely relate to the kinds of things people were talking about," he recalled.

I had been involved in several incidents actually. There was this one time where these guys had rolled past me and some of my friends as we were walking home. They opened their van door and started yelling all sorts of nasty names, hurling all sorts of insults, just because we were Black and happened to be on the street. And then, one night, I was riding the campus bus back home to Bursley and these white guys started throwing stuff at me and the other Black kids. It was humiliating to be treated like that.

### **A Spur in the Backside**

The hearing would be followed by a series of smaller disruptions and protests carried out mainly by undergraduates who supported UCAR. Ennis could be found in the middle of nearly every single one of them. "All anybody had to do was ask," he said. If the request came from Michael or one of his other graduate friends, he would drop everything to help out. "There was this closeness, a bond that I had especially with some of the older guys who were graduate students," he explained.

So when the time came to attend a rally, a protest, whatever, it was done, yes, out of political concerns but also out of a personal commitment to my friends. I wanted them to know that they could rely on me...that I would be there to support them, that we were in it together.

Even if Ennis had not been asked, he would have found some way to throw himself in to the mix, he said. “That’s what I did, what a lot of Black undergraduates did to support BAM III and UCAR,” he recalled.

I mean, we did other things to help like post fliers, Xerox stuff, run errands. But for most of the undergrads, we were meant to be spurs in the University’s backside. That was our role, our job. Mine too. Ticking them off any way we could so that they wouldn’t walk away, tune us out or ignore us.

He explained further:

It was our way of turning up the heat really. I remember doing all kinds of annoying, crazy stuff. We’d regularly stop traffic in front of the Union. The police would come out and we’d go ‘I’m trying to find my contact lens.’ Or we’d go take all of the books off the shelves in the UGLI. It was all civilly disobedient stuff. But the goal was the same. Get their attention every day. Do whatever you have to but just get their attention every day. It became a contest sometimes between all of us undergrads, which one of us could get our names in the Daily.

### **Ugly Identity Politics**

One of the benefits of Ennis’ dual role as a supporter and ready troublemaker of both BAM III and UCAR was that he was often privy to the decision-making processes of each organization. “People in both groups kind of let me just hang around,” he said. “I didn’t do much. Sometimes I got asked for my opinion but mostly I just sat and listened and tried to take in everything that was going on.”

It was during these meetings that Ennis’ says his eyes were opened to the less noble sides of both UCAR and BAM III, both of whom evinced sexist, exclusionary attitudes. “UCAR wasn’t as bad as BAM III, I don’t think,” he said.

People in UCAR could be really hard on one another, really mean. Especially the guys. They were always questioning the women—even though one of them was their leader—always challenging their authority. They didn't do it to each other in the same way though. And if something didn't go right, you'd hear people rumbling about letting a man run things. It was definitely sexist.

BAM III meetings could be even harsher. “BAM III was very exclusionary,” he recalled.

It was completely Black or pan-African, you know, nothing else...There was this litmus test you had to pass or you didn't have a part in the organization. And all of that really revolved around skin color, how dark you were. The lighter you were, well, they treated you as suspect. You could go to a rally but you would never have a say or a part in what went on when it started. And you could get yourself disinvited, depending on how you reacted to that stuff. Some people did. Straight up disinvited from being part of the group because they couldn't handle the skin color thing.

At one particular meeting, two BAM III members nearly came to blows because of this narrow, exclusionary mindset. Ennis recalled further:

I remember one meeting when this student almost got into a fight with a BAM III member for disinviting him. They told him ‘You're too yellow. You're too light-skinned. We don't know what your politics are. You got mixed parents or white parents?’ There was almost a fistfight but people broke them up. It was ugly identity politics, you know. Judging people on the basis of their appearance and using that to keep them in or out.

### **A Long Four Days**

On Wednesday, March 18, 1987, UCAR and its new off-shoot, BAM III, co-sponsored a public rally which would disperse only after an ultimatum had been issued: University President Harold Shapiro had until Monday, March 22 to act on what were now being called demands that had been presented to him weeks earlier (see “U-M President Feels Heat of Racism,” 1987). One of the organizers of the rally

would justify the ultimatum in the following words: “We want to let the University know that we’re fed up with its inaction. We’re mad as hell and we’re not taking it anymore” (“U-M President Feels Heat of Racism,” p. 6A, 1987).

The next night, March 19<sup>th</sup>—the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Black Action Movement and its Strike of 1970—UCAR members staged an overnight sit-in of the Fleming Administration Building (Peckham, 1994). Ennis, who had taken part in the public rally the day before, remembered the protest as a lively but respectful affair. He said:

I remember sitting in that night. Oh my God. The sit-in was funny. It was almost ridiculous. They were almost more social than anything, like family reunions. I’m sure we looked like nothing more than a bunch of miscreants, mad, evil people to the administration but we were still focused and we were clear that we needed to get some attention paid to our issues. And the sit-in was the only way for us to keep ourselves in the public view.

The following morning, BAM III and UCAR members would interrupt a Regents meeting being held in a ballroom of the Michigan League. According to Ennis, it was the moment when the protest began to truly heat up. “People were pissed,” he recalled. “We’d gone into the League to try and get some answers and the regents just upped and left. Walked out.”

BAM III and UCAR members would exert even more pressure over the course of the next day and half, until March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1987 when it was announced that President Shapiro would meet with members of the two organizations in a closed session on March 22, 1987 at exactly 7:00 a.m. in the morning (Peckham, 1994). Ennis could not wait. “We all so anxious about the meeting, you know,” he remembered.

Some of us wanted a fight and some of us just wanted to be constructive and get something done. I remember lots of conversations about that topic. Was it really a time to kick ass or a time for constructive negotiations? Anyway, I don’t know too many of us that

slept during that time. I think we all felt like something big was going to happen and nobody wanted to miss it.

### **A Call for Help**

The night before their scheduled meeting with President Shapiro, the members of UCAR and BAM III would issue a national plea calling upon the African American community to provide whatever support they could for their cause. The Reverend Jesse Jackson answered their plea traveling from his ministerial headquarters in Chicago, Illinois to Ann Arbor, Michigan for their meeting with University administrators (Peckham, 1994). Ultimately, Jackson would act as a mediator between the two parties, helping to determine which of the groups' demands were capable of being implemented on a widespread institutional scale.

### **The Six Point Plan**

On March 23, 1987, alongside 4000 other Michigan students, Ennis waited in the standing-room only rally held in the campus' Hill Auditorium for word of a resolution. There was an energy in the room that he had not felt before, he said.

I don't know if I can explain it well but it felt like we were waiting to see the turning of a very big page, like we were on the verge of making history. Does that make sense? I actually felt like a part of history. I felt historic. I'd never ever known what that felt like before.

When President Shapiro and Reverend Jackson approached the podium together, Ennis knew that he and UCAR and BAM III had come out on top. "I remember looking at the guys around me, them looking at me, and all of us were like 'This is going to be good.' Ennis' sense of accomplishment would be greatly augmented when the two leaders outlined what would become known as the "Six-Point Plan," a series of initiatives aimed at fostering a campus of greater access, racial tolerance, and inclusiveness. The Six-Point Plan would include the following:



- The appointment of a vice provost with responsibilities for minority affairs;
- Funding for the Black Student Union;
- The establishment of grievance procedures related to racial harassment and discrimination;
- Fiscal support for the recruitment and retention of African American faculty;
- The establishment of a Presidential Advisory Committee; and
- The inclusion of affirmative action goals in annual reviews (see “University announces six-point action plan,” 1987).

In later years, this plan would serve as the blueprint for the “Michigan Mandate,” President James J. Duderstadt’s program to increase the representation of students, faculty, and staff from all underrepresented groups and foster a campus-wide commitment to diversity (Peckham, 1994).

### **Changed...**

Ennis would emerge from his activist participation in the anti-apartheid movement and Black Action Movement III changed in a number of significant ways. His questionnaire responses indicated as much. Prior to his activism, for example, Ennis ranked his political orientation as a six, indicative of someone who possessed a moderate political viewpoint. After taking part in these particular student movements, his political orientation had clearly shifted to the left; he ranked himself as an eight, someone with a more liberal political viewpoint.

In terms of self-perceptions, Ennis indicated that his activist engagement had effectively convinced him of his abilities to shape history, to lead, to assume responsibility for the democracy he lived in, and to remain optimistic about the prospects of creating lasting change. The most telling indications of how his activism had changed him though were the adjectives he used to describe himself before and after his protest participation.

Before the Black Action Movement III and the Diag Shanty protest, Ennis characterized himself as largely “naïve,” “optimistic,” “shallow,” “well intentioned,”

and “compliant.” Post activist engagement, he described himself as “strong,” “critical,” “impatient,” “enraged,” and “engaged.” Taken as a collective whole, his word choices suggest he had not only become far more in tune with his emotions but had also matured considerably and was a bit wiser about the realities of making change.

Ennis spoke to these very same ideas in his last interview. He said:

One of the things I learned was how to question everything: authority, process, where information comes from, how it gets spun and to whose advantage, and what was being maintained in the spinning of information. I don’t necessarily believe I came out more cynical or less trusting so much as I think I learned how to be more critical and cautious. And these, I think, are good things.

### **...But Still Angry**

Ennis also indicated, however, that he had grown more pessimistic in his view of the University. His engagement in activism had essentially lowered his perceptions of the place in terms of its ability to foster a supportive educational environment, and as a just or fair institution. “I have a real love-hate relationship with the place,” Ennis said.

The experiences I’ve had in my life as a part of the University have been the key things that make me who I am today. Had I gone somewhere else I would probably not be the same person that I am. So I owe a big debt in some way to what I’ve been able to carve out of my existence there. But I still get so frustrated at times and angry...It’s been more than 30 years since the BAM movement and we’ve still never reached the kind of quantitative stuff that was put forth back then. We’ve never had the number of students here that we shot for. We’ve never had the increase in faculty that we were promised. We’ve never really had the resources allocated that we were supposed to. People at Michigan are still talking about the same things they were talking about over thirty years ago. And that to me is unbelievable.

## **Life Post-Michigan**

Ennis Campbell graduated in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in psychology. He started work on his masters degree in the same discipline at Michigan intending to some day become a college professor. He never finished his masters program, however. In the middle of his senior year at Michigan, Ennis married his college sweetheart. His wife gave birth to his first daughter the following year. The young couple would eventually file for divorce some 12 months later and Ennis would be awarded sole custody of his daughter. As a single parent with a full-time job attending school part-time, Ennis could not afford the time or the money to continue on in his studies. He would take a full-time staff position in the student affairs division of a nearby university where he remains today. Ennis has since remarried and is the proud father of three, young teenage girls.

### **Ennis's Story and the Path to Activism**

Much like the stories of Web Murphy and Rosa Cortez, Ennis' tale of activism also provides an interesting perspective on how the process of becoming an activist can unfold in the life of a young person of color. In some respects, his tale is nearly a carbon copy of Web's and Rosa's when it comes to the essential role that peers can play in that process.

Ennis' influential friends, however, were not undergraduates but primarily graduate students studying law and business among other disciplines. The true power of their influence did not seem to stem from age or experience but the many ways they opened his eyes to oppression, racism, and his power to challenge it all. As his story revealed, it was more than talk or dialogue that fueled Ennis' activist awakening, it was also the chance to participate in the Shanties protest and sit in on UCAR and BAM III planning meetings that played a key role in his becoming an activist. These experiences gave him the opportunity to bridge his burgeoning consciousness with

direct political action, imparting his participation with a sense of relevancy and purpose.

Like the others, his story also highlights the influence that identity exerts when it comes to the shaping of the commitment to activism. In the mid-1980s, there were numerous opportunities available to a Michigan undergraduate looking to become politically engaged on campus, including the anti-nuclear war campaign and the movement protesting American's foreign policy particularly as it related to Central America (see Peckham, 1994). Ennis, however, was solely interested in those campus movements that pertained to the empowerment of his African and African American peers. His focus suggests that not all causes possess the same relevance or power in the eyes of potential participants; rather, they have to speak some deeper, more intimate part of our identities.

In addition to these insights, Ennis' story also provides other interesting perspectives of the path to activism. One of those perspectives relates to the powerful activist motivation a young person can derive when he or she feels under attack, how a keen sense of threat can spur the engagement in activism. He recalled on several occasions feeling as though he and his African American peers were "under attack." The rash of racist incidents on campus was a central motivation of the collective organizing that took place in his junior year. The hostile climate of campus and the fearful reactions it prompts can also play a part in mobilizing a student.

Another interesting perspective Ennis' story provides is of the complex dynamics that often permeate the building of a student movement, dynamics that are critical to understanding how a movement is formed and carried forward by its members but in the case of college student activists typically goes unstudied. His story showed that the relationships between members both men and women, as well as African American and White students, affected how deeply tied into a campus movement a student could be. In the case of BAM III, in particular, student leaders

seemed to rely on a series of tenuous alliances, forged because of necessity more than anything else.

These perspectives highlight the larger lesson in Ennis' story: For some of us, the path to activism is paved by a host of experiences and dynamics, only some of which include our peers and our identities. Movement politics and basic emotions such as fear also come into play. These elements deserve further exploration so that we might more fully understand not only how a young person finds their way to activism but stays on that pathway.

### **Esme's Story**

Esme Rodriguez's time as a college activist on the University of Michigan campus had been over for nearly 20 years when she agreed to sit for an interview. Like Ennis, she had been questioning her ability to forge long-lasting social change. As a 36 year-old graduate student, she had organized efforts to increase the enrollment of students of color in her department and maintain the institution's Chicano Studies program which was operating under the threat of closure. While there were more students of color in Esme's department than there had been previously, there remained a great deal of complacency and indifference to issues of educational access and equity.

This was true even for her peers of color who had been admitted to the program as a direct result of the push to diversify the department. Esme was dismayed to find that even they "failed to value one another." And yet, she was trying hard to remain resolute in her commitment to activism. Forecasting the future at the end of an interview, Esme imagined that she would always be working to transform the status quo. She said: "I will maintain my commitment to activism, and probably in ways that are detrimental to my career. But I still believe in doing the right thing and I can't walk away from that.

Here is Esme's story.

■ ■ ■

Esme Rodriguez was born in 1967, an unexpected addition to a family that included three boys and parents who were in their early 40s when she was first conceived. Some days, she wonders if her unanticipated birth is why she has so often felt out of step with the rest of the world. Other days, Esme believes that there was some divine plan behind her late arrival in the world, as though she was meant to follow the beat of no other drum than her own.

One might think it would be different for someone like Esme, who was raised among the conformist confines of Oakdale, Illinois, an affluent suburb located just outside of the city of Chicago. Yet, for Esme, life in the suburbs offered few opportunities to simply fall in line with everyone else. The fact of the matter was she and her family differed considerably from her suburban neighbors. Esme's home life, for example, had been derived from the intermingling and mixing of her father's Mexican roots with her mother's "Anglo-Saxon" ancestry. "My family was the only Latino-mixed family for miles around," she said. "Everyone else was Jewish." Additionally, her family adhered to the religious traditions and practices of Roman Catholicism, a distinct departure from Judaism which was the predominate religion many of her neighbors practiced.

Esme's family stood out, she said, even when it came to the kinds of jobs her parents held. Oakdale was home to numerous lawyers, doctors, bankers, and businesspeople. In contrast, Esme's father taught Spanish at Oakdale High while her mother was a full-time volunteer for the only Roman Catholic Church in the community. "We didn't have the money other people had," she recalled. "We weren't destitute, but compared to everybody else in the neighborhood, we lived a bit differently."

Of course, Esme's parents had not anticipated these social differences when they first moved into the neighborhood five years before she was born. Back then, Oakdale was an affordable, culturally diverse place to live. A period of rapid development in the 1970s, however, transformed the suburb into an affluent,

predominately White environment, a haven for professionals and their families who did not want to live in the city but needed to stay nearby. As Esme explained:

My parents bought their house in 1962. Then in the 1970s there was this explosion of building, of new construction going up everywhere, I guess. Lots of rich people moved in basically. Most of them were Jewish. That became the dominant culture of Oakdale, Jewish culture. It became a very expensive place to live. People who could afford to stay, stayed. But a lot of people moved back into the city or somewhere else because the cost of living wasn't as high as it was in Oakdale. We stayed because it was where my father's job was and because of the Church my mom volunteered for. But I know neither of them thought our neighborhood would change like it did.

### **The Pressure to Conform**

Esme was quick to point out that life in Oakdale was hardly hostile or unwelcoming because of its predominately Jewish character. Nor has it translated into any Anti-Semitic sentiment on her part either, she said. "It was safe, secure place to grow up," she said. "People were very respectful of one another. They still are. And I don't hold any kind of negative perceptions or feelings about Jewish people either. My childhood in Oakdale just didn't lead to that kind of thinking, you know?"

What her early years in Oakdale did lead to was a nagging sense of outsidership that made it difficult for Esme to fully fit in among her grade school peers. "My brothers and I were the only Latinos in school, until at least sixth or seventh grade and we kind of stuck out because of that," she recalled.

Then when it came to our faith, well, we didn't practice what everyone else practiced. We celebrated Christmas. Everyone else in my classes celebrated Hanukkah. We didn't go to synagogue. We went to Church and had Mass. That set me apart from the other kids even more. It was like I didn't have as much in common with them as they did with each other. So I always felt like I was on the fringe of things at school. I was there but I wasn't totally there.

There were moments, Esme recalled, where she and the few other non-Jewish students in her school felt pressured to pass themselves off as Jewish. “In the third grade, my best friend told everyone that she was a Jew,” she said.

And we went to Church together! I remember being really kind of scandalized by the whole thing even then. But that’s how much pressure there was to be Jewish...It was how everyone fit in together. And as a kid, that’s all you really want, right? To be like every one else.

### **The Security of Home**

Esme’s refuge in these days was home, the one place she could always turn to when she was feeling too much like an outsider. “I grew up in a great home with a cool family,” she remembered.

I think that’s one of the main reasons I didn’t give in to the pressures of pretending to be somebody I wasn’t. It would have been easy too to grow up culturally confused about my identity. But none of that happened mainly because of my parents and the way they raised us.

Esme’s father, in particular, made certain that she and her brothers not only spoke Spanish, their native tongue, but that they regularly engaged in the customs and traditions that were part of their Mexican heritage. “My dad was very proud of being Mexican,” she said.

Almost everything that went on in the house was some extension of our culture. We ate tortillas all the time instead of white bread. We spoke Spanish at the dinner table, not English. We prayed to the saints and the Virgin Mary like all Mexican Catholics do. It was just a big part of our lives.

Esme’s mother ensured that her family fully embraced their Roman Catholic roots. Her faith was a central part of her life and she intended her children to formulate their own lives of faith. “My mother was a very spiritual person,” she said.



God, the Church, praying, it was all huge for her. She didn't work but volunteered full-time at St. Joseph's, our church. She was in charge of all of the liturgical activities—the readings, altar preparations, the music, those kinds of things. So as kids, we got introduced to Mass and praying at an early age. We spent a lot of time at Church too, helping her prepare for Sunday Mass. When my brothers and I were old enough, we played music and sang as part of St. Joe's music worship program. That was a big part of how we lived too.

Both of her parents also worked diligently to instill in their children a love of learning and the drive to succeed. “My dad loved being in the classroom,” Esme said. “That's why he was a teacher.” After the night's dinner dishes were cleared away, she and her brothers would settle in at the dining room table to tackle the next day's homework. “Even though I was younger, my brothers were always throwing quizzes and problem sets at me, to see what I could figure out on my own,” she recalled.

Sometimes, Esme said, home could become a competitive place in this regard, particularly at report card time. “We all tried to outdo each other all the time when it came to grades,” she remembered.

It was kind of crazy too because we were in different grades. We weren't even taking the same classes. I remember my brother saying to me once ‘Ha! You only got a B+ in that class. Well, two years ago I got an A. Take that!’ That's how ridiculous it could get.

During her interview, it occurred to Esme that her parents' emphasis on education was one of the most important lessons that they might have imparted to her. She said:

I didn't really think about it until you asked the question but now it just seems huge, you know, to have grown up in a home where everybody expected you to be able to hold your own intellectually. There was never any question about how smart I was or what I could do. Maybe that's why I've been able to move from one rung of the educational ladder to the next even though I've hated most of it. I loved learning. And I've known from a very early age that I was smart, capable.

Maybe that's what's been driving me even though I haven't been able to handle everything else that's come along with it.

### **Too Many Cliques**

Esme offered only the barest of details about her days as a high school student at Oakdale High, the same high school where her father taught Spanish. She was a strong student, fast-tracked early in her sophomore year into honors classes and later AP courses, earning high marks in every one of them. After enrolling in an introductory astronomy course in her junior year, Esme was certain that she wanted to major in the subject as a college student. "I fell in love with it right away," she remembered. "It was impulsive but I went home after a week, I think, and told my parents that I wanted to study astronomy."

Socially, life continued on much as it had before. Esme still felt out of place in the predominately White, Jewish confines of school. Unlike her grade school days, however, she, along with a small group of friends who also considered themselves outsiders, came to find a certain freedom in not belonging. "There were so many cliques in my high school," she said.

Too many. And all these petty social rules about who could hang out with who...For once, I didn't worry about that stuff. I had made some cool friends anyway and after that, I decided I wouldn't worry about whether I fit in or not. They were other things to focus on anyway, the alternative magazine we'd started, classes, play productions we were part of. That's kind of all there was to high school for me really.

After four years at Oakdale, Esme could not wait to go to college. "I cannot tell you how incredibly happy I was to leave high school," Esme recalled. "The place just wasn't for me, you know, I never fit in ... I couldn't wait to get to college."

### **Following in Her Brother's Footsteps**

Like the other participants in this study, there was never a question of whether or not Esme would attend college. What remain to be determined was where she

would go, which college or university she would pick as her school of choice. If the decision had been left to her brothers Tony or Stephen, she might have ended up at the University of Illinois or Ohio State University, Midwestern universities the two pursued their bachelor's degrees in economics and mathematics respectively.

The family joked that if she chose the University of Minnesota or Penn State, two schools she was seriously considering, the Rodriguez family could host its own Big Ten network. "My parents thought these were the best places to get scholarships which I needed to afford college," Esme said. "All of my older brothers were in college and with my dad's teacher salary, there wasn't any way we could afford tuition for me."

In the end, however, it was her brother Javier who would convince Esme to apply to the University of Michigan where he was undergraduate majoring in economics and business. Well-acquainted with her love of astronomy, Javier sent her both application materials and brochures from various science departments on campus. The school, he told her over and over again, had a great academic reputation and he would be nearby.

When she decided to visit the campus, Javier made sure that she spent time with a close friend of his, a young man named Carlos who was working on a thesis about the organizing efforts of Mexican autoworkers in Detroit. Esme had a small crush on Carlos, something Javier had known when he asked his friend to give his baby sister a tour of the campus. "Javi totally cheated," she said. "I really liked Carlos and he knew it. I spent most of the day with him [Carlos], walking around campus, meeting people. That was it really." Soon after her visit, Esme would submit her application to the University; several months later she would be accepted as part of the incoming Class of 1989.

## **An Old Desire**

Maybe it was the time she spent listening to Carlos talk about the men he interviewed for his thesis and their efforts to hold onto their identities in a new world but suddenly, Esme said, she found herself thinking about what it would be like to have her own network of peers who were also Latino. The thought had entered her mind many times before actually, but she rarely entertained it for long. “There were lots of times when I wondered what it felt like, you know, to be in the majority and hang out with a whole bunch of other kids who were Latino like me,” she recalled. “But I never got too wrapped up in that...I mean, what was the point? It wasn’t going to happen in my lily-white high school.”

After she had been accepted to the University of Michigan, Esme let herself consider this possibility more fully. “Second to studying astronomy and keeping my grades up for my scholarship, meeting other Latinos at Michigan was one of the things I really looked forward to,” she said. “I didn’t have any idea how I was going to make that happen but I knew before I even got to campus that it was something I wanted to try.”

## **A Few Bumps**

According to Esme, there were two “bumps” that marred an otherwise uneventful transition from high school to college. The first concerned her on-campus living arrangements. She had been assigned to live in the Mary Markley Residence Hall with a young African American woman from Detroit named Janel. After a few moments of stilted conversation upon first meeting, it was obvious to Esme that she and her roommate were not going to be able to cultivate a genuine friendship. “Janel turned out to have this deathly shy personality,” she remembered. “I didn’t. So we weren’t able to connect like a lot of college roommates do.” After a few weeks, the two would settle into quiet pattern of sorts, respecting each other’s space and privacy but rarely interacting beyond their doors of their room.

The second bump Esme would endure came in the form of a hostile campus climate, an element of college life at Michigan that she had not at all anticipated. “I was really surprised by how racist other students could be,” she stated. During the first weeks of the term, she saw African American students get harassed on the street and heard of several of her Asian floor mates who had been openly ridiculed by a group of White students in one of the cafeterias. “It was shocking and disappointing and surprising,” she recalled. “It sounds really naïve of me now, but I didn’t expect any of that at Michigan.”

Lounge talk, conversations over coffee with other classmates of color, and news passed through the student grapevine confirmed that what she had witnessed on the street and in the residence hall were not isolated incidents but part of an overall campus pattern. “Other students of color were talking about the same kind of things I’d noticed on my own,” Esme said. “People were getting called nasty names, getting questioned about how they got into Michigan, just stupid, insensitive stuff.”

When Esme pressed her brother for an explanation, Javier chalked the incidents up to the immature nature of college students. “Javi was like ‘Oh, don’t worry about it, unless someone gives you a hard time. It’s just part of the stupid things that college students do.’” She would not completely accept her brother’s perspective of the situation. “I thought, ‘No, there’s more to it than that Javi,’” she said. Uncertain as to what actions could be taken, Esme told herself that she would be careful and try not to put herself in a situation where she might be targeted herself.

### **The Socially Active Latino Student Association (SALSA)**

In her second semester at Michigan, Esme became involved with a group known as the Socially Active Latino Student Association or SALSA, one of the main student organizations that had been established by and for Latino students. She found her way to Latino Student Association through a chance meeting with the organization’s head representatives at a campus-wide club fair held in the center of

campus. “I didn’t know anything about SALSA until I saw their table out on the Diag one day,” she recalled. “Then it was like ‘Oh my God, other Latinos! Cool!’”

She quickly took to the group assembled at the table which included Juan, Josie, Anna, and Rick, all sophomores and juniors. “I ended up spending the day with them,” she said. “We just hung out. It was great.” Juan and Josie had come from California, entering Michigan the year before Esme arrived. Anna was from Colorado while Rick was from Texas; both were juniors living in an off-campus house with some other Latino students they promised Esme she would meet. Though their majors differed, they were all completing concentrations in Latino Studies.

In a very short span of time, SALSA and all of the Latino students who participated in it would become the people with whom Esme would spend the majority of her time. “We were a very social, outgoing bunch,” she remembered.

We did all sorts of things. We staged Hispanic Heritage month celebrations, raised money for speakers, got together regularly with the other six or seven Latino organizations on campus for happy hour. There were not a lot of Latinos on campus then but those of who participated in the groups were very active and very committed to building something that other students could benefit from.

Not only did SALSA provide her with a new social outlet, but over time the close, cohesive nature of the group also imparted a strong sense of community that Esme had always sought. “I had my own group of friends in high school,” she said.

But this was different. We weren’t hanging out together because we didn’t think we fit in anywhere else. It wasn’t about being an outsider. It was a more positive association than that. A more powerful association, I should say. Juan, Anna, we were together because we were proud to be Latino, because we loved where we came from.

Just as she once suspected, Esme would learn a great deal about what it meant to be Latina. One of the most enduring lessons, she claimed, was the variability that

existed even within a single racial categorization. “I knew that the label covered different people from different places,” she said.

‘Latino’ was a way to describe people who were Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban...What I didn’t understand was how different things were for people even under the same umbrella. Juan and Anna and Josie were Mexican like me but their traditions were different. Some of their Spanish didn’t have the same meaning as mine or was used in the same way. That was really eye-opening for me. It was like ‘Oh you do things that way? I do them this way.’ That was one of the best things about SALSA for me. It gave me a chance to explore my Latino ties in a way that I couldn’t ever have in high school.

Like other students of color at the time, Esme and the other members from SALSA would find themselves on the receiving end of some racial harassment. “It was usually when we were out together as a group,” she recalled. “Somebody would say something stupid about us all being here illegally or ask where our sombreros were or if we knew how to speak English. Dumb stuff.” Somehow, Esme said, the sting of such treatment was lessened by the fact that it was directed at the group and not just her individually. “We stood up for one another,” she said. “So when someone said something stupid, there were six or seven of us in their face.”

### **A Change in Academic Plans**

Like Ennis, Esme’s second year of college, the 1985-1986 academic term, would find her reconsidering the initial plan to declare astronomy as her major. Though she had thoroughly enjoyed the introductory astronomy courses she had taken as a first-year student, Esme underestimated the number of science-based courses she would have to take as part of the major’s core requirements. “The whole ‘I’m going to major in astronomy’ thing lasted a very short time once physics became involved,” she recalled.

After considerable discussion with her brother Javier, Juan, and Josie, Esme decided that she would choose a new major, this time in the field of social sciences.

“I ended up switching out and declaring anthropology as my major which was really more in line with my interests,” she said. Esme would also begin taking courses in Latino Studies, as part of her concentration in American Culture. “Everyone else in SALSA was taking these kinds of courses and I wanted to too.”

### **The Free South Africa Coordinating Committee**

In early December, Esme and the other members of SALSA would be approached by a group who called themselves the Free South Africa Coordinating Committee. They were developing a series of events that were to be part of a national chain of campus efforts to show support for the African National Congress. As Esme remembers it, members of the Coordinating Committee were hoping that SALSA would not simply support their efforts but actually collaborate with them on the projects they were planning for the new year. “The people from the Free South Africa Committee came to a meeting of ours,” she said. “I knew several of them from classes and just being around campus. They basically asked us to help them any way we could, money, time, people. We said yes because really there was no reason to say no.”

At the time, the details were a bit sketchy but Esme remembered some discussion related to the construction of shanties, a form of construction that passed for housing in much of South Africa. “People were going to be building them and then living in them for a few weeks.” The idea, she said, struck her as both interesting and unique. During the Christmas break, she decided on a whim to do some background research on the recent political events that had taken place in South Africa. “I wasn’t totally clueless about what was going in that country,” she explained.

I knew about apartheid and what they had done to Nelson Mandela, you know, sending him to prison for no good reason. I just wanted to know more, so I spent some time reading through newspapers and magazines to get a better handle on things.



The more background research she did, the more Esme found herself moved to get involved with the Coordinating Committee. When she returned to campus in January, she asked the members of SALSA to appoint her as the office liaison to the Coordinating Committee. They agreed and soon Esme was regularly spending part of her school week interacting with the other members of the Committee. “It was the first time I had ever thrown myself into something overtly political, you know, a major political cause,” she said.

She might have passed up the opportunity had not been for one of the Coordinating Committee members named Lauda, a fellow anthropology major and SALSA member. “Lauda was a member of Amnesty International and very much into human rights,” she said. “She broke the whole thing down for me. Especially the part about how universities like Michigan helped perpetuate apartheid because of their investment practices.”

In outlining the various sources that contributed to the political struggle, Lauda had helped Esme see the larger significance in the Coordinating Committee’s work. “Even though I volunteered to be the liaison and I had done some reading up on the subject, I still hadn’t made the connections I needed to make,” she recalled. “At one point I was thinking, ‘Why am I doing this again? I’m not South African.’”

But after talking to Lauda, I finally got it. It was about helping to end a system that kept people from being free. And I wanted to end my University’s role in supporting that system with their money. That was morally reprehensible to me...I wanted to do what I could to pressure the place to examine their business investments from a moral, ethical perspective and not just a bottom-line figure.

### **The Diag Shanties Protest**

Esme insists that her participation in the March construction and staging of what became known on campus as the Diag Shanties Protest was not intensive or complex. “My job was to get as many SALSA members and Latino students to participate as I could,” she recalled. “There weren’t a lot of us on campus in those

days so I hit up everyone I knew.” Despite her best efforts, Esme—with some help from Lauda—would only be able to talk a few friends into supporting the shanties protest. “It wasn’t the kind of support I was hoping for,” she admitted.

As for her own participation, Esme would spend two days and a night in the shanties. The time away from the residence hall and SALSA and the demands of the classroom would prove to be more necessary than she had expected. “Part of me was bummed out to be honest,” she admitted.

I was kind of pissed that people in the Latino community couldn’t support something that was that important. Even my brother Javier thought I was wasting my time. But that’s how segregated the campus was back then. There were these lines...and no one really seemed interested in erasing them....Anyway, living in a shanty for a few days was kind of like therapy for me. I was able to get away from things for a little while and clear my head.

The shanties protest would also whet her appetite for collective organizing. “It wasn’t that big of a thing to be doing, spending the night in one of the shanties,” she admitted.

I mean, we didn’t change the world overnight because of it. But it did open my eyes to working with other people on a bigger scale. I think there was a part of me that always to do that, you know, be part of something bigger. It certainly wasn’t normal for Michigan back then. Everyone stuck to their groups and didn’t really mingle. It felt good not to have to do that.

In the end, Esme would take personal satisfaction in knowing that she had “done the right thing” when she was asked. “I could have walked away but I didn’t,” Esme recalled.

It wasn’t like I thought ‘Oh, I’m superior to everyone else who didn’t help with the shanties thing’ because it wasn’t that. But I was proud of myself, knowing that I could see the bigger picture behind something that wasn’t directly about being Latino or Mexican.

## **A Second Chance**

Although she did not know it at the time, Esme would get a second chance to try her hand at organizing and coalition building during her junior year of college. This opportunity would come on the heels of a rash of racially motivated incidents that had occurred without any provocation on campus. “It was crazy,” she remembered.

It was like White students just went nuts or something. All of sudden, we had these racist attacks one right after the other...Someone had put up a poster saying it was open season on ‘porch monkeys.’ Then some frat guys got caught throwing full cans of beer at Black women who were walking past their house. The Daily printed a cartoon showing a Black guy saying he would kill for some Air Jordans or something like that. The worst one was the radio show where the D.J. asked people to call in with their best Black people jokes. It was horrible. I just couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that people could be so blatantly racist and act like they had a right to intimidate someone else. It made my blood boil!

## **UCAR**

These unprecedented attacks would set into motion the building of an anti-racist coalition led by a group of graduate students who called themselves the United Coalition Against Racism or UCAR. From Esme’s perspective, UCAR’s formation had been a matter of necessity. “Only students of color seemed to be up to the challenge of fighting racism,” she recalled. “All administrators seemed to be able to do was apologize for it. But fight it? They had no idea what to do or how to do it. That was obvious.”

Esme could not recall the specific details surrounding her decision to attend UCAR’s first campus-wide meeting. “I’m not sure I even thought about it,” she explained. The open hostility that had been displayed towards students of color was enough of a rationale all by itself. “I remember students saying ‘We’re under attack. We’re being attacked.’ That was the mindset we were in. And so when UCAR came

onto the scene, it was just automatic. I showed up because there was no other choice.”

She did remember being impressed, however, with what at the time appeared to be UCAR’s genuine intent to fight all forms of institutional oppression, regardless of which group was being targeted. “From the start, UCAR said ‘This isn’t going to be about just fighting racism. It’s going to be about fighting homophobia and sexism too,’” Esme stated. “‘And it isn’t only going to be about Black and White. It’s got to be about all of us.’ And I thought, ‘Aw, finally.’”

Esme would be further heartened by the strong female leadership she found at the helm of UCAR. “One of UCAR’s leaders was a graduate student named Barbara Ransby,” she recalled. “I didn’t know her personally but just knowing she was in charge made it seem like things were going to be very different with UCAR because you didn’t have a lot of women leading big movements in those days.”

### **The SALSA Liaison**

As she had with the Free South Africa Coordinating Committee and their Shanties Protest, Esme would assume the official role of SALSA liaison to UCAR. “I was supposed to keep everybody in SALSA in the loop as to what was going on with UCAR,” she said. Her involvement in the United Coalition would deepen considerably, however, once the group began its work in earnest. “I was out there like everyone else,” she said. “Handing out flyers. Talking to people. Just trying to build up support from the rest of campus. I was still a member of SALSA, of course, but I considered myself a member of UCAR too.”

She would also provide feedback when it came to the construction of a series of anti-racism proposals that UCAR was formulating. These proposals were intentionally broad and aimed at educating the campus about the importance of diversity through course offerings, extracurricular programs, and training, all initiatives that struck Esme as strategic and intelligent, not to mention clever. “I have

to say that UCAR was full of very smart people,” she stated. “Maybe it was because most of them were graduate students.”

Anyway, the proposals they came up with were really good. They asked for an office with a vice provost position that would serve Black students, Latino students, Native American students, all of us. They asked for more staff. They asked for more serious recruitment and retention for faculty of color. It wasn’t anything the University couldn’t do or shouldn’t do. And it wasn’t short-term stuff that Shapiro could check off and say ‘Did it. Done. Now leave me alone.’ UCAR thought long-term which I think made all the difference.

### **The Unraveling**

Though she did not know it at the time, these early days would prove to be the best days that Esme would have with UCAR. Ever so slowly, she said, her ties to the organization would unravel because of all sorts of internal and external pressures which led UCAR to morph into what she later called a “Black movement” rather than the multicultural movement Esme expected it to remain.

One of the contributing pressures was the fast pace at which the leadership of UCAR needed to move. The radio broadcasts had occurred in early February. In two and a half short months, classes would end for summer break. UCAR then, had only a short window of time to engage campus administrators and set a process of institutional change in motion. “We had this meeting where an alum who was in BAM I came and talked with us,” she recalled.

And he told us what happened when Black students demanded certain changes in programs and enrollments but then had to wait for them over a summer break. Basically, the administration made false promises. They did some things they said they would do but not the others. So UCAR was feeling a lot of pressure to move as fast as they could.

In such a fast-paced setting, there was not enough time to put together a list of demands that met the needs of every community. “We didn’t even really have

time to do a full inventory of what people wanted to see happen, you know?” she recalled. “It was more like majority rules.” As far as Esme could tell, that meant that UCAR would be presenting an agenda that was not truly pan-ethnic but based largely on the needs and requirements of the African American community who constituted more than half of its membership base.

A second contributing pressure was the political in-fighting that began to mark interactions between her African American peers who seriously clashed on an almost daily basis. “UCAR meetings were just all drama after that,” she remembered. “People would get personal in ways that made me uncomfortable and didn’t have a thing to do with the agenda.”

There were some people in the group—guys mostly—who thought that Barbara didn’t have what it took as a leader to handle the negotiations with the administration. Man, they said some really sexist things about her. To her face even. Then, people started to play the whole skin color thing, questioning who was really Black and who wasn’t. It was so uncalled for. I remember thinking ‘This is not how it’s supposed to be. Maybe I shouldn’t stay.’

### **The Start of Black Action Movement III**

Despite her misgivings, Esme decided to maintain her membership in UCAR, hoping that when it came time to engage University administrators, the Coalition would somehow get itself back on track. On March 4, 1986, UCAR would stage its first public rally calling upon University administrators to review and then implement their anti-racist proposals. Esme would not only attend the rally but march with other UCAR members to the Fleming Administration Building where they presented Provost James J. Duderstadt with their plans. “I can’t say things were totally harmonious within UCAR at that point,” she admitted. “But we definitely acted as a more cohesive group in front of the people in Fleming.”

Esme would also attend the next day's hearing of the Higher Education Subcommittee convened by Michigan State Representative Morris Hood (D-Detroit) in the Michigan Union. Like Ennis, she had her own stories to tell but relinquished the floor to other Michigan students who offered plenty of testimony about the hostile University environment they encountered. "The hearing went on for hours," she said. "I couldn't believe some of things people had been through. In the middle of campus, broad daylight, people were talking about getting called nigger, spit on, yelled at. It was crazy."

### **Relegated to the Sidelines**

UCAR leaders had given the President Harold Shapiro and his administration two weeks to consider their proposals and submit a plan for implementing them. Had the timeframe been shorter, Esme might have remained in UCAR. The days in between, however, would bring with them other reasons for her to cut ties with the organization.

For one, she had little tolerance for disruptive tactics that had no larger moral purpose behind them other than to annoy and disturb everyone else on campus. "I understood demonstrations and rallies," she said. "Those kinds of events where all you're really trying to do is get your message out and call people's attention to the issues."

What I didn't care for—and still don't really—is the kind of stuff where all you're doing is pissing people off. Some people in BAM went and took a whole bunch of books off the shelves at UGLI. And I thought 'What was the point of that? You're just made more work for some poor student who's probably on work study.' And everyone else seemed to think that was a cool tactic or something. But I didn't.

Two, she found it increasingly difficult to contend with the all-African American focus of UCAR. She no longer had any say in what UCAR might do next nor any substantial role to play in future rallies or demonstrations. "It was decided

that if you weren't Black you couldn't have any kind of serious role in UCAR other than as a general supporter," she recalled. "To me that was like saying I had to be invisible except when UCAR needed a body."

Three, Esme grew tired of the pressure and scrutiny her affiliation with UCAR garnered from the other Latino students within SALSA and elsewhere. They too were frustrated by the narrow scope of the movement and wondered how she could support UCAR if it was not going to advocate for her people as well. "For some of my friends, it was discrimination just on another level," she said.

'Who needs to be part of something where you have to stand on the sidelines because you're not Black?' I'd get asked that a lot and I didn't have a good answer. I was just trying to help, to make some change on a campus that needed it.

### **Leaving UCAR for a New Cause**

Esme's departure from UCAR would occur in a quiet, unassuming way. "I just stopped showing up altogether," she said. Her association with UCAR over, she quickly found herself championing another cause: ensuring the continued support of the Latino Studies program. While she had been involved in UCAR, her friends in SALSA and other Latino students organizations on campus were engaged in efforts to keep the program they had come to love. "The Latino Studies Program was where I, a lot of Latino students, found our intellectual home," Esme said. "The thought of it not being around scared the crap out of us."

Implemented in 1984, the Latino Studies Program was approaching the end of its three-year probationary period and students who were completing concentrations in it worried that it might not become a permanent fixture within the University's American Culture program. "It had been a battle from the start," she said. "The program had to prove it could draw enough students, that good scholarship was being done, that it offered a legitimate academic experience..."



Esme recalled long days and nights engaged in all sorts of consciousness-raising activities. “I went to faculty meetings, sat on advisory boards...” she said. “I wrote editorials for the Daily, everything under the sun you could think of.” In her eyes, it was a different form of activism than the shanties and UCAR, but it was still activism nevertheless. “I think some people would say that fighting to hang onto a program isn’t really activism, but I thought it was,” she said. “We were trying to raise people’s consciousness about how important the program was and how important it was to the educational experiences of Latino students at Michigan.”

### **Keeping Tabs**

Although she was no long part of UCAR, she kept close tabs on the events associated with what the campus was now formally referring to as “the Black Action Movement III.” She even attended the fabled March 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting between Coalition representatives, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and University administrators in Hill Auditorium.

For Esme, the event was bittersweet. Latino students, she said, had been left behind for all intensive purposes. “It was disappointing to a certain degree,” she said.

What started out as a real multicultural movement had basically been reduced over time to a Black student issue thing and really, we were, all of us, Latinos, Native students, Asian students, not just Black students, needing the same commitment and resources. But the rest of us got shut out. I was happy for Black students though. Really. They worked hard and it paid off.

### **Benefiting from BAM III Anyway**

In an ironic twist of fate, Esme would end up personally benefiting from the efforts of UCAR and BAM III even though she had abandoned their protests efforts. One of the proposals that University administrators agreed to implement was the establishment of a new Office of Minority Affairs (OMA), a center whose mission

was to provide a variety of academic support and enrichment initiatives specifically for students of color.

Despite Esme's claim that she had been invisible for most of her participation in UCAR, there were several other members who noticed her drive and commitment. When coupled with the advocacy work she had undertaken on behalf of the Latino Studies Program, she quickly became one of the top candidates for the new Latino Coordinator position in OMA. "Daniel Holliman, who was one of the leaders in UCAR, told the new Vice Provost Dr. Charles Moody that I would be great for the position," she recalled. "Before I knew it, I was hired to work there."

The work was intense but exhilarating at the same time, Esme said. She quickly became consumed with fulfilling her duties which required her to act as a central advocate for Latino students and their needs. "It was such a positive environment to work in," she said. "I wanted to be there all the time."

And it gave me the chance to work for my community, where they were a priority. I couldn't believe people paid me for that but they did. We set up tutoring programs, writing workshops, we brought speakers to campus, we developed diversity training programs...You name it and we did it. I felt like I was finally making a difference.

## **Burned Out**

It quickly became apparent to Esme, however, that she could not balance the demands of the job and the demands of her own schoolwork. In an act that would frustrate her family, she decided to take some time off before finishing her bachelor's degree at Michigan. "Everyone was like 'What? What are you doing? What's wrong with you?'" she recalled. "But there was nothing wrong with me. I just needed a break."

In all honesty, I started to struggle with the relevancy of my studies. I liked anthropology, don't get me wrong. And I loved Latino Studies but something was missing. I'd ask myself 'What's all of this for anyway?' Why am I doing this?' I never had to ask those kinds of questions when I working in OMA."

Emotionally, Esme said, she was also feeling spent and tired. “I know most administrators don’t see it this way but when you’re a student your activism can be draining.”

It’s actually hard work. Your emotions are all over the place. One minute you’re angry. The next minute you’re frustrated. The minute after that you’re anxious. And then, if people don’t respond to you the way you expected, you’re back to being mad. It’s a rollercoaster. At least it was for me and it just came to a point where I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to get off.”

Esme’s break would ultimately last two years, from 1988 through 1990. During that time, she said, she focused on her work within OMA but also tried to establish more of balance in her life than she had previously.

### **Returning to Campus**

Eventually, Esme would return to her student life in the fall of 1991 and complete all of the requirements for a bachelor’s degree in anthropology. She would graduate from the University of Michigan in 1992, three years after she had first enrolled.

### **New Growth**

According to Esme, her participation in the Shanties protest, UCAR, and the Latino Studies Program efforts resulted in some significant changes in terms of her sense of agency and self-confidence. “I came out of these experiences feeling stronger somehow, you know, secure about my ability to stand up for myself and things I believed,” she said.

Interestingly enough, the one place Esme did not show any sign of change was in the area of political ideology. According to her questionnaire responses, she characterized herself as an eight, what could be considered as an individual with a fairly liberal political orientation. Post-protest, she recorded the same ranking. “I

don't think my activist experiences did anything to change my political stance on things," she explained. "If anything, they solidified in my head why I was a liberal."

In terms of self-perceptions, Esme indicated that her ability to shape history, to lead, to assume responsibility for the democracy she lived in, and to remain optimistic about the prospects of creating lasting change had all been enhanced by her activist efforts. It helped, Esme said, that she had been able to experience the fruits of her labors as well as those of her peers. She stated:

It's easier to believe that you can create change when it happens in front of you and you can touch it. I had a job in OMA which never would have existed without UCAR or BAM III. And the Latino Studies program is still in existence because of how we fought for it. So, yeah, I know I change things because I've done it.

Surprisingly, Esme was far more positive about Michigan; in her estimation, it as a welcoming place, a supportive environment, a socially responsible institution, and a just institution. As she explained, however, these perceptions were largely due to the passage of time. "I made peace with the place a long time ago," she said. "I had to otherwise I probably would have ended up bitter and angry. What's the point of that?"

### **Postscript**

Soon after she graduated from the University of Michigan in 1992, Esme was hired as the director of a retention program at a flagship university in the Southwest. She returned to Ann Arbor in 1994 to care for a terminally ill friend and would remain there for another three years, working as a consultant in addition to a caretaker. In 1997, Esme began working on her doctoral degree in anthropology at a large research university located in Minnesota. She graduated in 2002 and is currently a faculty member at a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest.

## Esme's Story and the Path to Activism

So what are we to make of Esme's story? What does it reveal about her path to activism and the forces that shaped it? Like Ennis' narrative, Esme's tale reveals how a young student's activism is built from not one but many experiences, encounters, and individuals.

In terms of individuals, there are several groups of people we might credit for helping Esme to see herself as someone capable of creating change. Her friend, Lauda, for example, played a key part in raising Esme's consciousness and defining the necessity of taking part in the Diag Shanties protest. UCAR leader Barbara Ransby modeled a form of leadership that Esme was willing to follow, even when it became apparent that UCAR was operating by some serious sexist double standards. And when it came to the campaign to institutionalize the Latino Studies program, her friends in SALSALSA (Lauda included) also assumed important roles as colleagues willing to fight alongside of her.

Underlying the influence of these individuals, however, were other dynamics associated with the campus' climate and the degree to which Esme and her fellow students felt safe at school. The University of Michigan in the mid-1980s, as various newspaper accounts and historical archives have attested, was a hostile environment for many students of color. Esme admitted as much when she described the racist incidents she had witnessed and then been subjected to herself. The fear and the sense of threat she spoke openly about more than suggest that these basic emotions also came into play when determining whether or not she might join UCAR.

In a broader sense, her story provides further evidence of how much the cause a young person champions also matters. Esme's support of UCAR and later, the efforts to institutionalize the Latino Studies program was no random occurrence or the result of some idealistic, naïve leap. It was clearly tied to her identity as both a student of color and as a Latina.

Just how deeply committed was Esme when it came to these causes? If we examine the burn out she suffered, it is obvious that she was heavily engaged to the point where she was unable to live with the requisite sense of balance most healthy adults require. In this respect, her story stands as a cautionary tale of sorts. There are limits, basic tenets of emotional self-care that a young person needs to be cognizant of when establishing their commitment to a particular social or political cause.

The biggest lesson, however, that Esme's tale holds is related to relevance. When we can no longer see ourselves in a movement or we can no longer connect with those in the movement or when we feel detached from a movement, we are likely to walk away. In Esme's case, these were the basic elements tying her to UCAR. Once they had been seriously compromised, she simply stopped showing up.

## Chapter 6

### Malcolm Jones, India Taylor, and The Black Action Movement Strike Of 1970

In early February of 1970, University of Michigan president Robben W. Fleming issued a dinner invitation to members of the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Black Student Law Student Alliance (BSLSA), two campus organizations with a shared commitment to advocacy on behalf of the campus' African American student population. William Cash, the President's assistant on minority affairs, suggested that the students establish an agenda, which could then be used to guide the evening's discussion (Brune, 1984).

Although it reflected his gentlemanly persona, Fleming did not intend the invitation as a social call. In truth, he had asked members of the BSU and the BSLSA to dinner in the hopes of defusing what had become an escalating climate of frustration among the University's African American students. Upon their return to campus in the fall, African American students found that the previous year's efforts to establish a Center for Afro-American and African Studies and to increase the representation of Black students on campus had not been undertaken by the University in the spirit they agreed upon or expected.

Instead of hosting a dinner party on the night of February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1970, however, Fleming would unknowingly sponsor a demonstration against the very institution he had been hired to lead just two, short years earlier. Prior to the dinner gathering, African American students called a campus-wide meeting<sup>32</sup> to discuss a list of educational and social demands they hoped to present to the President, pending the group's approval (see "Black student demands," 1970). Unanimously agreed to, the demands were placed before Fleming on behalf of the United Black Population, an

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<sup>32</sup> The meeting—open only Black students—took place in the basement of the Michigan Union. In addition to members of the BSU and BSLSA, students from the Association of Black Socialist Students, the University's Medical School, and the Psychology Department also participated in the discussions (Interview with India Taylor, 2002).

amalgamation of African American organizations that later would become known as the Black Action Movement (BAM).

This presentation of demands would set into motion one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the University. Throughout the months of February and March, BAM staged numerous disruptions of University classes and services, culminating in a crippling thirteen-day strike that nearly brought the campus to its knees. Eventually, campus officials and BAM protestors would enact a series of compromises but not before the University was to be subjected to considerable scrutiny and criticism both within its own borders and beyond (see “Gardner Ackley remarks to LSA Faculty,” 1970; “Kuhn telegram to Fleming” 1970).

This chapter centers on the personal memories and recollections of Malcolm Jones and India Taylor, two African Americans who in their days as Michigan undergraduates not only witnessed the rise of the Black Action Movement but worked to support the major strike it sponsored during the first months of the new decade, a watershed event that in time historical records would chronicle as the BAM Strike of 1970 (Peckham, 1994).

Malcolm and India’s involvement in the BAM Strike and the accompanying activist transformations that fostered their involvement are presented here in life story form across three central time points, including:

- Their lives prior to attending the University of Michigan: As children born to African American and White parents, who endure childhoods living among predominately white, rural neighborhoods, and who as adolescents later attend Roman Catholic high schools;
- Their lives during their time at Michigan: As young undergraduates of color, growing vitally in their identities as African Americans, wrestling with questions of institutional access and equity, and who eventually become core supporters of BAM; and
- Their lives after the Black Action Movement had commenced: As adults, years removed from their activist days but still engaged in serious reflection of their activism and how it changed them politically as well as personally.



Like the other life stories presented in this work, India's and Malcolm's stories are then analyzed in terms of the larger individual and shared motivations that guided their engagement in activism.

### **Malcolm's Story**

The BAM Strike of 1970 had been over for thirty years when Malcolm Jones agreed to sit for an interview. Those who know him intimately will be greatly surprised to learn of his role in this study. For nearly two decades, Malcolm has made it his habit to deny interview requests about his participation in BAM and its Strike, mostly on the basis of privacy.

What he was trying to keep private all this time, Malcolm did not say. As for all of the other individuals who had made requests of him over the course of the last 20 years, Malcolm wanted them to know this: Even through two failed marriages, single parenthood, and a 30-year career in the demanding field of business, he has never once forgotten days as a militant member of the University's first Black Action Movement. And his belief in the possibility of revolution—the same belief that underscored his activism some thirty years ago—has never wavered either, even at the age of 55. “I still believe that revolution, radical change, is possible,” he said. “Maybe it won't be in my lifetime. Maybe it will be in my daughter's. I don't know. But in my heart, I've never given up on that.

This is his story.

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Malcolm was born in 1949, among the backwoods of rural Michigan. Home in those days was a ramshackle house, hardly big enough to accommodate his parents and their brood of 11 children. “We were really poor,” Malcolm admitted. “Our

house was about 1200 square feet, if that. There were seven boys and five girls, plus Mom and Dad. The boys all bunked together in one bed and the girls bunked together in the other.”

With no more than ninth-grade and twelfth-grade educations between them, his mother and father worked a variety of odd jobs around the clock to provide for their large family. Most times, Malcolm said, they fell short. “There was never anything extra in our house, you know?” he recalled. “We were always needing more, more of this, more of that, when it came to clothes, money, food, just everything.”

Somewhere underneath all of that need, however, must have laid some serious magic. Though they had no cache of resources to rely on, Malcolm’s parents would somehow raise 11 healthy children, each one of whom would earn full scholarships to college. His brothers would be especially successful, garnering offers of admission from the University of California at Berkeley, the Tuskegee Institute, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan. Later, they would all settle into worthwhile professions such as barbers, doctors, psychologists, professors, and businessmen. “We had no savings, nothing, growing up” Malcolm stated. “But we were still able to make it.”

### **Believing in All the Right Things**

Malcolm was not keen on the idea of talking about his childhood in any greater detail. “What’s there to say?” he said. “It was nothing but struggle, you know, nothing but hard times, scrapping just to get by.” All anyone really needed to understand, Malcolm said, was that he and his siblings were taught to believe in what he called “all the right things.”

One of those “right things” was the fundamental importance of education. From the time they entered grade school through their days as secondary students, Malcolm and his siblings were expected to embrace learning and give their fullest efforts in the classroom. Confined to a lifetime of employment options that offered inadequate financial gain or personal fulfillment, his parents knew firsthand what it

meant to live without a strong educational foundation. “Being educated makes all the difference in the world,” his father had said to him. “And once you are, no one can take it away from you.”

His parents were adamant about his sons’ and daughters’ need to do well in school because they believed it was the one tool that could counter whatever bias or discrimination they were certain their children would face in the future. Malcolm stated:

My father wasn’t one to complain or whine. But he still knew the deal. Black folk didn’t have a chance without an education. The cards were stacked against us from the start and if we didn’t do well in school we couldn’t compete at all. White people were always going to judge us and find us lacking somehow. But he and my mother made damn sure it wasn’t going to be because we weren’t educated.

Malcolm’s parents also taught him about the importance of self-determination. They modeled this trait, he said, mostly through their hard-working ways and in their fast refusal to ask for handouts. “My parents were firm believers in the ‘bootstrap’ mentality,” he said. “There were no free rides. You could ask for help but you could never ask for a handout.”

His parents’ belief in self-determination would also pave the way for lessons in shared responsibility. Everyone, including Malcolm, was expected to work and support the family in whatever ways they could. “My parents insisted that if we all pitched in, we’d be able to provide for ourselves,” he recalled. “So those of us who could work, worked while the rest of us helped our mother with the running of the house.”

The other “right thing” that Malcolm’s parents taught him was to know the difference between justice and injustice. As the main disciplinarian of the house, his father kept “tight parameters” on his children’s activities and was quick to dole out punishment if he felt they were “on the wrong path.”

Every so often, Malcolm’s father would underscore this lesson by letting his children see his frustration and anger at the prejudice he endured. “Once in while it

would just come out of him...the aggravation, the frustration, of being held down,” he remembered. It was in those moments that Malcolm would realize that there were serious consequences to doing the wrong thing. “There was real suffering when somebody committed an injustice,” he said. “It had its own price, you know? I saw that with my father. It made me realize I always wanted to be on the side of justice.”

### **Paint & Sweat for Books & School**

Like his family life, Malcolm offered the sparsest of details about his grade school days. The only memory he cared to share was the story of how he and his siblings had been able to attend the local Catholic grade school. With no money for tuition, his father offered to barter with the small group of nuns who oversaw the school. In exchange for free tuition and books, he and his sons would work year-round as the school’s janitors, maintenance men, and landscape crew. His wife and his daughters would do whatever else the nuns required; sewing, cooking, gardening, or cleaning. The sisters agreed to the trade with no hesitation. “It was probably one of the best business deals I have ever known anyone to make,” Malcolm said. “We swapped paint and some sweat for books and eight years of private schooling. It was a very smart deal.”

### **St. John’s High School**

Eventually, Malcolm would attend St. John’s High School, a predominately white, Roman Catholic institution which served the wealthier families in the county. This time around, however, his enrollment did not require bartering of any sort or kind. At some point during grade school, Malcolm had proven himself to be gifted in math and science, enough so that he earned a full scholarship to St. John’s all on his own.

The descriptions that he rendered of his first few years in high school reflected a comfortable, integrated existence. His classes were “small” and “well-

taught,” full of “smart people” who seemed just as enthralled by being the classroom as he was. And though he was one of just nine other African Americans in his class, Malcolm enjoyed the companionship of several “good friends.”

Perhaps best of all, St. John’s afforded Malcolm the opportunity to be with James and Jeremiah, the two older brothers that he idolized. Stellar students in their own right, the pair constantly competed with Malcolm over grades, test scores, and other forms of academic acclaim. That he rarely bested his brothers did not bother Malcolm in the least. It was the chance to develop a closer relationship with them that he relished. He said:

When I think about my time at St. John’s, I always think about James and Jeremiah first. We became real friends there. It wasn’t like it was at home, where I was always down in line somewhere behind them. They looked out for me all the time at school. And they were so smart. I wanted to be just like them.

### **St. John’s in a New Light**

Malcolm’s perspective of St. John and its people would change dramatically in his junior year when James and Jeremiah would be publicly accused of cheating on a test. They had both earned perfect scores and the teacher who had administered the exam was certain that their achievement had come through some unethical means. “They took this chemistry test and aced it,” Malcolm explained. “I wasn’t surprised at all, the way they studied all the time.”

After several rounds of intensive interrogation by the principal of St. John’s (during which the brothers vehemently denied cheating), it was decided that James and Jeremiah would re-take their tests, this time in the presence of a proctor. “I couldn’t believe it,” Malcolm recalled. “They spent four years proving what great students they were and none of it mattered. They had to retake a chemistry test with a babysitter present. It was ridiculous!” In the end, James and Jeremiah would prove their innocence by earning another round of perfect scores. His brothers, however, would never receive an apology for the erroneous presumption of guilt.

The incident, Malcolm said, sparked a “kernel of questioning” in his consciousness. Sometimes, during class, he would feel overly-scrutinized by his teachers, as though he could not possibly be as smart as he truly was by nature. “I felt pressed sometimes to prove my intelligence. I’d answer a question in class and have to answer three more, like I was being tested or something,” he said. Until James and Jeremiah’s troubles, Malcolm had never attributed this questioning to anything sinister or inappropriate. He would soon think differently. “The way the situation had been handled opened my eyes. It made me very skeptical of White people in authority,” he recalled.

James and Jeremiah’s troubles would also change his perspective of St. John’s and its personnel.

I couldn’t look at St. James in the same way again. Not the priests, not the nuns who were my teachers. My brothers were great students and nobody, not for one minute, was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. And they deserved it. They ended up having to retake the test and when they scored two more perfect scores, well, everybody shut up then. Didn’t anybody say a word more about it, not even an apology.

### **Malcolm’s Rebellion**

Deeply offended by the public humiliation his brothers endured, Malcolm decided to stage his own rebellion. “I just couldn’t stand aside and let everyone think that what had gone down was O.K.,” he explained. He no longer sat quietly through his classes but argued his way through them instead. Whether the subject was Greek mythology or religion or civics did not matter. Malcolm directly challenged his teachers time and again, looking to undermine their authority as well as prove that he possessed some all of his own.

He would not go unchecked. Asked to deliver a report on current events in his world history class, Malcolm gave an impassioned speech against the perils of blind patriotism and the immorality of the Vietnam War, perspectives that in the year

1965 were highly contentious to say the least. That same afternoon, four of his classmates (all young women) went home and complained to their parents about his lack of patriotism. Malcolm was called to the principal's office the next day and formally reprimanded for his words. "I got in good bit of trouble over that," he remembered. "But I didn't care. I was just looking to flex my own muscles, to show them that I had some too."

### **Ready for College**

By his senior year of high school, Malcolm was more than ready for college. He yearned to be a "college man" like his older brothers who were now enrolled at a nearby university. "I was jealous of their freedom and the way they were their own men once they left the house," he recalled. "I couldn't wait to have some of that for myself."

Intellectually, Malcolm also yearned for new challenges, especially when he learned of the rich array of courses his brothers were taking in college. James and Jeremiah regularly regaled him with tales about what they were learning in their studies. "I'd hear about all of the incredible courses in philosophy, in religion, economics, physics, history, everything I liked," Malcolm remembered. "It made my classes seem so basic."

After applying to a handful of schools, Malcolm would be accepted at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan. He would choose to attend Michigan, primarily on the basis of the full four-year scholarship he had been offered there. It also helped, he said, that his brothers would be just a few miles away. "I looked forward to going to college," Malcolm recalled. "I was ready for it, you know, new classes, new friends, the chance to be around more Black people, just everything."

## **Searching for Something Meaningful**

Malcolm would enroll at the University of Michigan for the 1966-1967 academic term, in the same span of time the National Aeronautical and Space Association (NASA) launched three lunar orbital missions in search of a place to land the American space shuttle Apollo, pending its arrival in 1969 ([www.nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov](http://www.nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov)). On the Michigan campus, he encountered a dynamic and intense seeking of a different sort: Throngs of young people, all of whom seemed to be in Malcolm's eyes "searching for something meaningful to latch onto."

Everywhere he cast his gaze, he saw other college students not simply trying to get a firm grasp on their world, but to transform it, to fundamentally restructure its systems, norms, and practices. "There were people all over the place. The Diag, the Union, up and down State Street, everybody was trying to get you to pay attention to their cause," he recalled. The treatment of welfare recipients; the draft; the sponsorship of military research; the on-campus recruitment of students by the Reserve Officer Training Corps and the Central Intelligence Agency; the escalation of the war in Vietnam were all likely to be encountered as Malcolm made his way around campus (see Brune, 1984; Peckham, 1994; Garvy, 2000).

All he knew for sure was that he had never witnessed anything like it before. "I'll never forget it," he admitted.

All of these people. All of this movement. Everyone reaching out to one another. And the voices! People calling out to you from the street. Pay attention! Question authority! Think for yourself! Wake up! I've never seen anything else like it.

## **The African Liberation Movement**

Somewhere early in the first term of the 1966-1967 school year—exactly when he could not recall—Malcolm would meet a small group of African American students, just as new as he was to the University. Karen, Linda, and Janelle were



from Ohio, Michigan, and Chicago respectively. Cleo, Thomas, and Michael hailed from the city of Detroit. Almost immediately, he said, they all became fast friends.

Malcolm had been lucky to make their acquaintance. Of the 32,000 students attending Michigan that year, just 559 were African American; the majority composed of graduate and professional students (as cited in Brown et al., 1978). With a finite number of opportunities to meet, interact, and connect with other African American undergraduates on campus, the seven would soon form a close, tight-knit group.

Each one of his new friends struck him immediately as “very socially conscious,” Malcolm said. “We became something of an anomaly on campus that way,” he further explained. “This small, all-Black group that was tied politically as much as socially...We did everything together. We were all we had.” The distinctiveness of their appearance on campus may have been helped by the fact that they referred to themselves as the African Liberation Movement, a rather grandiose title for a group whose ranks consisted of a half a dozen students plus one.

Where the name came from or how Karen, Cleo, and the others came up with it, escaped Malcolm’s memory. What he did remember is that he and his friends had been inspired by the similar groups that had formed at nearby Wayne State University, groups whose main intent was “emancipate Black America.” Malcolm was voted Vice-Chair of the organization and helped coordinate a number of its central activities. They met several times a week, for example, to study together and talk politics. The group also believed in community service, volunteering regularly to tutor African American middle schoolers who lived in Ann Arbor.

Despite its diminutive stature and its seemingly plain practices, the African Liberation Movement would contribute to Malcolm’s development in large, unexpected ways. For the first time in his life, he felt a sense of political agency. “We were this small group,” Malcolm recalled.

But we didn’t carry ourselves in a small way...Everyone in the group believed we could change things, you know, set them right. That rubbed off on me for sure. When I was with them, I was sure I could make revolutionary change myself.”

The African Liberation Movement also gave Malcolm a deeper sense of community, something that had been in short supply in his life since his rebellious days at St. John's. "I could always count on someone in the group looking out for me;" he said. "I was expected to do the same. And with James and Jeremiah off doing their own thing, well, it was reassuring to have a community behind me."

The Liberation Movement acted as a critical source of political reflection for Malcolm too. During their scheduled "political meetings," he and his friends would debate numerous questions and issues. Could you have a true revolution through non-violent means? Who really represented the views and needs of African Americans, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X? More often than not, Malcolm said, he was moved to reconsider his own views and perspectives. "We tested each other to see what we really understood about history, politics...I always left questioning my own knowledge of things," he explained.

### **Some Early Protest Experience**

Malcolm's political development would also be influenced by the efforts of his brothers, James and Jeremiah. Since their graduation from high school, the two had become serious campus activists, leading many of the political organizing efforts at Wayne State University where they were enrolled. Just as they had in high school, his brothers harangued him constantly to engage himself in similar efforts. "I was always getting calls from my brothers who were at some pay phone in Detroit," he remembered. "Where are you? What are you doing? We need you at this protest."

Several times, he managed to scrape together the requisite bus fare for a trip to the city, participating in protests against the car manufacturer Chrysler and the escalation of the Vietnam War. Yet even these efforts were not sufficient enough to satisfy Malcolm's brothers. They quizzed him endlessly about his understanding of socialism and Marx, the nuances in America's foreign policy on Cuba, and the efficacy of nonviolence in promoting social change versus more militant means such

as those espoused by Malcolm X. “They had always been there own kind of dictatorship, since we were young” Malcolm said. He continued:

We’d walk miles to go catch fish and I would always end up being the one to carry the equipment *and* the fish. It was the same when we were in college. I was always getting dragged into their protests and politics whether I wanted to or not.

## **Dark Times**

For all that must have transpired during Malcolm’s second year of college, the 1968-1969 term, he would only offer a few select memories: 1) his growing militancy; and 2) his participation in a lockout of the campus’ central administration building, what historical records now consider as the precursor to the Black Action Movement and its Strike of 1970 (see Brune, 1984).

Like others who endure so much emotional and political upheaval, perhaps his memory had been simply overwhelmed, registering only what it could. As the annals of history indicate, there was plenty by which to be overwhelmed. In July of 1967, right after his second term of college ended, his hometown city of Detroit would experience a wave of destructive and violent riots sparked by a police raid on an after-hours drinking club in one of its predominately African American neighborhoods ([www.67riots.rutgers.edu/d\\_index.htm](http://www.67riots.rutgers.edu/d_index.htm)).

Order would be eventually restored five days later, but only after the Michigan National Guard had been called in by Governor George Romney to stabilize the city. The “Detroit Riots” as they became known resulted in the deaths of 43 African Americans, nearly 1,200 injuries, and some 7,200 arrests, not to mention the loss of countless dollars associated with the destruction of personal and public property (Hampton & Fayer, 1990).

These riots were but a harbinger, however, of the pain that was soon to befall African Americans across the country. On April 4, 1968—weeks before his sophomore year was to end--Civil Rights Movement leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

was assassinated while standing on the balcony of his room in the Lorraine Motel. The bitterness and hopelessness that had coursed through Malcolm's African American community ten months earlier would run freely once more sparking protests, sit-ins, demonstrations, and street riots nation-wide (see Branch, 1998).

Sandwiched in between these incredible historical events, it is not hard to imagine why Malcolm would remember the most basic of details. If anything, they provide an important context for his recollections while also signaling the larger reality behind their making: He had lived through some very dark times.

### **The Rise of "X"**

Malcolm's sophomore year of college would mark the public emergence of his hard-core, militant self. It was not a complete departure from how he usually carried himself back then, he said, just more open and obvious. He took on a new name, for example, insisting that others refer to him only as "X," a moniker he adopted in honor of his activist hero, Malcolm X.

Malcolm also started writing editorials and think pieces, submitting them on a regular to the campus newspaper, the Michigan Daily. "I thought of them as 'liberation articles,'" he said. In addition to detailing the perspectives and viewpoints of "an angry, young Black man trapped in White America," Malcolm's writings regularly exhorted his African American brethren to take direct action against the injustices that were being perpetrated against them. "I can't explain how it all happened," he said of his sudden, public transformation. "It was like someone had thrown a switch and I was on. I wanted to be in everyone's face, waking them up to the truth."

One of his articles eventually earned him a visit before the faculty of the University's History Department, the discipline Malcolm would later declare as his major. In print, he openly accused the department of unfairly mistreating the African American students enrolled in its graduate program. The meeting, Malcolm said, was hardly collegial but never once did he let the faculty intimidate him. "I knew what I

knew,” he recalled. “And what I knew was the truth. They weren’t treating us right. And until they did, I wasn’t going to cut them any slack.”

### **Bring Your Chains**

Malcolm’s sophomore year of college would also be marked by his participation in a lockout of the campus’ central administration building. It was to be the first shot African American students would volley at University officials in order to underscore the seriousness in which they intended to pursue institutional change. The lockout itself had been conceived in the early morning hours of April 5, 1968 (just a day after the startling news of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination) by members of the newly formed United Black Population, an umbrella organization that consisted of nearly every African American group on campus, including Malcolm’s African Liberation Movement, the Black Student Union, the Association of Black Socialists, and the Black Student Law Student Alliance.

His role was simple and unanticipated. Malcolm would provide the chains that would be used to lock the doors of the administration building, preventing campus authorities from ever entering it. He had no idea of his actual role in the lockout, however, until the following morning when he arrived at the building site. Malcolm recalled:

All I remember is getting a call the night before the lockout from my friend Sam Fox who was one of the big leaders of the Black Student Union. I picked up the phone and I heard him say, “Malcolm, do you have any chains? And I said ‘No, but I can get some.’ And Sam said ‘Do it and then meet us at the doors of the Administration Building first thing.’ I ran out right then, bought what I could, and then showed up first thing in the morning like he asked me to.

As Malcolm soon discovered, Sam not only intended to lock the doors but if things went as planned, spark a public protest too. In the days between King’s assassination and his funeral, Sam and several other African American student leaders

had created a list of demands that they planned to present to campus administrators at the scene of the lockout. They intended to show their grief and pain to be sure, but they also meant to show that they were no longer going to wait on the slow wheels of change to deliver the tolerance, inclusiveness, and equity they deserved.

On the morning of April 10, 1968—the day of Dr. King’s funeral—African American students from across campus gathered in front of the administration building, waiting to confront then University-President Robben Fleming and his staff. Malcolm remembered further:

Sam knew that I’d want to be in on the protest. Maybe that’s why he asked me to get the chains. I don’t know. I just remember how tense the whole scene was though. I felt it even before I delivered the chains. People were hurt, you know, very sad. But there was a lot of bottled up rage and anger written on their faces too. I sure saw it on Sam’s. I remember telling myself to be careful because I had no idea what was going to happen next.

### **A List of Demands**

The demands that were presented during the course of the lockout were not unfamiliar to University administrators, it must be noted. They had discussed the possibility of establishing a scholarship in King’s name with African American students on other occasions (Brune, 1984). To the as-yet unfulfilled request, Sam and his peers simply tacked on new demands including an increase in the hiring of Black administrators and athletic staff; the creation of an African American studies center; and the addition of more Black students on campus (Peckham, 1994; “Martin Luther King, Jr. scholarship,” 1969). University officials quickly accepted the list, promising students that they would fully attend to their concerns over the course of the summer break. “The term was over except for exams,” Malcolm remembered. “All we could do was wait for the fall.”

## Preparing for a Revolution

Malcolm, meanwhile, continued in his evolution as an increasingly hard-boiled, militant activist. Over the course of the summer, he returned to his martial arts training, an activity he had taken up in his first year of college at the behest of James and Jeremiah. Malcolm also purchased a handgun, learning to aim and shoot at a nearby range. “I needed to make sure I could defend myself if it ever became necessary,” he explained.

That was part of what being militant was all about. You had to be ready to fight in every sense of the word. And let’s face it, after some of the things I wrote about white people and Michigan, I had pretty much made myself a target.

Both of these activities underscored his belief that a real, genuine revolution was in the making. He recalled:

It was the time in my life and in the other Black people around me, where I, we, just became convinced that revolution—real, true revolution—was right around the corner. We were so close, we felt like we could taste it, you know? And I couldn’t wait. I thought it was going to happen any day.

The Detroit riots prior to King’s assassination and the violent disruptions that flared afterwards had also led him to believe that the change to come was most likely going to be borne by aggressive means. “Oh, I knew it wasn’t going to be pretty,” he admitted. “The revolution wasn’t going to be televised and it wasn’t going to be pretty. That much was obvious to me even back then.”

As fate would have it, the firearm he purchased would never see the action for which it was intended. Malcolm has still retained possession of the weapon nonetheless, a cold, steel reminder of what might have been. “Yeah, I still have that damn thing,” he said. “...I just couldn’t part with it.”

## **An Inadequate Response**

Malcolm returned to campus in the fall of 1969, brimming with a renewed faith in the power of his African American brothers and sisters to fundamentally restructure the country's political and social systems. He was not the only student shouldering great expectations of change. His peers were just as eager, if not more so, to discover how campus administrators had fulfilled their spring promises. The administration's response, they would soon find out, was anything but heartening.

Although the University had established a Center for Afro-American and African Studies, it had done so without the input or ideas of the campus' African American community. Every one of the teaching positions associated with the one of the Center's newly created courses "A Survey of Afro-American History," for example, had been assigned to white students (Brune, p. 44, 1987). Additionally, 50 or so Black students were expected among the year's class of newly admitted law students; a mere 17 had enrolled.

Incensed by what appeared to them as a half-hearted attempt to diversify the law student population, representatives of the Black Student Law Student Association (BSLSA) would approach the Dean of the Law School, Francis Allen, demanding that he hire more minority recruiters and provide more money for support programs specifically aimed at bolstering the enrollment of African American students. Allen would deny these requests, citing a lack of available resources for such activities, inciting students to engage in various forms of protest. Allen would mysteriously find money to support more recruiters and support programs but only after suffering through two continuous months of "agitation." On November 21, 1969, he announced that the Law School would more than double its financial aid budget for Black students from \$44,000 to \$100,000 per year (Brune, 1984, p. 45).

For the briefest of moments, the news delighted Malcolm and his friends. "We proved to Allen that he couldn't just tell us no and expect us to skip on home," he said. Soon came, however, the sobering realization that their efforts to broaden access to the University were dependent upon a form of administrative lexis that did



not always reflect the truth. “We saw through the University’s rhetoric right away though. There was a big difference between what they *said* they could do and what they *actually* wanted to do,” Malcolm explained.

### **A United Front**

It was on the heels of Dean Allen’s sudden reversal that African American students began organizing themselves and discussing the possibility of forming a full-scale campus movement. “A lot of us had grown dissatisfied with the University,” Malcolm recalled. “We were tired...and everyone was frustrated, Black professors and students.”

Throughout the remainder of the year, the leaders of the major African American student organizations would work to establish the United Black Population. The name, Malcolm said, was intended to show the campus that he and his African American peers stood as a unified collective with one voice. “We wanted the campus to see us as a united front. The way we figured it, with one main organization, the less dividing and conquering they could do too.”

### **A Big Sticking Point**

It is unclear whether Malcolm was present or not the night his peers presented President Fleming with their list of demands. But he was well-acquainted with it, having spent hours with central authors, offering feedback and helping to shape its language. His liberation articles, his leadership of the African Liberation Movement, his protest experience, and his willingness to jump unquestioningly into the fray garnered the attention and respect of the older professional and graduates on campus who invited him to sit in on their planning meetings. “They knew I was real,” he recalled. “That I was in it to win it.”

These planning sessions, Malcolm said, were fascinating in large part because the group rarely abided by the notion of limits. “We wanted everything to change,” he stated.

It wasn't just about some scholarships here or an office space there. We were way past all that small stuff, especially after what happened at the law school. Everything was up for grabs. That's the way we looked at it. Ask for what we want. Ask for what we need. And then negotiate from there.

Written in language that was strong, bold, and unequivocal, the list included an unprecedented demand: By the 1973-1974 academic year, the enrollment of African American students was to be equal to ten percent of Michigan's overall student population. Its specific wording was as follows:

EXCEPT IN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION WHICH HAS PRESENTED A VALID DEMAND FOR A TWENTY PERCENT POPULATION FIGURE IN THE ACADEMIC YEARS AHEAD, WE SET AS OUR MINIMAL BLACK POPULATION IN ANN ARBOR BY 1973-74 TEN PER CENT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION. THIS SHALL INCREASE YEARLY UNTIL THE OVERALL POPULATION OF BLACKS SHALL APPROACH IF NOT EXCEED THE PROPORTION OF BLACKS IN THE STATE ("Black student demands," page 3).

It would become the major sticking point in every talk, every meeting, and every negotiating session leading up to and through the Black Action Movement Strike of 1970. Fulfilling the demand would be no easy feat. Black student enrollment at Michigan never exceeded three percent of an overall population that had hovered between 30,000 and 32,000 students in the course of the last three years (see "Kennedy letter," 1971); more than doubling their ranks presented serious implications for the University's fiscal budget.

Malcolm did not care. This was the one goal above all others that he wanted to achieve. "The other demands were important," he said.

Don't get me wrong. But none of the others had any meaning without our enrollment demand. It was the most important one of the bunch for me. If we were going to be treated as equals once and for all, there had to be more of us on campus.

## **The Good Soldier**

The presentation of demands by the United Black Population would set into motion a complex and lengthy process of negotiations. It would also mark Malcolm's emergence as a good soldier of sorts, someone his student peers could rely on to carry out whatever needed to be done. He appeared to walk in locked step with his United peers at nearly every juncture of the Strike's unfolding.

On February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1970, for example, Malcolm joined dozens of other African American students in removing and rearranging thousands of books from their appointed shelves in the undergraduate library ("Blacks disrupt library," 1970). The library disruption had been prompted by the University's Board of Regents who refused to grant their approval of the demands until President Fleming and his personnel had an opportunity to present an alternative proposal and a "careful appraisal of funds ("Regents statement," 1970)". It was no small task. In the course of two days, Malcolm and his peers moved an estimated 15 to 20 thousand books ("UGLI returning to normal," 1970).

While Fleming explored the feasibility of adopting United's 10% enrollment goal, Malcolm spent the weeks from February 19<sup>th</sup> through early March in planning meetings, debating tactics and outlining strategies with his peers in anticipation of the University's refusal to grant their demands. In the course of these meetings, United leaders would decide to change the name of their organization to the Black Action Movement (BAM), in anticipation of struggle with campus administrators. "We knew better than to think they were going to come back and give us everything we wanted just like that," he explained. "So we spent a lot of time talking about what would happen afterwards when they told us no. That's usually what someone means when they use the word 'alternative.' It's just another word for no."

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1970, when negotiations between Fleming and BAM members broke down because they could not agree on a revised enrollment target<sup>33</sup> of 7%,

Malcolm would devote himself to networking with other student organizations on campus that might be sympathetic to their efforts.<sup>34</sup> “To be honest, I didn’t think we’d ever get the kind of support from the rest of the campus like we did,” Malcolm admitted. “But folks came out to support us.”

In the process of carrying out these tasks, Malcolm would not only grow in his understanding of how to challenge systemic oppression but the kinds of risks he was willing to take in doing so. “We talked all the time about what we’d go through to see the University do right by Black people,” Malcolm said. “Me, I didn’t feel like I had any limits. I was willing to risk it all to make sure BAM achieved what it set out to.”

Part of his willingness to risk so completely was due to the strong friendships Malcolm had developed with other BAM leaders. “We were brothers,” he recalled.

They helped me understand what it meant to be a Black man, a *real* Black man who was down with his community and not just out for himself. I thought if they could risk so much—their schooling, jobs, money, all that—then I could too.

Did Malcolm ever struggle with the role of the good soldier? “Not really,” he said.

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<sup>33</sup> Citing a shortage of funds and the high attrition rates for Black participants in the University’s Opportunity Awards Program (OAP), Fleming put forth a rationale for an enrollment goal that was three percentage points less than what Black students had demanded. Established in 1964, the purpose of OAP was to provide special academic counseling and tutoring services to disadvantaged and minority students who would have otherwise been ineligible for admission under the University’s standard entrance criteria (see Brown et al., 1978; Brune, 1984, and Peckham, 1994 for the larger story behind the establishment of the Opportunity Awards Program).

<sup>34</sup> In addition to writing letters to the editor of the Michigan Daily, faculty, students and staff weighed in by passing resolutions and issuing public statements on behalf of their departments. On March 12, 1970, for example, the University’s student government passed a resolution declaring their support for BAM and calling upon the University to grant their demands (Brune, 1984). On March 14, 1970, a group of white faculty who called themselves “Radical Faculty,” endorsed the BAM demands as well, insisting that administrators “respond to the BAM proposal with urgency” (“Radical faculty,” 1970).

I was just doing my part, doing what I could to keep us moving forward. I believed back then, like I still do now, that when it comes to making change you can't be in for the glory. You have to be in it for the change. Nothing else.

### **The Call for a Strike**

Negotiations between BAM, President Fleming, and the University's Board of Regents would continue for another nine days without any compromise or resolution. Time and again, BAM roundly refused to consider Fleming's proposal which called for an African American enrollment increase of 7% rather than 10% as well as the hiring of additional recruiters and the further expansion of a Black Studies Program, all by the year 1973 ("Chalmers Report," 1970). Fleming's proposal, Malcolm said, was not BAM wanted. "That was the bottom line for us," he recalled. "It wasn't what we put on the table. And we weren't going to accept anything less. We just weren't."

On March 19th, 1970, in a closed door meeting, Fleming and the University's Board of Regents attempted to get BAM leaders and spokesmen Ed Fabre and Darryl Gorman to agree to their proposal without the consensus of other BAM members. Fabre and Gorman, the only students who had been invited to attend the meeting, flatly refused prompting the Regents to vote and pass the proposal without their support.<sup>35</sup>

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1970, BAM leaders Fabre and Gorman would issue a public plea urging their members (as well as their supporters) to take part in an extended boycott. Rather than attend their classes the next day, he asked that students gather in the Regent's Plaza and take part in demonstration to launch the boycott ("BAM calls for strike," 1970). The Black Action Movement of 1970 had begun.

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<sup>35</sup> According to the March 20th account of the meeting published in the Michigan Daily, Gorman later called the proposed resolution a "nebulous, weasel-worded proposition" (p. 8). He went on to state further: "This is a battle of political realities, and self-interest. If we (black students and the administration) are indeed on a collision course, so be it" (p. 8).

## Intense Days

Though Fabre and Gorman did not intend their words to incite violence, the call for a strike would spark a spontaneous demonstration among students who had gathered in the Plaza, waiting to hear what had transpired during the negotiations. The glass entryway to the administration building was pelted with bricks while other students attempted to seize it completely. The Ann Arbor police, standing by on alert per Fleming's instructions, arrived immediately and set about trying to quell the angry crowd of 200 students (Brune, 1984).

The violent drama that occurred in the Regents Plaza would be played out in varying patterns across campus for the duration of the Strike that was to ultimately run from March 19<sup>th</sup> through April 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1970. Destructive acts said to be committed on behalf of BAM and its cause would be chronicled in the student newspaper on almost daily basis, despite BAM's own professed policy of nonviolent disobedience. These acts ranged from the overturning of wastebaskets to the flooding of classroom floors with fire hoses, to the breaking of windows (see issues of the Michigan Daily from the 20<sup>th</sup> through the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 1970).<sup>36</sup> Malcolm had no problem with these particular tactics. "People were angry," he said. "And they had a right to be. What Fleming proposed was unacceptable."

Such demonstrations were just one element of what Malcolm remembered as "very intense days." Tensions also ran high not simply between administrators and students but between students themselves. From the beginning, BAM leaders decided that there would be no integration of their organization; their White peers could be allies but they could not take in the planning of strategy or assume any

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<sup>36</sup> Fleming would not be spared either. One night, after a President's Tea at the Michigan League, he and his wife were followed home by a small crowd of nearly 100 students yelling, "Open it or shut it down!" as they made their way home ("Crowd jeers Fleming," 1970).

position of responsibility. “We wanted their support,” Malcolm said. “But that was all. The rest was meant for us to do, not anyone else.”

Like many of his African American peers, Malcolm found himself pulling back from his friendships with White classmates during the Strike, partly because of the need to “circle the wagons” but also because he thought it would eliminate any confusion about his own “Blackness” or his commitment to BAM. The tenet of Black militancy required that a person “stay Black” at all times, he said. “That’s a hard thing to do if you’re hanging out with White folks, you know?”

Often times, Malcolm said, the act of pulling away resulted in hard feelings, mistrust, and in the most extreme of cases, the making of enemies. “I knew of folks who got into drag-out fights and hated on each other the rest of the time they were in school” he said. “I knew lots of White people who were hurt and angry by the way they got cut off. It was personal for them. But for us it was political. We needed to be in charge.”

He cut ties with his White friends, a decision that time has yet to soften. Malcolm still regrets the rebuffing of two, White University classmates who he had felt a genuine affection for and once considered close friends. For the sake of BAM, he simply stopped talking to them. He said:

...I do regret hurting them. They were good people. But I turned my back on them because at the time, that was the only choice I felt I could make. Now I see things differently. Maybe I didn’t have to hurt them like I did. I don’t know. I am sorry for it though. I am.

These were not the only tough moments Malcolm and his BAM counterparts would face during the Strike. What also made them so intense was the sense of threat and danger that accompanied them. “You had to be careful in those days,” he said. “We didn’t go anywhere by ourselves because who knew what would happen to you if you got caught alone.”

Just as the Strike stirred emotions on campus, it also stirred great criticism Malcolm said, and the last thing anyone wanted was to run into someone who did not

believe in their cause. “There were a lot of people out there who thought we were nothing but troublemakers, that we needed to be taught a lesson,” he recalled. “I can’t tell you how many times I heard that. ‘Someone should teach you a lesson boy!’ What they really meant was that we should get our butts beat.” Though he was loath to admit it, Malcolm spent most of the Strike constantly looking over his shoulder.

As for the consequences his participation would engender, Malcolm says he gave no thought to the idea once BAM had set the Strike into motion. “I wasn’t focused on anything else other than getting our demands met,” he said. The thought might have popped into his head on occasion, but it never lingered. “I didn’t think about my classes, my grades, not even my parents. Well, maybe I did once or twice but otherwise, I was all about the Strike.”

### **Unexpected Support**

As in the days before, the campus showed its strong support of BAM and their call for a strike against the University. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, the Michigan Daily would report that an estimated 50 percent of students had boycotted Liberal Arts and Sciences (LSA) courses in support of the BAM demands (“Strike for BAM,” 1970). The next day the Daily reported an even more widespread show of support for the Strike. The Residential College, for example, voted to cancel all classes for the duration of the Strike while 78 members of the Institute for Social Research voted to shut down their operations until BAM demands were met (“Strike gains support, 1970). On March 26<sup>th</sup>, the University’s Senate Assembly passed a resolution requiring each academic unit to set aside a portion of their budgets for the ten percent enrollment goal BAM had proposed (“Senate assembly,” 1970). By March 27<sup>th</sup>, student attendance in LSA classes was estimated at a paltry 25 percent (“LSA attendance down,” 1970).

Malcolm would never cease to be overwhelmed by the strong showing of support for BAM and its goals.



We held mass meetings and demonstrations, teach-ins...all sorts of things. I don't know why but there was a part of me that always doubted anybody would show up. But they always did. In big numbers too. It always amazed me, how people supported our cause. Hell, at one point, I was even surprised that Robben Fleming and the others kept showing up at the negotiating table, you know?

### **An Imperfect Movement**

As righteous as their cause was, Malcolm admitted that BAM and the Strike it set into motion were far from perfect. In retrospect, he said, there was a great deal of sexism surrounding many of BAM's internal workings. Women could help with the Strike and the building of the Movement but they were never trusted to lead it; they could also attend planning meetings but never offer a word of advice, at least not with the expectation that anyone would take it seriously.

It was ironic, especially for a Movement whose existence was predicated on the notion of equality. How then did the sexist practices and mindsets escape the scrutiny of the men who participated in BAM? "Well, it wasn't for a lack of trying," Malcolm said. "The women in our group were always calling us out for our sexist ways.

But honestly, there weren't too many of us, including me who wanted to confront those issues, you know, the ways that women were treated by those of us in the movement. And we did treat them poorly. They were sex objects to us mostly. I don't know. It just wasn't something that as men we were ready to deal with. Our eyes were on the bigger picture of getting the University to meet our demands.

### **New Negotiations**

Unwilling to see more students abandon their classes, Fleming and the Regents met secretly to discuss a plan of action that would put an end to it once and for all ("LSA attendance down," 1970). According to Malcolm, the meeting between the two parties was expected. "We knew something was going to happen, we just didn't know when," he recalled.

It didn't take a genius to see that the longer the Strike went on, the worse things would get. I think Fleming understood that more than anybody. And he didn't want to see that happen. Neither did we. But you know, once you call a strike, how do you stop it when so many people are in your corner? We couldn't do that. I think Fleming knew that too. If the Strike was going to end, he was going to have to end it. So when we heard of a secret meeting, we weren't surprised. All we were worried about was what they were going to come up with as a resolution.

Fleming confirmed for the campus that such a meeting had taken place but he that he was not going to make announcements in relation to its contents until BAM called off its disruptive activities and took part in a new series of negotiations. BAM acquiesced and negotiations began again (Brune, 1984).

### **The End of the Strike**

For two days, March 28<sup>th</sup> through March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1970, Fleming and BAM leaders worked to forge an agreement that would end the Strike. In the end, BAM would get everything it wanted: funding for the establishment of recruiting programs for both Black students and faculty; the creation of tutoring and counseling programs for minority students; increased financial support for the Center of Afro-American and African Studies; and most importantly of all, an increase in Black student enrollment consistent with the 10 percent goal BAM had originally demanded (Peckham, 1994). The following day, Fabre and Gorman would announce BAM's victory to a packed crowd that had spent the last few days waiting for such news.

Malcolm remembered the crowd's reaction. "People just started grabbing at each, hugging, crying, kissing..." How did he feel? "I was overjoyed," he said. "I was. I was still angry but I was overjoyed too. And proud. I couldn't wait to tell mybrothers."

On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1970 the headline of the Michigan Daily proclaimed: "BAM Ends Class Strike: Accepts Regental Statement." ("BAM ends strike," 1970). Ed Fabre, one the main leaders of the Black Action Movement promised his student

peers that “the fight is not over” but for all intensive purposes, the BAM Strike of 1970 had run its course.

### **A Still Elusive Goal**

As other accounts of the BAM Strike have noted, the enrollment of Blacks students at Michigan never reached the 10 percent mark, despite Malcolm’s fierce efforts and those of his BAM counterparts (see Brown, et al., 1978; Brune, 1984; Peckham, 1994). By the 1973-1974 academic year—the four-year deadline by which the University was to recruit, enroll, and retain a cadre of Black students equal to ten percent of the overall student population on the Ann Arbor campus—Michigan’s African American student population represented no more than 7.3 percent of the total student enrollment (Brown, et al., 1978).

Today, some 40 years later, that goal remains elusive and unfulfilled. According to the latest fall enrollment figures for 2006, African American students at Michigan represent just six percent of the overall student population (“U’ enrollment tops 40,000 for first time,” 2006). The closest enrollment figures have come to the 10% benchmark consist of the years 1996 and 1997, when African Americans made up 9.2 percent of the overall student population, still shy of BAM’s goal (Report 875, Office of the Registrar).

Malcolm doesn’t believe, however, that it is fair to judge the success of BAM and its Strike by such numbers. “Don’t judge BAM because Michigan didn’t uphold its end of the bargain,” he said.

That doesn’t make sense, you know? Judge Michigan. They’re the ones that haven’t kept up their end of the deal. They’re the ones that still have to do what they promised. BAM, we kept out promises. When they didn’t open it up, we said we’d shut it down. And we did.

### **Changes**

Unlike some of the other participants in this study, Malcolm did not offer any lengthy or detailed assessment of the Strike’s influence on him, developmentally or

otherwise. His growth, he said, was never the point. “We did what we had to do. We were treated like numbers. We were anonymous and invisible, until we stood up for ourselves. It wasn’t much of a choice after a while.”

He did admit, however, that his militancy had been softened somewhat by the passing of time, at least on the outside. Inside, Malcolm said, he still held on to many of the same ideals he had espoused as a twenty-year old. “I’m still militant and serious about change on the inside,” he admitted. “...Time has mellowed me a bit. I know now that I don’t have to resort to extremes to get what I want in this world. I know how to make that happen all on my own.”

### **Life After the Strike**

Malcolm would graduate from the University of Michigan in 1971 with a bachelor’s degree in history. He would then take a job teaching mathematics at the Maxey Boys Training School, a juvenile detention center for young boys who had run into trouble with the law. A few years later, he became an associate registrar at the University of Detroit where he was asked to streamline and improve the campus’ registration process. During his tenure there, Malcolm would meet a man he simply identified as “Dr. Woodruff,” a campus official who later convinced him to apply to business school.

After being told by the Dean of the University’s School of Business to go elsewhere, Malcolm applied and was accepted to Wharton, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. He chose Harvard where in addition to mastering his economic courses, he participated in the school’s Black Student Union and chaired their Educational Issues committee. Upon graduation, Malcolm set off for a career in business world, where he spent the last 30 years of his life working as product manager and leadership consultant.

## Malcolm's Story and the Path to Activism

What are we to make of Malcolm's story? What does it reveal about the forces operating behind his activist transformation? There are several answers to these questions, all of which highlight how keenly relational the process of forging a commitment to activism can be. If we look across the whole of Malcolm's story, it is clear that his path to activism was shaped by many hands, including those of his parents, his brothers, and his peers.

Let us consider first Malcolm's parents. Though they did not deliberately rear him to become an activist, both his mother and his father raised him to possess certain sensibilities that he undoubtedly relied upon in his days as part of the Black Action Movement (BAM). A fundamental respect for education, a strong belief in the tenets of self-determination, and an abiding sense of justice and injustice; these were not only critical components of his overall moral orientation to the world but as it happened, they were also consistent with the ideals behind the Strike itself.

It is no leap of logic to believe that in some way, Malcolm's upbringing—at least in part—may have made him more open to the possibility of engaging in protest. We have to ask ourselves: If he did not fully understand the importance of education, would a protest aimed at increasing access to education have much meaning for him? If he did not believe in self-determination, why would he back a cause that sought only to expand the field of educational opportunities, not ensure a particular kind of performance? If he were unable to differentiate between justice and injustice, how could he recognize the larger moral imperative inherent in challenging the limited access of something as vital as a college education?

Malcolm's moral upbringing, however, only explains part of his engagement in activism. We also have to credit his brothers and his college peers for showing him how to move on that upbringing and translate it into concrete action. According to his story, no one else played any sort of significant role in this respect other than

James, Jeremiah, his counterparts in the African Liberation Movement, and the rest of the leaders of the Black Action Movement.

Sometimes, as in the case of James and Jeremiah, Malcolm's protest engagement was a baptism-by-fire affair where he was simply thrown into the middle of rally or demonstration. In BAM's case, space had been made for Malcolm to explore the ins and outs of organizing a longer-term protest. There were also the community service efforts and political discussions with the members of the African Liberation Movement, individuals who challenged him to think critically and to extend himself in terms of a greater collective good. Though his peers used different means, the end result was the same: They both awakened and emboldened Malcolm as the kind of change he could make and that needed to be made.

It would be a mistake, however, to presume that Malcolm's activism was shaped solely by external forces; that he did not bring something to the process on his own. He had his own dreams of revolution and change, his own abiding sense of "the truth" to which people needed to be awakened. He also possessed a significant capacity for risk. On several occasions, Malcolm deliberately challenged the powers-that-be because he believed they were being discriminatory. Those incidents took place not at the behest of his brothers or others in the Liberation Movement but through his own initiative.

There is also Malcolm's identity to consider here as well. As his stories about his growing militancy made clear, he very much wanted to establish himself as a strong African American man, someone others would recognize as powerful both in body and in intellect. Yet, it was not for glory or recognition or even personal satisfaction that he sought to do so. It was simply who he believed he ought to be.

This is one of the interesting ways in which Malcolm seems to differ from the other participants in the study. Unlike Web, and to a certain degree Ennis, Malcolm did not look to define himself through the engagement in activism. Rather, he looked to express his inner self through his activism. His martial arts training and his

shooting lessons were part of the person he wanted to bring to the movement, not who he hoped to find through the movement.

Such a perspective may help explain the curious denial he issued when asked to account for the long-term influence of his engagement in activism. His growth, Malcolm said, was not the point. Such a response is certainly consistent with the unselfish, hard-lined philosophy of the Black Power Movement, a movement in which Malcolm deeply believed. We might also see his response, however, as a fundamental difference in his overall approach to activism, an approach that we have not seen in this study thus far.

Perhaps this is the larger lesson that Malcolm's story possesses for us. Sometimes, the path to activism is paved by the political and not the personal, or at least not to the degree we have become accustomed to thinking it is. There are those in the world for who activism is primarily a political act, a means of ensuring greater self-determination and justice and opportunity before it is anything else.

Then again, is it really? The question begs asking: Would Malcolm spin the same kind of tale as a younger man, say, a year past the BAM Strike like Web was when he first sat down to tell his own story? Or would his tale reflect a similar form of yearning for identity and verification that Web's did? It is an interesting question to ponder especially if we take into consideration Portelli's (1991) argument that life histories and personal tales "depend on time, if for nothing else, because they undergo additions and subtractions with each day of the narrator's life" (p. 60).

Maybe Malcolm's story would have been different had it been rendered earlier and in closer proximity to the actual timing of BAM and the Strike than it stands now. To some degree, there is no need to tell a story about who you hoped to be or were trying to be when you had already resolved such issues a long time ago. We will likely never know for certain.

## India's Story

Like Malcolm Jones, India Taylor's participation in the Black Action Movement of 1970 was well over when she agreed to be interviewed for this study. Lately, she had been ruminating about the life she once led in local politics. Eighteen years ago, India was a key public relations official and precinct captain for the state's Democratic Party. Although the hours were long, she found work as a public servant fulfilling. Perhaps, India mused, she would one day move again in that direction, after her son finished high school and was firmly settled in college.

For now, she would live vicariously through the other young students of color on campus who championed the same political and social causes India herself had as an undergraduate member of BAM during the early 1970's, causes related to access, equity, and a more inclusive educational environment. Silently, she hoped her own son would come to care about these causes too. That they had not been adequately resolved in the course of thirty years did not vex India. "It's funny, how things change, but stay the same," she said. "We're still fighting the same struggles. But at least we're still fighting."

This is her story.

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India was born in 1949, the only child her parents would ever have during the brief time they were together. She remembers nothing of Chicago, the city in which she was born. She also does not recall the move her parents made to Holland, Michigan, two short years after her birth. In fact, most of what India knows about the circumstances surrounding her infancy has been gleaned from snippets of conversations, words exchanged here and there, between various family members.

Her parents left Chicago, she heard, because they could not maintain a healthy and stable relationship. It was also said that most of their troubles stemmed from their racial differences. India's mother, who she described as a "waspy" White



woman had done the unthinkable: She fell in love with India's father, an African American who also proudly claimed Oklahoma Choctaw Indian as part of his identity. "Back in those days, a relationship between a Black man and a White woman was the stuff of major scandals," India recalled.

After a few years of trying to live above the reproach of the world around them, her parents decided to call it quits. While she is not entirely certain it is true, India likes to believe that her parents still loved each other when they parted. "I sometimes tell myself that they broke up because they couldn't figure out how to make it work, not because they weren't in love with each other anymore," she said.

No one has to tell India, however, about the instability that her parents' break-up would cause in her childhood days. Although their move to Michigan was intended to give all of them a new, fresh start as well as infuse some much-needed normalcy in India's young life, it would instead kick off a childhood of considerable transience and uncertainty. Once home, her mother began regularly disappearing for long stints at a time. Where she went, who she was with or when she would return, India never knew. Her father staged his own disappearing act, rarely visiting India even though lived only miles away in the town just next door.

Her life soon resembled a game of hot potato. "I got tossed back and forth between my strict, Germanic grandmother and my wild aunt who didn't really know anything about how to take care of a kid" she recalled. Still, the only tell-tale sign that India was troubled by the irresponsible actions of her parents would come in the form of a stutter that she developed at the age of five years old. It was simply one more element that set her apart from everyone else around her. "It wasn't easy, my childhood," India recalled.

"Here I was, this stuttering, mixed kid living with adults while my parents were out doing God-knows-what. I know I stuck out like a sore thumb. Especially in those days...Would I have liked things to be different? Sure I would. But that's life. And somehow I survived it all."

## **In the Company of Strong Women**

Despite the fact that they had no hand in the troubling circumstances which led her to their doorsteps time and again, India's grandmother and aunt never shirked their responsibilities when it came to ensuring that she had what she needed to survive. This would remain the case even after she had entered college as an emancipated minor. "They always took me in," India recalled. "They always made sure that I was provided for."

Years later, when she was married with a child of her own, India would be even more appreciative of these women and the sacrifices they made for her. "Growing up, I know I wasn't always grateful for what they did for me," she said.

It was hard to, there was so much resentment floating around. Plus neither of them had a soft touch which is something I wanted as a young girl, you know, that loving mother-daughter bond. But after I had Samuel [her first son], I was able to see all the important things they did for me. I was lucky to have grown up in the company of such strong women.

In addition to providing a place to live, these women taught India some very important lessons about how to carry herself when she was out in the world. One of those lessons was how to move past the insensitivity that was thrown her way. Her stuttering problem, her bi-racial identity, and her troubled parents often made her a ready target for teasing by her classmates. After several tear-filled trips home, her grandmother insisted that she learn to stand tall despite what was being said about her. "India, you have got to grow a thicker skin.' That's what she'd say to me all the time," she recalled. "Otherwise fight back. Give as good you get. But you have to stand up for yourself. No one is going to do that for you."

India's aunt was especially instructive in this regard. It was well-known among the people who lived in Holland that her aunt was a lesbian. It was also an everyday occasion, she said, for her aunt to be teased about her sexual orientation by someone passing them on the street. Instead of suffering in silence, India's aunt would offer a

biting criticism in return. “My aunt was so quick with a putdown, it was incredible,” she remembered. “As far as I could tell, she didn’t internalize the nasty things that got said to her either. She just kept on moving.”

India’s grandmother also possessed a deep sense of right and wrong. She was forever divvying the world up according to the two. “There were few gray areas for my grandmother,” she said. “If she didn’t think you were doing right, man did you hear about it.” Perhaps, India said, she was simply trying to prepare her for the struggles she would have later in life. She was not entirely sure. But it seemed to India that her grandmother also spent a considerable amount of time calling attention to situations that specifically revolved around race.

Though some forty-odd years have passed, India could still recall her grandmother angrily gesturing at a news broadcast on television about the infamous Birmingham police chief Eugene “Bull” Connor who had taken serious liberties with the law and allowed the Klu Klux Klan to attack Freedom Riders in 1961. “She was outraged,” India remembered. “Just outraged at his bravado, his cruelty...She’d gone on for a while, talkin’ a blue streak about the immorality, the meanness he displayed...”

On her grandmother’s sprawling, multi-acre farm, India also learned how to accept responsibility for someone other than herself. Her grandmother’s sole income was derived from the crop harvests the farm produced each year. If the fields were not properly tended, she and India would not have the money they needed to maintain their basic standard of living. “We weren’t rich by any means,” she said.

Every penny counted. I was reminded of that all the time, believe me. And as hard as that lesson was, it was important for me to learn it. I mean, let’s face it. My parents weren’t good role models when it came to taking care of your responsibilities. I’m sure my grandmother thought I needed to learn that from someone.

## The Sisters of St. Ann

India's grandmother and aunt were not the only women to leave a lasting impression upon her. The summer before she was to enter the fifth grade, India transferred from the public school she had been attending to the local Catholic grade school known as St. Ann's. "I couldn't take public school anymore," she explained. "I was tired of all the teasing and it was exhausting trying to fight everybody off."

St. Ann's was run by a small group of Italian nuns with a strong commitment to education equality as well as to social justice. India has never forgotten them. She recalled:

They were feisty, oddly—as nuns—in charge of their destiny, and committed to social justice. They built the house they lived in and would take in and teach Black children when it was dangerous to do that sort of thing. And they kept on doing it even after someone had their house set on fire...They were just amazing, empowered women.

Unlike her public school teachers, the sisters of St. Ann would recognize India's innate intellectual abilities. "For the first time in my life, somebody could see that I was smart," she said. She would be encouraged by the sisters on a daily basis to apply herself in her studies. "They were the first people to tell me that I could do anything I wanted," India remembered.

Suddenly, all of the troubles she had endured in the previous four years seemed to fall away.

It didn't matter that I looked different from the other kids or that the people in my town knew my aunt was a lesbian or that my parents were messed up. What mattered was that I was smart and somebody wanted to invest in me.

Although India would continue to stand out as the only African American student in the school, the distinction was no longer the source of grief it once was. The same could be said of her stuttering problem. By the end of her first year at St. Ann's it was gone.

## St. Peter's

Four years later, India would find herself making preparations to attend St. Peter's a nearby Roman Catholic High School that typically served the wealthier families in the county. She had no intention of attending the school at first; there was simply no money available to pay for the private tuition. The sisters of St. Ann would intervene on her behalf, however, convincing school officials that India was a more than suitable candidate for a scholarship. "They advocated for me and I was able to go St. Peter's even though I didn't have the money for it," she recalled.

To hear India tell it, the transition from middle school to high school was a rocky one. Where the teachers and staff of St. Ann's had been welcoming and inclusive, she found the people of St. Peter's largely disinterested in her. "No one seemed to care that I was there," she said. "My teachers didn't really pay much attention to me at all." It seemed to India that her teachers barely registered any of the small "handful" of other African American students in their midst either. "There weren't a lot of us," she said. "There was only one Black teacher in the whole school to boot. Maybe that's why no one bothered to see how we were doing. "

As she had in grade school, India would also endure several rounds of racist treatment during the first months of high school. "I got called some pretty nasty names by kids who didn't even know who I was, for no apparent reason" she remembered. It was then that India decided to move through St. Peter's as a "floater," an anonymous someone who stayed on the fringes of school life, rarely delving deeply into one group or activity. "I didn't want the same trouble I had in grade school," she explained. "I figured the more I moved around, the less easy of a target I'd be."

India also decided to stay focused on her schoolwork, earning straight 'A's' and a place in St. Peter's National Honor Society during her first two years of high school. "The classroom was the one place where I felt O.K." she said. "I could hold my own and nobody would mess with me."

## “The Golden Negro”

By her junior year, India said, she had grown tired of the floating routine. She had also become frustrated by the double standards that increasingly pervaded the classroom. White students could challenge the nuns and priests who taught them without any fear of reprisal; her African American peers, on the other hand, were rarely allowed to offer a contradictory opinion. If they did, they were reprimanded on the spot. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before,” she said.

But all of a sudden, I started to notice how the White kids could get away with stuff we couldn’t. If a Black classmate disagreed with a White teacher there was hell to pay. When a White kid did it, he was being a ‘free thinker.’

Her White peers were also allowed certain privileges that her African American peers were not. “They [White students] could make a mistake and it would be just that, a mistake,” she recalled. “One of us [African American students] would make a mistake and it was like ‘See, you’re all dumb.’”

Increasingly conscious of these double standards, India began questioning the treatment she received in the classroom. Did her teachers only endure her presence because of her academic skills? Were they being truly sincere when they praised her in the classroom or were they just trying to keep her line? Eventually, India became convinced that the nuns and priests who taught her only tolerated her because they had no other choice. She stated:

As I got older, it became clearer to me. I was the ‘golden negro.’ I was tolerated because I had good grades and was a good student. But the nuns made it clear that I had no real room to step out of line. The minute I did, I would go back to being one of ‘them,’ the other black people who nobody liked or thought anything good of.

## **Pushing Back**

For reasons she could not quite articulate, India felt the need to test the limits of this begrudging tolerance. “I just wanted to push back,” she said. She began by staging a reading of one of the more provocative scenes in Ralph Ellison’s once-controversial novel Native Son for her speech class. Just as she anticipated, the nun teaching the class strongly abruptly called India’s reading to end before she had even finished it. She was made to stand before a small panel of sisters, each of whom took her task for her insolent behavior. “The nuns were totally scandalized by the book I’d chosen and my reading of it,” India recalled. “I got in big trouble...”

A few weeks later, India pushed back again. This time it was in religion class.

We were discussing the idea of faith. Every time one of my classmates would talk about what they believed, I would challenge them. ‘Are you sure you really believe in God? ‘How do you know God even exists?’ ‘What if He doesn’t?’ I got kicked out of class for ‘threatening the faith’ of my classmates. At least that’s what they [the nuns] told my grandmother.

## **Leaving the Farm**

At the same time that India began challenging her teachers in the classroom, she also began making preparations to leave the farm where she lived with her grandmother. She did not wish to talk in depth about her departure or her reasons for moving out. She would only admit that the two of them had been at odds for a long time and she felt stifled by her life on the farm. India moved in with her aunt and remained with her until she set off for college, a year and a half later.

## **Michael & Mr. Phelps**

The bright spot in India’s high school life was a young man named Michael Phelps. They bonded almost immediately after meeting one another, she said. Like India, Phelps was African American and had grown up in the same town, just on the other side of it. He was acquainted with her life story too but it made no difference

to him who she lived with, what her mother had done or who her aunt loved. “He knew the talk and still wanted to be with me,” India remembered.

Throughout all of the floating and questioning and pushing back that she would do at St. Peter’s, Michael remained the one constant in India’s young life. “He was always there, always around, no matter what” she recalled. Part of the attraction between the two of them was rooted in Michael’s innate need to care-take and her innate need to be take care of, she often thought. “He probably wouldn’t like me saying this but for a young guy he was definitely nurturing,” India said. “And I needed that, you know, because of how I had to grow up.”

Despite their well-matched ways, her relationship with Michael was not always harmonious, India admitted. They could both stubborn to the point of foolhardiness; offering apologies was also difficult for the young couple. As a result, India and Michael regularly called off their relationship only to turn around renew it time after time after time. “It was one of those on-again, off-again relationships,” India said. “Where you couldn’t live with them but then you couldn’t live without them.”

There was a third person in their relationship. He was Michael’s father, a man she always formally referred to as “Mr. Phelps.” Though he was not entirely supportive of the pair’s relationship, he loved India nearly as much he loved Michael. “He was the sweetest man,” she recalled. “But he was always telling us to break up, that we didn’t need to be together so much. I think he was afraid that neither of us would ever leave Holland otherwise.”

Throughout high school, the elder Phelps would keep a close eye on India, offering support in whatever way she seemed to need it. When she had no money for books, he bought them for her. When she fought with her grandmother, he would offer a compassionate ear. When she left her grandmother’s house, he helped moved her belongings to her aunt’s house. He did all of things, India said, because he believed in her potential. “He used to rib Michael all the time about the fact that I was a better student than he was,” she recalled. “He’d say “You better watch her. She’s going to be somebody some day.”



## **Preparing for College**

To show how deeply he believed in her, Mr. Phelps would become the driving force behind India's eventual attendance at the University of Michigan. The idea of going to college had never been in doubt, of course; what she had been uncertain of was how to get accepted and then pay for it. "Honestly, I was ready for college by the time my junior year started, probably even before then" India said. "But I had no clue how I was going to make it happen."

At Mr. Phelps's behest, India would apply to the University of Michigan, despite her misgivings about its proximity to home. "Ann Arbor was down the road from where I lived but it still seemed too close for comfort," India remembered.

She also decided to apply to Radcliffe College. "Radcliffe actually wanted me," India said. "They sent me all sorts of literature about the campus and even made phone calls."

Mr. Phelps would simply up the Michigan ante by writing a stellar recommendation on India's behalf; he would also appeal to one of the University's financial aid officers--a close, personal friend of his--asking him to look into the possibility of granting her some much-needed aid. When her acceptance letter from the University appeared in her mailbox several months later, it contained an offer of a scholarship that would cover her tuition and fees until graduation. "That was basically it," India recalled. "I was going to Michigan."

Like the sacrifices of her grandmother and aunt, India has never forgotten the kindness or generosity that Mr. Phelps showed her as a young teenager. "He was more of a father to me than my real father," she said. "He died with a picture of me in his wallet, like I was one of his. I wouldn't have made it to Michigan without him."

## **Expectations for Michigan**

No longer preoccupied with questions of cost or location, India's thoughts turned to the kind of experiences she hoped Michigan would provide for her. One of

her core expectations was that the University would provide opportunities for her to explore her African American roots in depth. India also hoped that she would have the chance to interact and live among “her people” more fully.

As for her academic plans, she intended to declare sociology as her major. “I thought it would be the way for me to learn more about my Black heritage, even my Indian background,” India said. “That was important to me. I wanted to be in a place to explore the other parts of my identity that weren’t White...”

### **An Emancipated Minor**

As most first-time college students do when they arrive on campus, India felt suddenly independent and free when she stepped foot on University soil in 1966. In her case, however, her independence was more than some romantic notion; it was an actual fact of law. Before moving to Ann Arbor, India had filed and obtained the status of an emancipated minor. Legally, she was beyond the control of any parent or guardian. Filing for the status of an emancipated minor had been necessary; her parents were nowhere to be seen and neither her grandmother nor her aunt was able to provide anything for college.

The fullness of her independence did not truly set in until the day she met Ivan O. Parker, the University financial aid officer charged with disbursing the funds she needed to get through the school year. “He was one of the first people I saw when I came to Michigan,” India recalled. “As he was turning over this money, *my money*, I remember feeling uncharacteristically adult and grown-up. I thought “I belong to me now.””

### **Searching for a Way In**

But India wanted more than to simply belong to herself. She also wanted to belong among others, in particular the larger African American student community on campus. Finding a way into this small, tight-knit community would prove to be no easy task. “In those days, the way in was usually through a group like a fraternity

or sorority” she remembered. “That came with its own set of issues like whether you could take all the hazing, the snobbery, all of the unnecessary pretense.”

India decided to rush the popular African American sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. The women in that group, she soon found, were highly cliquish and especially cruel when it came to their hazing routines. “I had long dark hair back then, down to my knees,” she recalled. “And the girls put baby powder in it. It came out this gray, streaky mess. I had to walk around in public like that all day. I cried it was so awful.”

Admission to the inner social circles of the African American student community was also circumscribed by gender, a fact that further rankled India. “It was the days when the role of a black woman was to take care of a black man, not much more,” she said. In her attempts to befriend some of the men on campus, she was often rebuffed, if not insulted. “I used to get propositioned all the time. The guys didn’t want hang out and get to know you so much as they just wanted to get into your pants. It was demeaning.”

### **Dropping Out**

Half way through the first term of college, India’s grandmother developed a bleeding ulcer, a serious condition that left her bedridden. When her aunt refused to take care of her grandmother, India had no other choice but to return to Holland and administer homecare until she was healed. “I was needed at home and ended up having to drop out. That’s what I told the registrar,” she remembered. As a result, India’s attempts to find a way into the African American student community were temporarily suspended. Her attempts to rush the popular sorority Delta Sigma Theta would be postponed as well. At that point, India, she did not much care. She would drop “off-line” and never try to rush any sorority again.

### **Back Again**

India would return to the Michigan campus in time for the start of its 1968 winter term. This time around however, she would try a different way in to the

African American community. For weeks, she attended the meetings and activities of the Black Student Union (BSU), an organization focused specifically on the social and education needs of African Americans at Michigan. After making the acquaintance of several of the young men who had established the BSU, India would be nominated for the only position available to women in the organization, that of the acting secretary. “I have to admit that I didn’t think too much about it,” she admitted. “I was flattered that they even nominated me. So I just said yes.”

### **Secretary of the BSU**

According to India, there was not much to the job of BSU acting secretary. “It was what you would imagine it to be,” she said. “Taking meeting notes, writing them up, distributing them to the rest of the group...” Still, she refused to relinquish the position even though there was little in it that challenged her intellectually or otherwise. She had her reasons.

In the first place, the position gave her entrée to the African American community, something she had struggled the previous term to achieve on her own. Little by little, India began to establish a genuine social life because of it. There were invitations to coffee, to movies, and of course, to study at the undergraduate library. There were also requests for dates which thrilled her. “It was kind of heady, you know?” she said. “I’d spent all of high school dating the same guy. And then, it was like I had my pick. It was a rush.”

The position of secretary also put India in close proximity to one of the BSU’s central leaders, a young handsome man name Sydney Brown. Full of charm and good looks, she found herself thinking about him constantly. After a series of memorable dates between the two of them, he had begun to do the same. “We fell for each other in a big way,” India recalled. Before the end of the school year, the pair would begin to date each exclusively.

In time, her role as acting secretary would prompt a greater awareness of and attention to the world of politics too. Although many of its activities were social in nature, the Black Student Union had also been established for political purposes as well, mostly because Sydney and his friends believed that African American students on campus could benefit from a collective form of political advocacy. “We were stronger and could get more done as a group, Sydney was always saying,” India recalled. “And he was right. With so few of us on campus, it was easy to feel insecure and vulnerable. It was also easy for the University to overlook what we needed.”

She began paying greater attention to the organizing efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement he was building from a perspective she had not utilized before, such as the legal tactics, base building strategies, and non-violent methods that were being used to garner equal rights for African Americans. India also became more attentive to the various political philosophies that other change agents such as Gandhi and Che Guavara were drawing from to inform the social movements they were creating elsewhere in the world.

Most of her new focus was the direct result of listening to the conversations that took place in front of her during the BSU meetings. In watching her peers—primarily the men of the group—discuss and debate the political events of the day, she also found herself developing a deep appreciation for their intelligence, wit, and insight. “I know it sounds strange,” she said. “But it was like I fell in love with them...not romantically, but maybe spiritually? I don’t know if that’s the right word. I just know they cared about their community and it made me want to care too.”

### **The Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Much like Malcolm Jones, what India remembers of her second year in college, what was then the 1968-1969 academic term, is not by any means extensive or detailed. In fact, her main memories spin from the axis of but a single historical event: the assassination of civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. in the spring of

1968. King's tragic death would not only spark great sadness on campus but also prompt a lockout that historical records would later characterize as one of the essential first steps of the Black Action Movement and its extraordinary Strike of 1970.

India recalled clearly where she was and what she was doing the moment she learned of what had happened to King:

I was sitting in my dorm room. I remember listening to Otis Redding on the stereo. And that's where I was when I heard the news that MLK had been killed. I couldn't believe it. I was stunned, shocked. It was so hard to comprehend.

After a round of teary phone calls between her African American peers, it was decided that their response as a community should come in the form of a day of silence. Early the following morning, India, Sydney, and their friends made their way to the center of campus. "It was so cold that morning," she recalled.

There had been this freaky April snow and we all gathered on the Diag at about five or six a.m. It was dark and the mood was heavy, somber. We agreed not to talk to one another or anyone else. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. There weren't any words for the immense pain and sadness we felt.

### **The Lockout**

Six days later, the day of King's funeral, African American students staged a lockout of the University's central administration building. "The same day Martin had been killed," India said, "Another call went out among the Black community, putting us on alert that something big was going to happen." Some time later that day—she could not remember when exactly—yet another call was issued, urging India and her roommates to make their way to the administration building as soon as possible on the morning of April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

Neither she nor her roommates had any idea about what was going to happen in the Plaza outside of the administration building. They simply showed up because they had been asked to do so. “That’s how it worked in those days,” India explained. “You were asked to show up somewhere and you did it. No questions asked, really.”

She was not entirely surprised to see Sydney standing at the front of the building helping Sam Fox and Malcolm Jones secure its doors with chains either. “King’s death was very hard on Sydney. I half expected him to do something...what it was going to be I didn’t know. I just knew he wouldn’t let the moment pass without trying something.”

It was not until she saw a sheaf of paper being exchanged between Sam Fox and President Fleming, however, that India began to realize that “something” larger was in the works. “I saw that and I thought, ‘Oh, there’s going to be more,’” she remembered. “This is just the start of it.”

### **Learning about the Demands**

Soon after the lockout, India, as well as everyone else in the African American student community, would be told about the sheaf of paper and its contents. It was list of demands, she said, some of which India was acquainted with and others which she was learning about for the first time. “Sydney told me about the scholarship that they had been trying to get the University to create in honor of King” India remembered. “The other things, like the center and getting more Black students on campus were new to me.”

Unlike Sydney and the other members of the Black Student Union, India believed that their demands would be met without complications. “It wasn’t at all unreasonable, what we were asking for especially when you considered what we’d just been through with King,” she said. “It didn’t dawn on me that the administration would do anything else.”

## **Mrs. Sydney Brown**

In truth, India had little time to consider such matters. She was in the midst of preparing for her wedding which was to take place in the middle of the summer. Paid for by Sydney's well-off family, it was a lavish ceremony, the likes of which India had never witnessed before. She said:

It turned out be quite the event. The mayor of Detroit even came to our wedding. There was all of this glorious food and drink. I never imagined I'd have a wedding like that. It was definitely a high society kind of occasion.

## **A Bad Reaction**

Now known as Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Brown, the happy couple returned to campus in the fall of 1969 eager to live as man and wife as well as advocates for their African American community. India recalled:

Sydney and I moved into an apartment when school started in the fall but we still lived the student lifestyle. He continued working with the BSU and organizing Black students on campus. And I took up my same role as acting secretary of the Black Student Union.

Amid honeymoon plans and wedding gifts, she had rarely given the lockout and the demands any thought. Sydney's thoughts, on the other hand, were never far from the lockout or the demands or administrator's responses. "The closer it got to fall and the start of the new school year, it was all he wanted to talk about," India said.

Then came the news of the ways in which administrators had attempted to fulfill African American students' demands. She remembered further:

When we found out what the administration had done with our demands, the half-assed way they took care of them, well, people got very upset, including Sydney... Things only got worse from there with the law school and all. First we [African American students] get told



they have no money then they tell us they do. It was classic administrative manipulation. When Sydney came home to tell me that BSU was going to start organizing with the other Black groups on campus I thought, 'This could be a long year.'

### **On the Sidelines**

India was not part of the planning efforts that began in the wake of the Law School's abrupt about-face, though she fully supported the idea of organizing a unified front to oppose the administration. "That just wasn't allowed," she remembered. "Women were supposed to stand on the sidelines and be cheerleaders for their men."

It had been that way when Sydney and the leaders of the Black Student Union, the African Liberation Movement, and the Black Student Alliance formed the coalition called the United Black Front. From what India could tell, things would probably remain that way until students' issues were resolved. "I wish it had been different," she said. "There was a lot we as women could have offered."

### **The Reluctant Liaison**

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that India and her female counterparts simply accepted their roles as cheerleaders willingly, without a word of protest. Almost nightly, Sydney would hear about the hypocrisy inherent in the sexist ways he and his friends were organizing the community. "There were plenty of arguments over it," she recalled. "The bottom line was that none of them believed we were strong enough to handle the pressure."

As a way to mollify her, Sydney suggested that India begin organizing the women of the African American community, making sure that they were well-informed about the demands and the steps that were being taken to see that they were met. She reluctantly agreed to take on the role. "I wasn't an organizer in the truest sense of the word. I was more of a liaison, sharing information with the other Black women on campus." The work itself was hardly difficult. It meant attending

meetings, calling group representatives, and providing pamphlets, flyers and posters for distribution among various women's organizations.

The high point of her liaison activities would come when she had to meet with the women of Delta Sigma Theta, the sorority that once subjected her to some serious hazing as a first-year student. She had been India Taylor then; now she was Mrs. Sydney Brown. "It killed them, I know," India recalled. "I had everything they wanted. A ring on my finger and fine lookin' man."

### **Bearing Witness to the Strike's Beginning**

India might have been able to convince Sydney to allow her to take on other significant responsibilities had she not become pregnant. When she informed him that they were going to have a child, Sydney quickly shut down her participation in what had become the Black Action Movement (BAM) and its organizing activities. "Sydney was like 'Well that's that. You have to take care of the baby now,'" she said.

Part of his reaction stemmed from his genuine concern for his child and wife. But Sydney was also well aware of the instability and uncertainty that had as of late started to permeate the campus. Negotiations between BAM and the University had yet to produce the changes in institutional policy African American students were seeking since early February. "Sydney was worried, I knew," India said. "It was almost the middle of March and we didn't have any kind of resolution."

Sydney was growing concerned about the increasingly militant and angry tone the members of BAM had adopted as well. "He thought the administration would grow tired of it and just stop showing up at the negotiating table," she said. "...Not that he wasn't angry himself. But I think he questioned whether it would harm us rather than help."

As fate would have it, India would still witness one of the most violent episodes in the history of BAM and its Strike. After negotiations had broken down during a March 19<sup>th</sup> meeting between President Fleming and BAM spokesmen Ed Fabre and Darryl Gorman, Fabre called for a boycott of classes the following day.

African American students gathered in the Plaza, however, would not wait. They began throwing bricks and other debris at the administration building, setting in motion a small, violent protest (Brune, 1984).

India would watch the angry scene erupt from the window of her apartment overlooking the Plaza. She recalled:

I was pregnant at the time and both my husband and in-laws insisted that I keep myself and the baby safe. That was back when older women believed you couldn't reach up to the top shelf in your kitchen cupboard to get something if you were pregnant because 'it might hurt that baby.' I reached anyway but I did stay out of the streets. As it happened, I saw the whole thing from our 24<sup>th</sup> floor Tower Plaza apartment which faced the brand-new Fleming building. Students were trying to storm it willy-nilly just to be broken up by wedges of cops. I remember standing at the window, hitting it, banging on it, trying to warn BAM folks about the cops coming down the street, about how vulnerable they were.

### **Days of Worry**

Most of what India remembers about the days of the Strike is sketchy at best. She recalls, for example, the violent start of the Strike as well as the instance when someone had flooded a classroom with fire hoses. She also remembers the unusual presence on police on campus. And she distinctly recalls the night Fleming and his wife were followed home by a crowd of students who jeered at them on their walk home. Beyond these specific memories of the Strike, her recollections are rather clouded.

There is good reason for this. The truth of the matter was India had a lot on her mind back then: the impending birth of her first child, the safety of her husband and friends, and the larger looming question of what would happen to all them if BAM did not achieve its aims. "I worried constantly about what was going to happen," she said. "What happens if Sydney gets expelled? What happens if they decide to throw us all out of school? What are we going to do? How are we going to take care of the baby?"

While the memories she has of that time may not be so distinct, she has rarely forgotten the emotional feel of them. In addition to worry, they were also days of keen uncertainty and considerable stress. Some times, the pressure of the Strike would make its way into in her relationship with Sydney. “It was just a very emotional time for me,” India explained.

I was pregnant which I’m sure did not help but I remember crying a lot and being scared because I was afraid Sydney or someone we loved was going to get hurt or worse, killed. And Sydney would get angry with me because I didn’t want him to leave the apartment.

### **Lonely Days**

India also remembers the days of the Strike as intensely lonely. Her husband spent an inordinate amount of his time with the other leaders of BAM, planning strategy and talking tactics. These conversations usually went well into the night, often leaving India alone to fend for herself. “I was lucky in that I was used to being by myself but that was before I became a wife” she said. “I just wanted my husband home safe and he was out in the streets, instead. It was not at all what I imagined my first year of marriage would be like.”

### **On the Circuit**

To keep herself from becoming wholly fixated on the Strike and Sydney’s absence, India assumed her role as a liaison once more, calling her African American girlfriends to get or transmit news about the Strike and its negotiations. She rarely told Sydney of her activities. “We were already fighting more than I was comfortable with,” she said.

She also did not tell Sydney about the meetings she would attend while on campus for classes. On the sly, Sydney had begun meeting with several women’s organizations—all White—sharing her “insider” information about BAM and hoping that she could in some way encourage their support of the cause. “It started when I got invited to speak by a classmate who knew that I was married to Sydney,” she said.

“It snowballed from there. I felt like I was on this talk-show circuit meeting with one group or another.”

Did it help BAM’s cause? India was not entirely certain. But the experience did open her eyes, she said, to the universal frustration women felt when it came to the limited ways they could participate in politics and protests on campus in those days. “It wasn’t just Black women who wanted to do more and couldn’t,” she recalled. “It was White women too. We all wanted to be part of the change that was going on around us but we kept getting pushed aside.”

### **The Strike’s End**

India does not recall exactly where she was when the announcement of the Strike’s end was issued. All she can remember is Sydney’s relief and joy at the news that the University would increase the enrollment of African Americans by 10% in the course of the next three years. The heaviness and stress of the last six months seemed to lift off him then, she said. “It was almost like he was a new man.”

How did she feel? “I was so glad it was over,” she said.

It was worth every minute. I was proud of Sydney and I was proud of BAM. What we had accomplished was historic. But it had been a long fight and my life—our life—had been on hold even before the Strike started. I felt like we could start living our lives the way we wanted to again. That I couldn’t wait for.

### **No Effect**

Like her counterpart Malcolm Jones, India did not believe it was necessary to go into detail about the Strike’s influence on her, largely because she felt it had not had any long-term, transformational effect on her life. She had been “bold, brash, brilliant, and slightly insecure” before the Strike. She remained so, India said, after its end.

On her questionnaire, she accounted for her perspective in the following way:

“Activism does not clear one’s head...as much as we like to think it does. I was and remain skeptical (and challenging) of authority figures, institutions, and our ability as individuals, or entire movements, to effect permanent substantial change.”

### **Life After Michigan**

India Taylor left the University of Michigan in 1971, three classes shy of the necessary requirements for the conferral of bachelor’s degree. With a young child and a husband to care for, her lifestyle as a “young society wife” left little time for other pursuits, not to mention academics.

By 1980, however, India would find herself in the world of politics, managing public relations for the Democratic Party in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She would marry for the second time in 1985 and give birth to another son a year later. At the end of the decade, India switched careers and became involved in the field of arts administration, overseeing the management of a community civic theatre. After stints as a free-lance writer and bookstore owner, India went to work once more in the field of public relations where she remains today.

### **India’s Story and the Path to Activism**

In many respects, India’s story is not unlike the others that have been presented here in this study. Peers and identity also emerge as central influences on her growth from a college student to a student activist. Much like Web’s tale, for example, India’s life narrative is emblematic of the same youthful yearning to verify one’s self and to project an identity that others could readily embrace. Where their stories differ is in the contexts that initially shape the seeking they engage in to establish these socially acceptable identities.

India’s home and school lives were significantly more difficult given her absentee parents, the constant moving between reluctant guardians, and the school-kid scrutiny of her bi-racial identity. Though his mother moved several times when

he was young, Web was by no means transient or alone; his mother and his brother were his constant companions throughout his childhood.

There are also references to self-amplification in her story as well just as there was in Rosa's life narrative. One of India's core expectations of college was that she would have the opportunity to explore more fully her identity as an African American, a part of herself that she had not been encouraged to discover on her own. Rosa also expressed the same desire to plumb the depths of her identity as a Latina, something that was very hard to do living in a predominately White community with few, if any, other Latino students around.

The difference between Rosa's and India's need to engage different aspects of their identities stories is again a matter of context. Rosa's parents actively encouraged the exploration of her Latina roots. India, on the other hand, grew up in settings where her African American identity was largely kept under wraps so as not to call unnecessary attention to the perceived scandalous behavior of her parents.

Even when we consider her BAM counterpart Malcolm, there are strong similarities to be found between his and India's stories. Both of them stage their own rebellions as high school students because of the same frustration with the racist and discriminatory practices of their teachers. As Michigan undergraduates, they also experience growth in terms of their political awareness largely through the same means, namely, their support of African American student organizations such as the African Liberation Movement and the Black Student Union. And like Malcolm's brothers who were constantly making space for him at their protests, India's husband Sydney carved out the small role of liaison for her so that she might contribute to the Black Action Movement as she wanted.

Yet we also know from India's story, that her activism was seriously curtailed by the sexist presumptions and practices of the men who were leading BAM and its Strike. Though she wanted to do more and she was clearly capable of doing more, she was "not allowed" to do more, at first because she was a woman, and later, because she was pregnant.

Calling attention to the difficult contexts in which India had to exist and against which she forged her eventual engagement in activism, is more than an exercise in cross-case comparisons, however. These differences highlight an important aspect of her life narrative: as much as it is the story of her life and her activist development, it is also stands a testament to her resilience as an individual.

Of course, we might characterize all of the study participants as resilient in some, way, shape or form. But India seemed to possess an even greater measure of that innate inner quality; she had to in order to overcome her tumultuous childhood, her troubling adolescence, and her struggles to be treated as an equal during her days as a young co-ed living in remarkably sexist times.

It is a part of her story should be taken into consideration when we weigh the significance of the role she played in the Black Action Movement. On the surface, acting as a secretary and liaison may seem small and inconsequential in comparison to the tasks and efforts that the other study participants assumed. But unlike the rest of them, India literally had no choice but to accept these roles in the Black Action Movement. They were the only ones that existed for her.

The larger lesson here? For some of us, the path to activism is not solely defined by the personal or the political, it is also defined by opportunity, how fully we get a chance to engage in the making of social change. As India's story has revealed, the path to activism can be obstructed by all sorts of roadblocks. What matters most is our ability to overcome those roadblocks and push ahead anyway.



## Chapter 7

### Becoming an Activist: A Cross-Case Analysis of the Process and Its Essential Dimensions

In his book, Tricks of the Trade, sociologist Howard S. Becker (1998) suggests that one of the most fruitful ways to approach the study of human behavior is to think in terms of the processes that explain how a certain behavior occurs rather than the causes that account for why that behavior may have been necessary. He writes: “Assume that whatever you want to study has, not causes, but a history, a story, a narrative, a ‘first this happened, then that happened, and then the other happened, and it ended up like this’” (p. 61). On this view, processes are a kind of scientific tale that helps us produce and refine the imagery of the world we seek to understand.<sup>37</sup>

As Chapter Two illustrated, much of the imagery that scholars have painted in relation to student activism suffers from a lack of rich, humanistic detail. The idealistic desire to change the world has been portrayed largely as a matter of particular biographical characteristics or environmental conditions that neither reflect the cognitive complexities of creating change nor honor the artfulness with which human beings craft their lives. It was this absence of a more humanizing, empowering imagery that warranted the study’s use of the interpretative biographical form and its collection of the life narratives presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Now that the life stories of Web, Rosa, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm have been recounted, this chapter will explore the larger scientific tale that collectively characterizes their transformations from private citizen to political activist. The intent here is not to account for *why* these activist transformations occurred but to explore *how* various biographical, historical, institutional, and cultural dimensions may have informed their fashioning.

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<sup>37</sup> Imagery, Becker (1998) goes on to say, is a critical component of conducting social science. Imagery determines “the direction of our research—the ideas we start with, the questions we ask to check them out, the answer we find plausible” (p.13).

In contrast to the others which relied upon life experience, memory, and story-telling to convey a sense of how the commitment to activism is established, this chapter looks to theory and empirical research to further inform our understanding of how such a commitment might be forged. The concepts to be presented here have been drawn from a wide body of literature related to racial identity development, civic engagement, social movements, social movement narratives, and college student activism. Despite their grounding in intellectual constructs, however, it should be remembered that every facet of the process owes its origins, first and foremost, to the seedbeds of participants' everyday lives.

It also bears repeating that the process to be discussed is not a universal one that can or should be applied to the lives or stories of other student activists. Truly, the discussion presented in the pages ahead speaks only to the shared commonalities that existed between and among the stories of the six people who participated in this study. It is left for future studies to show whether or not the ideas presented here can be extended to a wider universe of college activists and student movements.

### **Home Life, School, and the Neighborhood**

All processes have their starting points, even those that involve the mounting of public protests and movements in the name of greater social justice. In this section, we will explore the origins of India, Rosa, and the other participants' activist transformations from the perspective of their early days living among the central places they inhabited prior to attending the University of Michigan, namely, their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. How did these environments influence study participants' eventual engagement in activism? To answer this question, this section draws upon the theoretical notions of hospitable spaces and transformed consciousness, two ideas that highlight the power of place and its ability to shape one's orientation to the world.

## Home & Hospitable Spaces

As Chapter Two noted, one of the most consistent portraits to emerge from the extant literature on college student activism centered upon the familial settings in which young activists were raised. The portrait included two parents—a mother and a father—who typically worked in high-status professions such as business, law or medicine (Flacks, 1967); a home ethos that emphasized strong political standards (Watts & Whittaker, 1966); a familial commitment to the liberal, leftist political tradition (Katz, 1967); and active family participation in a host of local civic and social organizations (Lyons, 1965).

We know from the testimony of this study's six participants, however, that their home lives were considerably different than those characterized in the literature. Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm grew up in households maintained by men and women of color who worked as police officers, teachers, and general tradesmen; where concerns about money and finances were ever-present; whose home cultures were rooted in religion rather than politics; and in the cases of Ennis and Web, guided by domestic organizations run not by fathers but their single mothers, the primary caregivers and bread winners of the family. Yet, these households produced young individuals who would eventually espouse the same commitment to activism as those captured in the literature some forty or so years earlier. How did this occur?

A close reading of participants' life stories suggests that the most fitting explanation to that question lies not in a discussion of variable background characteristics like parental marital status or socioeconomic status but something deeper and more fundamental: the maturation and personal growth these households fostered among study participants. According to Daloz et al. (1996), one of the critical, master patterns that marks the lives of individuals who have established a commitment to a greater, common good is their connection to "hospitable spaces," those communities and environments<sup>38</sup> that allow for the development of integral

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sensibilities such as trust and agency; learning and belonging; self-reflection, shared responsibility, and global awareness (p. 52).

For study participants, no other pre-college environment acted as a hospitable space than the modest, unassuming places they knew as home. These households offered little in the way of material comfort but as Rosa, India, and the others described them, they were abundant in other vital respects: Home was where they learned of a higher spiritual power; where they cultivated a passion for education and learning; and where they were first educated about their identities as people of color with their own rich traditions, histories, and cultures.

Home was also the place where the seeds of participants' eventual engagement in activism were first sown. Despite their largely apolitical nature, these homes would serve Esme and her fellow participants' activism by providing a core foundation for it, one built upon the cornerstones of agency, moral discernment, and a shared sense of purpose, the very same sensibilities believed to guide one's involvement in protest politics.

The home lives that participants grew up among appeared to foster these sensibilities in several ways. For one, they provided participants with models of agency who showed them firsthand how to move through the world with purpose and conviction, often despite significant adversity. As might be expected, the primary models that participants were exposed to were none other than their own parents and guardians, all of whom had their own distinctive way of expressing what it meant to possess an inner sense of agency and how to wield it.

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<sup>38</sup> Hospitable spaces are not bound by architecture or structural design elements. Schools, neighborhoods, day care centers, youth groups, museums, and work places—in addition to a host of other environments—can be considered hospitable spaces so long as they allow for growth, learning, and meaningful human interaction. Hospitable spaces also possess a healing power of sorts, Daloz et al. (1996) states, because they often stand as "...antidotes to negative forms of individualism and tribalism, enabling committed people to act positively and dwell with confidence in the midst of life's confounding richness" (p. 52).

Malcolm, for example, recalled watching his parents' shoulder multiple jobs simultaneously, day in and day out, to provide for their eleven, ever-growing children. Strong adherents of the "bootstrap" mentality, they rarely sought outside aid of any kind, choosing instead to believe that they could best provide for themselves through the work of their own hands. Web and Ennis also spoke of watching their mothers struggle, not only to fulfill their responsibilities as the sole breadwinners and main caregivers of their families but to accomplish the goals they possessed as women with their own professional careers. (Despite the often conflicting demands of home, work, and graduate studies, both women would ultimately earn masters degrees in the fields of education and criminology.)

And then there were Rosa's parents, who modeled a highly politicized form of agency. In addition to their vocations as a psychologist and free-lance writer, her parents were also involved in indigenous and Latino politics, regularly devoting their free time to politically-related activities. It was among the powwows, lectures, political rallies, and public demonstrations they attended as a family that Rosa said she was able to observe her mother and father's keen intent to create a more just, compassionate world.

Additionally, these homes provided space for participants' to cultivate and express their own special form of agency. According to India, Malcolm, Ennis, and Web, much of what passed for agency was largely domestic in nature but grounded nonetheless in the serious pursuit of survival. Living among families with significantly constrained economic circumstances, they learned to act with initiative and independence, handling chores around the house, picking up odd jobs to earn extra income, and generally, looking to do whatever they could to help keep their families' heads above water. The need to sustain the family even colored study participants' perspectives of their academic futures. They all claimed that in order to attend college, they had to earn full scholarships to offset the financial burden of tuition.

These places also imparted important values and ideals, ultimately helping Rosa and the others to formulate their own moral compasses. Self-respect, honesty, and integrity were all said to be part of the guiding ethos that commonly marked participants' homes. So too were other values, such as a deep respect for justice and equality. From the testimony participants' provided, these values and ideals appeared to be instilled in much the same way that hospitable spaces are known operate: by acting as a backdrop against which their everyday experiences were "brought into dialogue with larger meanings" (Daloz et al., p. 55).

When Ennis came home with the news that he had been passed over for an early Jesuit priesthood training program, his mother began what would later become a life-long conversation with him, unraveling the harsh realities of racism and discrimination as well as discussing the need to persevere in light of life's unfairness. On the occasions when India could not contend with the callous treatment of her classmates or teachers, her grandmother would deliver strong lectures about standing firm in the face of cruelty and learning to ignore those who were preoccupied with skin color. Rosa's parents took a more straightforward approach, actually scheduling family discussions around the week's major news stories or events, especially when they referenced the political oppression of people of color and their struggles for equality. It was from these discussions and lectures that participants learned not only of the ills that marked social life but the mindsets and attitudes needed to overcome them.

Finally, these homes afforded participants the opportunity to experience a shared sense of purpose, of working with others towards a common goal. For Esme, India, Web, and Malcolm, this largely meant working in tandem with their parents and siblings to support the family. In the cases of Rosa and Ennis, the experience of a shared commitment was also specifically tied to activism. Prior to meeting and marrying his father, Ennis' mother had been a staunch supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, participating in its protests and marches out of hope that someday equal rights would be secured for her African American brethren. Rosa's parents had

followed Cesar Chavez, championing the Chicano movement, migrant worker rights, and taking part in the launching of nationwide boycotts against grape growers notorious for their exploitation of Latino migrant workers.

Years later, Ennis and Rosa would continue the familial tradition of working for social justice by challenging institutional policies and organizations that perpetuated the detrimental practices of racism and discrimination. And though their parents did not fully agree with the risks they took on, Ennis and Rosa knew their families supported them in their change-making efforts. As Ennis stated:

My mother wasn't happy about me being out there protesting all the time. But she respected my decision to be an activist because it wasn't any different from what she did when she was my age. She felt pulled to do the same things I was doing. It was a common commitment that we came to share with one another.

### Home's Link to Activism

As central as these sensibilities are to living life in general, it is also the case that they are basic to the engagement in activism. Take the sensibility known as agency. In the world of sociology, agency is considered to be the engine that drives an individual's participation in protest. Long before any recruiting tactic or political strategy or rhetorical device comes into play, an individual must believe that he or she has both the capacity and the skill to shape the world around them. Lacking such a mindset, an individual has no basis for believing that his or her efforts will affect any sort of real change and thus, no true motivation to take part in a social movement, much less any other sort of social change initiative (Klandermans, 1997). By instilling participants with a sense of empowerment and providing models to show them how they might move through the world themselves, their home lives provided them with the fundamental force necessary to the engagement in activism.

Moral sensibilities or more specifically, the ability to make moral discernments, are also key to activism. Prompted by their experiences in school, Rosa, Web, Ennis and the others learned to discern right from wrong, fair from

unfair, just from unjust; to make, basically, the same kinds of moral evaluations that often pervade the engagement in activism and protest politics. According to the sociologist James M. Jasper (1997), protest is as much a moral activity as it is a political one; those who engage in activism are not moved solely by their ideological goals, they can also be guided by their moral aspirations and values.<sup>39</sup> Growing up among homes where ideals such as justice, equality, and integrity were emphasized as well as actively discussed, study participants' were able to develop a moral base that they could later draw on when determining the kinds of political actions to which they would commit themselves.

Lastly, there is the sensibility related to a shared sense of purpose to be considered. According to social movement scholars, the ability to work in communion with others towards a common good is critical to activism at both an individual level as well as a collective one (see Hirsch, 1991). At the collective level, a shared sense of purpose is one of the key sensibilities that movements look to both engender among their members and to identify in individuals who may be recruited to join their activist bases (Gamson, 1992). At an individual level, a shared sense of purpose is often what transforms a group of otherwise separate people into a cohesive movement; it acts as the connective tissue that ties members to one another, fusing them together in solidarity and from which they establish a collective identity (Hirsch, 1990). In allowing participants to experience and operate from a joint sense of purpose, their homes helped to initiate Web, Ennis, and the others in the communal ways that most social movements and social movement participants attempt to create social change.

None of the discussion presented here is meant to suggest, however, that participants' home lives somehow guaranteed that they would later become activists. Rather, it is to acknowledge the fundamental role their homes played in setting the

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, Jasper (1997) claims, the ability to invoke a moral position is a "central satisfaction" of activism because it provides "the opportunity to articulate, elaborate, or affirm one's moral principles and allegiance" (p.15).



stage for their eventual activism. When the time came for Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm to attend college, they carried with them numerous sensibilities, key components of which were compatible to those guiding the engagement in activism. The conscious intent to be activist or even the understanding of what it meant to be an activist still remained to be formulated in their young minds though.

Additionally, the other salient influences behind the process of their activist transformations—defined in the pages ahead as peers, moral shocks, and the invitation to join a student movement, to name a few—had yet to come into play.

In the next section, we will explore the effects of the other pre-college environments they grew up among, namely, high school and the neighborhood. Unlike their home lives, these environments were not the nurturing, hospitable spaces they might have been. Nonetheless, they too played an important role in setting the stage for participants' emergence as activists largely by creating a consciousness of their identities as people of color and sparking their quests for a true sense of community.

### **High School, the Neighborhood & Transformed Consciousness**

Little has been written about the roles secondary schools and neighborhoods play in shaping the desire to work for social change. Most scholars have not seen fit to study these particular social territories or their effects on activist development, perhaps because of the transitory role they often assume in our lives. Schools and neighborhoods are, by and large, places we encounter for stretches of time as we move through the world; rarely do we return to them, much less with the intent of remaining.

The testimony of study participants suggests that these social spaces do have an influence upon the engagement in activism, although not in the way one might either hope for or expect. Whereas home helped to shape Malcolm, Web, and their fellow participants' activist engagement by acting as hospitable spaces, school and the neighborhood appeared to help set the stage for their activism by acting as *inhospitable spaces*, environments that were unreceptive—and sometimes, outright hostile—to

their needs and lives as people of color. In the end, they would stand as platforms for prompting a new racial awareness among participants, opening their eyes to the passive, unthinking ways they had been taking in the world around them.

What exactly was the problem with these places? Part of what made the neighborhood inhospitable to study participants was its inability to support a diverse constituency of families and neighbors.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of where their neighborhoods were located—the city, the suburbs, or the country—participants were shackled with the same difficult task: creating a sense of belonging and community within predominately White environs in which they were typically the only people of color around. In Esme’s case, the task was also complicated by religion; she and her family were the only Roman Catholics within a half-mile radius of their home.

The neighborhood was also deemed inhospitable because it was too culturally confining, offering participants only limited opportunities for genuine cultural interaction, particularly with other people of color like themselves. Of all the participants, India was perhaps the most restricted in her ability to establish authentic relationships with those who were part of the small, surrounding rural community in which she lived. Because of her racially mixed background, she was never fully welcomed by her White neighbors or the few other African American families who lived in on the farms adjacent to that of her grandmother.

As troubling as the neighborhood was for Malcolm, Ennis, and the others, it would pale in comparison to the intolerant nature of their high schools. They were no strangers to prejudice, of course, but never had they felt its sharp edge far more directly and forcefully as they would in secondary school.<sup>41</sup> Throughout their junior and senior years, in particular, participants would find themselves on the receiving

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<sup>40</sup> Web Murphy is the exception to these characterizations. Both high school and the neighborhood were places he loved and felt a sense of belonging.

<sup>41</sup> Rosa and Web did not speak of directly enduring any serious discrimination themselves. Yet they were aware of peers who had been subject to harassment and discrimination based on race as well as sexual orientation.

end of racist behaviors and attitudes that were just as likely to have been launched by their teachers as well as their fellow students.

India, for example, spoke of regularly enduring stray racial epithets of one sort or another from peers who could not accept her mixed racial background. As she matured, India became conscious of the subtle discriminatory messages her teachers relayed too, confirming a growing suspicion that she had only been tolerated because of her academic talents. The racist presumptions of Ennis' teachers also troubled him; despite his strong commitment to the Church, he said none of his Jesuit instructors believed he would make a viable candidate for the priesthood. In addition, there was Malcolm who—like his brothers—had to consistently defend his intelligence to teachers and peers who were unwilling to believe in his exceptional academic prowess.

As their further accounts of high school revealed, these moments led to others of a rebellious nature, generally uncharacteristic for participants. Malcolm began arguing his way through classes, deliberately challenging his teachers' mastery of course subject matter and their authority in the classroom. India purposely scandalized the nuns teaching her debate class by reciting several pages of Ralph Ellison's then-controversial novel Native Son. Ennis willingly engaged in a complete about-face, refusing to attend church, participate in the classroom, or be present at school functions. "My involvement in school went to zero," he had said.

### High School & the Neighborhood's Links to Activism

It is tempting to define the influence of participants' high schools and neighborhoods primarily in terms of the frustration, alienation, and anger they provoked, dark psychological states that scholars once considered integral to a student's engagement in activism (see Kennan, 1968; May, 1965). The testimony of study participants suggests, however, that these locales did more than push them to mutiny or disaffection. They changed the way Ennis, Malcolm, and the others looked

at their surroundings and the way they perceived them, heightening in the process their attention to the role race and racial differences played in their lives.

From the perspective of racial identity theory, it could be claimed that amidst these contexts, participants were in the process of cultivating a “transformed consciousness,” an altered mindset whereby young people of color begin to critically examine the world around them<sup>42</sup> and become acutely aware of White culture, standards, values, and beliefs (Adams, 2001, p. 215). What prompts the cultivation of a transformed consciousness is an internal “series of contradictions” in which a person of color first begins to question and later challenge, his or her unconditional acceptance of the dominant White order (Adams, 2001, p. 215).

For study participants, such internal questioning appeared to be rooted in their personal struggles with White authorities, peers, and the cultural ignorance both groups displayed. After he had been passed over for Jesuit training, Ennis, for example, started to look at his Jesuit teachers with a more critical eye; they were no longer the godly and infallible men he had taken them to be but flawed human beings with their own unfortunate limitations. After failing to establish a sense of belonging among her school and neighborhood, Esme also began to critically evaluate the cultural assumptions and behaviors that marked life in both locales. Rosa was no different. By her senior year of high school, she was weary of living in predominately white spaces and began to question her allegiance to people and places that did not reflect nor fully embrace her identity as a Latina.

Eventually, racial identity theorists claim, young people of color become acutely aware of the need to redirect their attention to the culture, values, and beliefs of their own people. Such realizations put them on the path of “redefinition,” a process by which they openly seek opportunities to affirm themselves as members of

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<sup>42</sup> The concept of transformed consciousness was first presented as part of a larger model that explored the identity development of African Americans (see Jackson, 1976). Over time, core generic aspects of the model (like transformed consciousness and redefinition) have been used to explain the identity development of other people of color including Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans, and Native Americans (Adams, 2001).

a particular ethnic group with their own traditions, history, and culture (Adams, 2001, p. 215). Study participants' stories were marked by similar references to redefinition. Rosa spoke of her desire to meet and interact with other Latino students; India hoped for the chance to freely and fully explore her Black identity; Esme talked of her eagerness to forge bonds with the Latino community at Michigan; and Ennis claimed he intended to cultivate friendships with other African American students. In these respects, then, the culturally confining nature of the neighborhood and high school served as launching pads of sorts for participants' critical examination of their burgeoning identities as people of color.

As with their home lives, however, participants' experiences of the neighborhood and high school hardly ensured that they would take up the cause of working for social justice once they became college students. What they did do is provide other important sensibilities that would be critical to study participants' eventual engagement in activism: a growing self-awareness of themselves as people of color; the existence of the color line and its divisive qualities; and the potential and power of rebellion.

The inability of participants' to fit in or to forge a sense of belonging among these places also helps explain the contexts in which their stated desires for a fuller sense of community and kinship were originally formed. As they revealed in their stories, participants looked to Michigan to provide what high school and the neighborhood could not, namely, a community of peers with whom they could forge close friendships. Their intentions to find and experience a sense of community would ultimately prove to be key as they led them to the most influential force behind their future activism, namely, their fellow students of color.

Participants' troubling experiences of high school and the neighborhood likely served their choices to champion the causes of equity and tolerance as well. Having endured the sharp sting of racism and discrimination time and again as they did in these places, participants no doubt felt compelled to embrace student movements that focused on fostering inclusiveness, ending oppression, and community-building

because they knew first-hand how it felt to live without these life-affirming conditions.

In the next section we will explore the influence of two additional contexts: the historical times participants lived among and the educational climate they experienced as undergraduates attending the University of Michigan. Despite the years that separate participants, their struggles for equality and tolerance are bookmarked by remarkably similar social circumstances which call into question the merit and worthiness of their admissions to the University.

### **Historical & Institutional Conditions**

“Every event we study,” once wrote the historian Richard Marius, “exists in its own network of cause and effect, its own set of relations between people and events, its own modes of thought” (p. 8, 1995). The event of becoming an activist—despite its highly individualized nature—is no exception to this characterization. As Chapters Four, Five, and Six have shown, an individual’s activist transformation can be borne from the personal interplay of social relationships, moral sensibilities, life experiences, and particularized interpretations of the world. Yet, as Marius’ words advise us, event analyses also require an examination of the larger sociological and historical forces against which they play out.

For study participants, these forces encompass a considerable span of time, nearly forty years worth. Malcolm and India’s life stories, for instance, take place against the backdrop of the turbulent 1960s, a period marked by broad-scale movements for gender equity, civil rights, and world peace. Esme and Ennis’ stories, on the other hand, are grounded in the 1980s, a time of increasing materialism, self-interest, and political conservatism in mainstream American life. And Rosa and Web’s life stories unfold against the late 1990s, an era scored by concerns about democratic citizenship, the authenticity of the country’s political leadership, and the growing diversification of the American population.

What are we to make of this history? Or, more specifically, how it relates to study participants and their activist transformations? In one sense, the history that surrounds the stories of Esme and the others should remind us that neither their lives nor their activism unfolded in some isolated vacuum, impervious to other forms of social or political influence. To a certain degree, participants were products of their times, subject to the same swirl of history and touched by all of the prevailing issues and circumstances that went along with it.

Consider here the stories of Malcolm and India, who as so many other young African Americans once did, rose to challenge the troubling events unfolding in their midst. The morning after Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of his room in the Lorraine Motel, the two participated in a campus-wide silent protest, refusing to speak to anyone, professor or peer, for a full 24 hours. Five days later, the same day of King's funeral, Malcolm and India joined the small community of other African American students at Michigan in staging a lockout of the campus' main administrative building and effectively kick-starting the Black Action Movement, one of many such campus movements that would unfold in the aftermath of King's assassination. Similar displays of grief, anger, and political mobilization would be played out at other institutions across the country including San Francisco State, Columbia University, Stanford University, and the University of California at Berkeley (see Bell, 1969; McEvoy & Miller, 1969).

In another sense, the history surrounding the life stories of India, Malcolm, and their fellow participants must also be seen as part and parcel of the daunting, deep-seated social and political ills they intended to rectify through their activism. History was not only a backdrop to participants' stories; it was the very opponent they intended to vanquish, an adversary that appeared under a variety of formidable guises such as racial inequality, limited educational opportunity, racial intolerance, overt discrimination, and cultural ridicule.

Perhaps no other story best embodies this notion than that of Web and Rosa and their attempts to bring Michigamua's reign on campus to its final end. The pair

not only battled the privileged 100 year-old honor society's ties to the University but every part of the past that coincided with it: ancient, hackneyed stereotypes of Indian culture and traditions; old mindsets that mistook cultural ridicule for cultural appreciation; and an antiquated system of institutional policies and procedures that allowed Michigamua to flourish as an insensitive, discriminatory organization for almost an entire century.

History deserves acknowledgement here, however, for more than the seminal sense of context it provides or the way in which it underscores the magnitude of the change-making tasks participants faced as activists. History was also a critical source of consciousness for participants, clueing them into the existences of other people of color and their respective struggles to emancipate themselves from social and political oppression. As their stories revealed, participants recalled a number of historic figures and world events, inspiring men, women, and movements in whom they recognized the same keen desire to change the world.

Malcolm, for instance, remembered his attraction to the political militancy of black men like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. India spoke of the Civil Rights Movement and the way she had been drawn to its leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Ennis talked of the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa and the bravery of the political prisoner Nelson Mandela. Esme called to mind apartheid in South Africa as well as the growing movement among wives and mothers whose husbands and children were brutally victimized by repressive political regimes in Latin American countries like Argentina and Chile. Lastly, Web and Rosa remembered the rising anti-affirmative action sentiments that were bubbling up around the country and the efforts of their undergraduate peers at college campuses across the nation to mobilize themselves in defense of the all-important policy.

Participants appeared to actively draw on these historical figures and world events for spiritual inspiration as well as in the crafting of their burgeoning political lives. In deference to Malcolm X and the Panthers' strident, hard-lined attitude towards white authority, Malcolm took on the moniker of "X" for a time, using it as a



pen name for the fiery editorials he often submitted to the Michigan Daily. To show his support for his African brethren, Ennis participated in the shanty protests and the campus' anti-apartheid movement, hoping that, in some small way at least, his efforts might stir a greater consciousness of the pressing issues that marked Black peoples' lives elsewhere in the world. Dismayed by the way students of color had been shut out of institutional and national discussions concerning affirmative action (as well as other critical topics), Web and Rosa found themselves drawn to the Student of Color Coalition in part because of its promise to grant a voice to students of color who had been excluded from the larger dialogues taking place.

It is their special treatment of history—the attentiveness to it, the determination to transform it, and the way it was used in the shaping of individual political commitments—that binds participants to one another despite their distinctions in age and life experience. For all of the time-related differences that score the life stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and, Malcolm, each one of them established a remarkably similar relationship with history; an attentive, working association that fueled a consciousness of the wider world and their power as people of color to shape its course.

The late German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952) would have characterized this study participants' as belonging to “generational units,” those cohorts of young people who bond together and become engaged in collective efforts to challenge and redefine the existing social order (p. 100). History, for members of an activist generational unit, is not passively or unconsciously accepted but critically explored and later, assigned new meaning based upon how they endure its attending issues and problems.

According to Mannheim, unit members are bound by the generation they are born into; birth years, he stated, provide them with “a common location in the historical dimension of the social process” (p. 105). As unit members age, certain numbers of them come to share a collective consciousness of their historical and political experiences. Ultimately, they “work up” these experiences, fashioning from

them a common sense of destiny as well as a collective consciousness. When unit members cohere with social movements, they can become a force for social or political change.

Taken as a whole, the efforts of India, Ennis, and the rest of the study participants reflect different facets of the same human struggle to belong in a community and be embraced as equals. Their efforts are indicative of a larger legacy of activism; a legacy carried on through the years by successive student of color cohorts in the name of ensuring their full participation in the life of the University.

### Differing Historical Effects

Of course, these observations of history and the powerful ways it led participants to embrace their potential as collective political actors would be incomplete if there were no discussion as to how it stood as a source of difference, as an element that distinguished Ennis, Web, and the others' stories of activism from one another. From the scope and appearance of the movements that participants supported to the technology that was used to sustain their public relations and recruiting work to the roles participants themselves played in sustaining their movements; all were influenced by prevailing mindsets, social norms, and behaviors in operation at the time.

The movement building efforts of Ennis, Esme, Malcolm, and India, for example, were not undertaken with the same technology that Web, Rosa, and the Student of Color Coalition relied upon in the launching and maintenance of the Tower Takeover. They used e-mail, the Internet, and desktop publishing programs to inform, educate, and attract other potential adherents to their cause. Because the technology did not exist in Ennis, Esme, Malcolm or India's times, they had to rely primarily upon mass, public gatherings like all-campus meetings, rallies, and demonstrations to garner support for their change efforts.

The character of the Tower Takeover was also more genuinely pan-ethnic by nature than any of the student movements associated with the late 1960s, 1970s or

1980s had ever been. In fact, the Takeover was the first student of color movement to forthrightly champion the needs of Native American undergraduates; in years previous, the educational needs of African American students had always been at the forefront of the organizing agenda with the presumption that any changes in institutional policy or practice would eventually work to the benefit of other students of color on campus. Admission trends and the increasingly diverse student population the University looked to admit as well as students' growing social awareness of their interconnectedness as people of color were all likely contributors to the Takeover's highly multicultural nature, social dimensions whose salience earlier generations of University administrators and students were only just beginning to understand.

Finally, there are the differences in roles and responsibilities that certain participants took on in their respective movements to consider. Unlike India, Rosa was not nearly as circumscribed in terms of the kinds of duties or positions of leadership she could assume. As she revealed in her story, Rosa chose to write newsletters and help with the drafting of space proposals largely because doing so allowed her to utilize her strengths as a writer for the greater good of the Coalition. India, on the other hand, had no real choice in terms of how she might serve Black Student Union in its efforts to start a campus movement. She accepted the position of secretary because it was the only one offered to her, not to mention the only one open to women. The rest of the Union leadership was strictly and solely shared by men, a patriarchal and patronizing approach to governance that typically ruled social movements of the past (see Barlow, 1991). The different roles the two women took on in their respective movements then, was shaped by larger social norms that dictated the ways in which they could contribute and participate.

### **Institutional Conditions**

But what of the institutional conditions participants endured as undergraduates at the University of Michigan? What influence—if any—did

Michigan itself have upon Esme, Ennis, and the others' eventual engagement in activism? We might first answer these questions by recognizing the tradition of activism that has long been part of Michigan's student culture. As previously noted, University undergraduates have championed a wide range of political and social causes since the 1800s, including civil rights, free speech, peace, gender equity, women's rights, anti-apartheid in South Africa, multiculturalism, laborers' rights, and most recently, affirmative action (Peckham, 1994). When placed in the context of this unique legacy, it could be argued that participants were simply following in their peers' footsteps, acting out the same commitment that numerous Michigan undergraduates (and graduate students) once had before them.

Certainly, the stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, and Ennis lend credence to this notion. Each one of them was well aware of the activist efforts previous generations of students of color had undertaken in relation to the same causes for which they advocated. Rosa and Web both spoke of the 30 year-old activist legacy that had been initiated and carried on by other small, stubborn groups of Native American, Latino, African American, and Asian Pacific American students who had been intent upon pushing the University to renounce its ties to Michigamua. Similarly, Esme and Ennis' acknowledged that their attempts to create a racism-free institution were not the beginning but the continuation of a political campus struggle that had its roots in the Black Action Movement of the 1970s.

We might also respond to such questions by focusing upon the University's size and selectivity, macro-level conditions that previous studies once identified as key institutional predictors of campus student activism (see Bayer & Astin, 1969; Norr, 1977). Like other public, large-scale institutions that had endured significant political protests among its undergraduates, we could argue that the critical mass of intellectually sophisticated students attending Michigan essentially provided a corps of peers for Web, Ennis, and the other participants to interact with, individuals who possessed their own penchant for racial politics. Ample evidence to support this claim can be found in participants' generous and complimentary (not to mention

numerous) descriptions of the peers they encountered once they arrived on campus, individuals who struck them as extraordinarily intelligent, worldly, and unusually passionate about ideological matters.

To hear participants themselves tell it, however, no other institutional condition appeared to be so closely tied to their engagement in activism than the climate of the University, an atmosphere which often left them feeling overexposed and unfairly scrutinized. At times, it was their status as meritorious admits that seemed to draw a considerable deal of public attention. Web and Rosa, for example, attended Michigan at precisely the same time the University was embroiled in legal battles to uphold its use of affirmative action in its undergraduate and law school admissions processes.

These lawsuits not only sparked widespread speculation about the legitimacy of Michigan's admissions processes and its future ability to educate a multicultural corps of students but they also seemed to revive what the oral historian Studs Terkel (1992) once called "the American obsession" with skin color. According to Web and Rosa, student preoccupation with issues of merit and racial identity was overwhelming, leaving the pair to endure an endless line of intrusive questions in relation to the legitimacy of their presence on campus, both as people of color and as capable students.

In other moments, it was racism and discrimination that trapped participants in the glare of the public eye. Recall here the stories of Ennis and Esme who had to endure one intolerant display after another as students attending the University in the mid-1980s. Racism was rampant on campus, it seemed to the two of them, coming in all shapes and forms: radio broadcasts, flyers, Daily cartoon editorials, fraternity party themes, and even burning effigies. That these kinds of incidents had occurred on their campus (and with such frequency, no less) was difficult enough for Esme and Ennis to accept; to deal with the personal hurt such incidences caused while the eyes of numerous campus administrators, faculty, and peers probed them for a some sense of a reaction was another kind of pain all of its own.

Heightening the sharpness of this problematic climate for every participant was one other troubling institutional condition: the smallness of their student ranks. When compared to their white counterparts, participants and their peers of color were significantly outnumbered. India and Malcolm, for instance, were two among only a hundred or so African American students during their days on campus. The number of students of color in Ennis and Esme's cohort stood at less than 10% of the overall student population while Web and Rosa were part of a student of color population that represented little more than 11% of the entire student community at Michigan. "With so few of us on campus, it was easy to feel insecure, vulnerable," India had remarked. "We stuck out like sore thumbs."

As India's words suggest, the influence of these kinds of institutional conditions upon participants' activist engagement was not only rooted in their thorny nature but perhaps even more so, in the feelings they prompted among them. Scholars who study the emotions behind the engagement in protest politics would argue that the true influence of such conditions was grounded in the keen sense of threat they contributed to among participants. Threat, according to such scholars, is often a short-term response to a situation but one that draws upon the enduring parts of our persons such as our core values, beliefs or morals (see Goodwin et al., 2001). When what we hold most dear to us is violated, we can become ever more inclined to take action. Through our activism, we attempt to protect ourselves and our interests, material or otherwise.

We know from their stories that study participants felt threatened by a host of conditions: the persistent, invasive questioning about their personal lives and the legitimacy of their presence on campus; repeated episodes of racial intimidation and harassment; and, as in the case of Malcolm and India, by the full-scale, organized opposition from within and outside of the University to the increased enrollment of African American students. We also know from their stories that these threats deeply violated participants' sense of fair play, justice, and privacy, not to mention personal safety. Given these intimidating contexts, it is entirely conceivable that Web and the

other participants' eventual move towards activism was informed, in part, by something ever more basic and primal than politics or ideology, namely, their fears.

But these institutional conditions also served another important function. They solidified in participants' minds who they could blame for the scrutiny, discomfort, and fear they experienced. According to sociologist James M. Jasper (1997), the ability to allocate blame is an essential part of protest. "The specification of blame," he writes, "is important because it generates villains" (p. 121). Villains—the concrete, specific embodiments of that which deeply threaten us or make us fearful—often stimulate emotions, morals, and cognitive beliefs that are highly instrumental to the engagement in protest. By doing so, says Jasper, villains help shape "anxious frustration into purposive outrage" (p. 357).

In the case of study participants, Michigan's institutional shortcomings (and study participants' experiences of those shortcomings) gave them a tangible, definable bad guy to fight, a rogue whose crimes were too numerous and salient to ignore. From its failure to ensure a diverse student body to its inability to maintain an inclusive, tolerant learning community to the compromised quality of life it offered to students of color, the University appeared to participants as an establishment that despite its lofty rhetoric was not genuinely committed to their educational success or their personal well-being. Further, it perpetuated those social problems—racism, intolerance, harassment, educational inequality—that participants found seriously egregious. In challenging Michigan, rendering it as the target of their activism, participants were also able to challenge what might have otherwise remained a subjective and shadowy set of social ills.

As with their home lives and their experiences of high school and the neighborhood, these historical and institutional elements stand as important supplemental pieces of the overall puzzle, informing an understanding of the larger sociological forces that can be at work in the activist process. They provide a context, certainly, for understanding participants and the stories they relayed. But these conditions also deserve recognition for the ways in which they fed Malcolm,

India, Ennis, and the others' emotions and political consciousness. They stood as a kind of raw material that participants drew upon in the fashioning of their own activist efforts, providing not only a sense of the kind of social change that was possible but also helping to define the very structures and practices they needed to directly confront and to change.

### **The Other Key Steps**

With their experiences of home, high school, and the neighborhood behind them, study participants set off for the University of Michigan anticipating a wider world where they would be freer to shape the course and content of their own lives. Unbeknownst to any of them, their transitions from twelfth grade to the world of college undergraduates would mark an altogether different turning point in their young lives: the defining moment in which their transformations from passive political spectators to engaged activists would begin to unfold in earnest.

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall explore participants' activist transformations from the perspective of their days as Michigan undergraduates, where all of the latent activist sensibilities imparted by the pre-college environments they grew up among finally come into full bloom and are utilized in the name of fostering widespread institutional change. Here, participants' stories have been distilled into key dimensions that collectively characterize the main, foundational steps which inform the overall process behind their development as activists; these steps are discussed in the context of sociological and educational theory as a way of exploring their larger meanings and significance. It should be noted that while they are presented as distinct elements of a single, general process in the pages ahead, these steps are not wholly separate. In the lives of study participants, they stand as chronological, interrelated experiences that flow from one into the other, building upon and informing the unfolding of the whole activist process over time.



First, participants encounter *threshold people* and *threshold organizations* with whom they establish serious relationships. Then, certain *mobilizing events* on campus occur, prompting participants' and their peers of color to begin building their own student movements. Along the way, participants experience their own private moments of *moral shock* that ultimately work to solidify their resolve to work for institutional change. Their activist engagement begins not through some pressured form of recruitment, however, but an open, non-coercive *invitation to act*. For reasons that remain largely undisclosed, participants *make the commitment to act*, offering to support their peers in transforming the University into a more equitable and just institution. They then *assume personal responsibility for the movement*, working behind the scenes and tackling numerous tasks that despite their lowly administrative nature are still critical to its functioning. In the process of working for institutional change, participants learn to *negotiate challenges*, emotional, mental, physical, as well as educational. They also learn in the aftermath of their activism to *endure consequences of their actions* and attempt to make peace with all that their choices have wrought, institutionally as well as personally.<sup>43</sup>

### **Threshold People & Threshold Organizations**

Looking across the life stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm, it is clear that one of the critical first steps in their becoming activists was the establishment of relationships with peers who were personally engaged in the work of addressing institutional and social injustices. Their biographical accounts are scored time and again with references to such individuals, the other students of color

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<sup>43</sup> These last two steps have been included here even though they speak in greater measure to the experience of *being* an activist rather than the experience of *becoming* an activist. To ignore the risks, challenges, and outcomes associated with the activist commitment, would be to render incomplete portrayals of participants' experiences not to mention the significant ways that they were transformed by their activist engagement.

with whom they forged friendships, and in whose company they experienced a sense of support and belonging.

As study participants have described them, these students of color were a diverse lot differing in racial identity, intellectual interests, class standing, and gender, among other characteristics. In Rosa's story, for example, we met Roberto and Jesse, two young Mexican-American upperclassmen who took her under their wings and shepherded her through the Tower Takeover. India's story introduced us to Sydney Brown, a proud, well-to-do African American sophomore who help shaped the first Black Action Movement and later became her first husband. Web's story of activism was laden with references to both men and women of color. In addition to Luke and Jamal, we heard about Grace, Coral, Connie, and Avni, African American and Asian Pacific American women who help nurtured his commitment to creating change primarily by modeling their own.

Within the social movement literature (as well as the literature on collective behavior), such types of peer relationships have been generally characterized as "social networks" or the preexisting, interpersonal contacts a potential "recruit" is known to possess in relation to members who are already involved in a social movement or larger collectivity (McAdam & Paulsen, 1999, p. 644).<sup>44</sup> While the exact manner in which they work has not been well-articulated by social movement scholars, the prevailing notion is that these ties act largely as informational conduits, transmitting tactical and political strategy in a way that ultimately compels a potential recruit to lend his or her support to the movement at hand (see Friedman & McAdam, 1992).

Yet, when placed against the context of participants and their stories, the notion of social networks does not seem to fully capture the true nature or influence that these peer relationships played in Malcolm, India, Ennis or the others' activist

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<sup>44</sup> These ties have been empirically studied across a range of movements as a means of understanding how they facilitate the building of base support, recruitment, and the diffusion of new ideas as well as collective political actions (see Snow & Oliver, 1991).

development. For one, the term is a far too abstract and mechanical depiction of what participants often painted as close, personal relationships with the other students of color around them.<sup>45</sup> Two, as participants have described them, the basis of these ties were not founded upon recruiting incentives or tactical information but upon the fulfillment of human, emotional needs such as trust, support, and mutual understanding. Consider Ennis' description of the older Black graduate students who regularly included him in their activist efforts:

There was a closeness, a bond that I had especially with some of the older guys who were graduate students...So when the time came to attend a rally, a protest, whatever, it was done, yes, out of political concerns but also out of a personal commitment to my friends. I wanted them to know that they could rely on me...that I would be there to support them, that we were in it together.

How then should we characterize the role that peers played in the process of becoming an activist for participants if the notion of social networks is insufficient? If we look at the transformative effects these relationships had upon participants (which the concept of social networks also fails to adequately address), we might cast them as "threshold people," a term coined by Daloz et al (1996, p. 52) to describe those persons who effectively aid others in crossing over from their private, individualized existences to lives that are communal, centered upon serving a greater, common good, and deepened by trust, love, and respect, both for one's self and for others.

Daloz et al (1996) do not describe in detail how these threshold people move others from their individual lives to their communal ones. (The patterns undoubtedly differ across relationships in wide-ranging ways.) We know from the life stories captured in these pages, though, that one of the major ways these individuals enriched participants' lives was by providing an immediate sense of belonging and

community, sensibilities they had not fully experienced in an educational setting previously.

According to participants' stories, we also know that their peers eventually served their crossing over in other substantial ways:

- They helped to define (or in some cases to solidify) participants' identities as people of color, whom they came to acknowledge as members of a culturally rich but politically subordinated group;
- They brought alive the notions of injustice and oppression by casting light on the ways in which the University failed to provide a learning environment of inclusiveness, equality, and tolerance for its students of color community;
- They helped participants recognize the imperative to actively oppose the practices, policies, and procedures that subordinated students of color; and
- In their own willingness to put themselves at risk, they showed participants how closely they saw themselves in one another, furthering India and the others' resolve to take action out of an intimate sense of kinship and shared responsibility, as well as moral outrage.

According to sociology scholars Jane Mansbridge (2001) and Aldon Morris (2001) such transformations in perspective and self-understanding are indicative of an "oppositional consciousness," an empowered kind of political awareness from which members of an oppressed group act to undermine or overthrow the system that dominates them (p. 4). The cultivation of an oppositional consciousness, Mansbridge & Morris (2001) claim further, allows those suffering from oppression to look critically at power holders and the systems of domination they perpetuate as well as establish the need for collective, political action.

In the case of study participants, their peers provided a basis for expanding their awareness of oppression and its pervasive presence in their own lives as well as in the lives of people of color generally. Malcolm, Ennis, and the others were not complete strangers, after all, to oppressive conditions like discrimination and racism;

high school and the neighborhood had provided more than a thorough introduction to these unfortunate aspects of life. What participants had not been previously versed in, however, was the possibility of challenging these conditions through collective action, alongside other people of color who could no longer endure their perpetuation either. This is, in large part, what their peers awoke them to: that they could transform these conditions if they so chose despite whatever differentials in authority and status existed between themselves and those in power.

Again, consider Ennis' words as he talked about the older graduate students who befriended him and their influence upon his consciousness as both an African American and an agent of change:

Hanging out with the guys really made me think. They were true critical thinkers at a time when I and the rest of my friends were just accustomed to thinking about social stuff like parties, dating, that kind of thing. They'd start talking and I'd be like 'Screw class. I'm staying here with them.' And then we'd settle into these amazing conversations that I had never had before. About what it meant to be a black man in a global context, what it was we stood for as Black men, where our powers were in changing a world that we knew was unjust...how we might overthrow the institutions that intended to keep us down.

It should be noted here that the peer relationships which participants' forged with threshold people did not always take the shape of one-on-one relations. They were also experienced within the contexts of groups, what we might call *threshold organizations*. Like threshold people, these organizations acted as bridges to more communal and politically engaged existences. In the lives of study participants, this occurred in a number of ways:

- These organizations provided space for participants to try their own hands at community-building and political advocacy by inviting participants into their circles and later, creating opportunities for them contribute to the larger collective;

- They also fostered a sense of collective responsibility among participants through the advocacy work they often undertook and the communal causes their members were actively engaged in; and
- In sticking together and standing as a collective, these organizations provided participants with a sense of common destiny and group consciousness.

From a sociological perspective, it could be said that these organizations (and their members) allowed participants to experience the unique bonds that all social movements intend to foster among its members at some point: a collective identity; a keen sense of solidarity; and a communal consciousness (see Melucci, 1980; Hirsch, 1989; Friedman & McAdam, 1992; Klandermans, 1992).

According to participants' stories of activism, the nature of these threshold organizations varied; some were predominately cultural or social with only a slight political bent while others were solely and straightforwardly ideological. Esme's story, for example, is marked by references to groups of both kinds, organizations that operated under monikers like the Latino Students Association, the United Coalition Against Racism, and the Free South Africa Coordinating Committee. India's story mentions the African Liberation Movement and the Black Student Union, social organizations established by African American students that doubled as political advocacy groups during the days of the first Black Action Movement.

These threshold organizations were hardly sizeable, in membership or campus status. Because they drew their ranks primarily from the student of color community at Michigan, they tended to be small in stature and were relatively unknown to the rest of the predominately white campus. And yet, when circumstances called for it, these organizations could be easily mobilized for a protest or sit-in, lending the impression that a larger mass movement stood in support of the activist efforts taking place on campus. In Rosa and Web's case, a number of organizations were responsible for the rise of the Student of Color Coalition including La Voz, the Black Student Union, the Native American Student Association, and the Ethnic Studies

Initiative, all student advocacy organizations that, until the Takeover, typically stood as distinct organizational entities.

As Rosa's words reveal, what truly mattered about these organizations though, was not the outward form they took but the effect they had upon participants' understanding of themselves as people capable of changing the world around them. She stated:

Being part of La Voz and watching people organize, bring other students together to create an agenda around social justice was an amazing thing to me because up until that point I'd always had it in my head a kind of value system for social justice but, you know, I never knew what to do with it. And with the group it was like, 'Oh, so that's what you do.' You move on your values, you take action. You turn it all into something that people have to pay attention to. You just don't sit on what you feel.

### **Mobilizing Events**

The second critical step in participants' activist transformations involved the occurrence of certain campus events which revealed in an undeniably open and public way that institutional commitments were not being fulfilled as promised or expected. In the life stories of Esme, Ennis and the others, these events essentially acted as catalyzing agents that were ultimately formulated into large, campus-wide protests and student movements.

The problematic events that were described in participants' life narratives assumed a variety of appearances. In Web and Rosa's stories for example, it was the University's disclosure that the enrollment rates for students of color had declined for the fourth time in as many years that helped set into motion the individual and collective processes that ultimately resulted in the formation of the Student of Color Coalition and its takeover of the Michigan Union Tower. In the case of Malcolm and India, it was both Michigan's failure to include African American students in the planning and coordination of the newly established Center for Afro-American and African Studies as well as its inability to admit the afore-promised 50 Black students

to the Law School that moved their community to begin planning a campus-wide movement to challenge the University's admission goals.

Within the sociological literature, such instances are known as “mobilizing acts” (Gamson, 1992, p. 72) or mobilizing “events” (Jasper, 1997, p. 90) because of the ways in which they are drawn upon to frame injustices; the ways they inspire a sense of solidarity and collective identity among people; and most importantly, because of the ways they can fuel all of the other processes that lead to the establishment of an activist movement. Although these events are subject to individual interpretative processes, the cultural meanings that are ultimately attached to them can significantly influence the likelihood of a collective protest taking place. As Jasper stated (1997): “...Events can have a big effect on protest by arousing strong emotions, encapsulating hopes and desires, constructing interests, even defining new collective actors on the political stage” (p. 91).

According to participants' stories, not only did these mobilizing events spur strong emotion among their peers but consistent with Jasper's characterization, they brought them together, unifying students of color and giving rise to the formation of organizations like the Student of Color Coalition, the Black Student Union, and the United Coalition Against Racism; entities that would spearhead the formation of larger student movements known as Tower Takeover, the Black Action Movement, and the Anti-Racism Movement.

Once formed, these organizations and their members set about constructing their movements largely by painting negative impressions of the University that heightened students' sense of injustice and inequality. In Web and Rosa's stories, for example, Michigan was depicted as hypocritical and inconsistent for sponsoring a student organization that engaged in cultural ridicule. In Malcolm and India's stories, the University was cast as lax and unresponsive for its poor handling of the new Center for Afro American Studies and the low enrollment of African American students. While in the case of Esme and Ennis, the University was portrayed as incapable of providing a safe learning environment where students of color could



exist free of racial discrimination and harassment. Study participants and their peers then, did more than simply react to the events taking place on campus; they were actively engaged in the impressionistic work sociologist Max Heirich (as cited in Gamson, 1992) called “reframing acts,” whereby an event is intentionally characterized as unjust or unfair and through which potential social movement participants come to possess a common sense of injustice that they know is shared by the others around them.

According to Heirich, reframing acts are often followed by “attention-calling acts” or those words and deeds that highlight the immoral aspects of an event and the respective parties associated with its making (p. 73, as cited in Gamson, 1992). The purpose of attention-calling acts, in the words of sociologist William Gamson (1992), is to convey a single, urgent message: “Look what is happening here. Something that is not normal and unexceptionable is occurring” (p.73). In the case of study participants, they and their peers engaged in a number of attention-calling acts, sponsoring town hall meetings, public University-wide meetings, petition drives, silent protests, as well as establishing other activist coalitions and groups.

It was among these collective contexts that participants developed a shared sense of political purpose and activist commitment. Recall here Web’s reaction after attending a town hall meeting at the campus’ multicultural center. The meeting was specifically formulated in the wake of the University’s disclosure about the decline in student of color enrollment; his peers needed a forum to express their growing frustration with what they saw as Michigan’s inauthentic commitment to the larger student of color community on campus. During the meeting, his eyes had been opened to the struggles of his peers. He soon came away determined to help them. Web said:

I knew from my talks with them [his peers of color] before that we were all struggling at Michigan in some way. But I didn’t know the half of it, I guess. I didn’t know we were in such dire straights as a whole community. From ethnic studies, to the condition of the comprehensive studies program to the minority peer advising program

Housing wanted to nix to MESA [the Multiethnic Student Affairs office] that was in complete turmoil, I just had no idea. All I could think about after that was ‘O.K., now we’ve got to do something about it. We have got do something serious about it.

### **Moral Shocks**

The third step in participants’ process of becoming activists involved experiencing an unanticipated moment of personal outrage, one that dramatically pricked their political consciousness, causing the rethinking of the campus conditions they acquiesced to while also spurring their desire to engage in direct public protest. Every life story in this study contained such a moment, if not several. They differed in form but their effect was one and the same: Upon experiencing a moment of personal outrage, participants were moved to act with a resoluteness and righteousness that they did not possess previously.

These moments of personal outrage have been characterized in the sociology literature as “moral shocks,” whereby an unexpected piece of information or a particular event raises such a sense of outrage in a person that he or she becomes inclined towards political action (Jasper, 1997, p. 106). Often considered to be the first step towards recruitment in a social movement, these shocks can be gradual or sudden, highly public or personal, dramatic and gripping or simply modest. According to Jasper (1997), the moral shock generally works to help a person “...think about her basic values and how the world diverges from them in some important way” (p. 106).

In the case of study participants, the moral shocks they endured took on a multiple forms including stories of injustice, overt acts of racism, and direct confrontations with authority. Web and Rosa’s stories referred to all three forms of moral shock. First they heard the tale of Michigamua, then Web was nearly arrested in the President’s office (Rosa would also hear the story of this unfortunate episode) and later, they both endured the discovery of Native American artifacts in Michigamua’s meeting space. For India and Malcolm, the moral shock that pushed

them to action comes in the form of a radio announcement declaring the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In Ennis and Esme's stories, these moral shocks took the form of a racist radio broadcast and the posting of racist flyers in the residence halls demeaning the campus' Black women.

While these shocks unfurled in largely public ways, they were experienced in an intensely private and personal manner, provoking all kinds of deep-seated emotions in participants like anger, indignation, shame, humiliation, fear, and anxiety. According to sociologist Theodore D. Kemper (2001), such types of emotions are highly conducive to social movement participation because of the ways in which they directly reflect the differentials that exist between individuals of varying status and power relations. In the case of the Tower Takeover, for example, Web, Rosa, and the other members of the Student of Color Coalition decided to launch a sit-in after they had endured the shame and humiliation of being nearly arrested by campus police for trying to deliver a petition to the President of the University. The sit-in, Web had said, was meant as both a retaliatory measure for the near-arrest and a means of highlighting how contradictory and inconsistent the University had been in its commitment to students of color.

The moral shocks participants endured also seemed to reinforce the unfortunate degree to which they stood at the mercy of the University and its administrative charges for the provision of their social and educational needs. In the following quote, Esme expresses the moral outrage she experienced upon learning about the rash of racist acts that had been occurring around campus and the University's inability to prevent their continued occurrence. She said:

When I heard about all the crazy stuff that was going on around campus, I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that people could be so blatantly racist and act like they had a right to intimidate someone else. It made my blood boil! As far as I could tell, only students of color seemed to be up to the challenge of fighting racism. All administrators seemed to be able to do was apologize for it. But fight it? They had no idea what to do or how to do it.

Participant accounts suggested too that the power of these moral shocks to compel them to action was dependent upon their timing or when exactly they took place. In every tale of activism presented here, the moment in which these shocking episodes occurred came after a series of other disappointments and frustrations had already been experienced. Amidst the aftermath of King's death, for example, India and Malcolm found themselves taking part of an administrative building lockout, signaling to University officials that the days of calm negotiations and deliberations between the two parties were now over. In this respect, they represented the proverbial last straw that pushed participants and their peers to jettison pre-established tactical plans for protest strategies that were wholly oppositional, provocative, and hard-lined.

### **An Invitation to Act**

The fourth critical step for study participants concerned the extension of an invitation to join others in the building and launching of a student movement. In many ways, the notion of an invitation stands in direct contrast to the portrayals of base building that scholars have typically relied upon in their analyses of social movements and their growth. For most of them, social movements are built up through the active, pressured solicitation of another's participation, otherwise known as recruitment (see Ferree, 1992).

The term is not utilized here, in large part, because it does not accurately convey the means by which most of the participants became associated with others looking to create change on campus or their sponsoring organizations. To hear them tell it, they were invited and left to determine for themselves how and in what ways they would participate in the political activities taking place on campus.

According to participants' testimony, the nature of these invitations was entirely non-coercive and open, signaling a respect for both the existing bonds of friendship as well as for the personal gifts or talents that might be brought to bear on

the movement itself. Web, for example, was asked by his friend Coral to consider attending a meeting about the larger issues facing students of color on campus and then later to help her conceptualize how they might build a pan-ethnic coalition. Ennis' friends first asked him to think about taking part in their shanty protest against apartheid; several weeks later, he would voluntarily help them by using his social ties as a liaison to other student groups on campus to procure resources and funds for their on-going protest activities.

Malcolm's invitation came in the form of cryptic request from his friend; he unquestioningly fulfilled it. As he recalled:

All I remember is getting a call the night before the lockout from my friend Sam Fox who was one of the big leaders of the Black Student Union. I picked up the phone and I heard him say, "Malcolm, do you have any chains? And I said 'No, but I can get some.' And Sam said 'Do it and then meet us at the doors of the Administration Building first thing.' I ran out right then, bought what I could, and then showed up first thing in the morning like he asked me to.

Sam's intention, as Malcolm soon discovered, was to initiate a lockout of one of the campus' main administrative buildings and hopefully spark a protest in the process. Malcolm never once spoke of feeling forced to take part. He remembered further:

Sam knew that I'd want to be in on the protest. Maybe that's why he asked me to get the chains. I don't know. I just remember how tense the whole scene was though. I felt it even before I delivered the chains. People were hurt, you know, very sad. But there was a lot of bottled up rage and anger written on their faces too.

Though it may seem like a smaller, less significant step in their activist development, calling attention to the movement invitations that participants received is important if for no other reason than it reminds us how deeply their activism was embedded in their relationships with others. The request to become part of a student movement did not matter in an ideological manner alone; who had issued the invite

and the other movement members they would be working alongside of, were of critical importance to participants as well.

This particular dimension also deserves recognition because in some cases, the openness of the invitation later became a source of anxiety and frustration for certain participants. Web, for example, struggled mightily to establish a definitive role in the Takeover (and the Student of Color Coalition); he was not sure where he fit in the protest after a while. In Esme's case, the invitation to take part in the anti-racism movement gradually lost its appeal when UCAR began focusing primarily on the needs of African American students. Both stories reveal that despite the seemingly open and friendly nature of the invitation, accepting it was a double-edged sword of sorts with their own problematic consequences. The personal, human connection it was emblematic of did not always remain constant; people changed as did their expectations. So too did movement agendas.

### **Making the Commitment to Act**

The next step in participants' activist transformations involved the act of making an unequivocal commitment to the student movements that were beginning to emerge; aligning themselves in a public and identifiable way with the other student activists and protestors who had joined forces to redress the inequality and intolerance that existed on campus. Until this commitment was established and Web and the others had assumed their respective roles as members associated with a particular movement, they could only consider themselves to be politically conscious and concerned about the perpetuation of racial injustices but not yet full-fledged activists.

In the early days of social movement research, scholars believed that the commitment to act was largely guided by a decision-making process which emphasized a rational, calculative cost-benefit analysis; if the benefits outweighed the costs of his or her participation, the individual would likely become part of the protest movement (see Olson, 1965). Labeled later as "resource mobilization

theory,” this particular perspective of social movement participation argued that human beings would always act out self-interest first before they would act out of a concern for others (Ferree, 1992, p. 31). The job, then, of a social movement was to appeal to peoples’ self-interest and convince them that the personal benefits and preferences they sought to maximize could indeed be fulfilled through their protest participation.<sup>46</sup>

Other than the element of rationality, this particular perspective of how the commitment to activism is established fails to accurately account for participants’ own activist choices for some fairly obvious reasons: 1) While they all had traveled to Michigan carrying their own dreams and aspirations, participants spent a good portion of their college days trying to define their membership in and responsibility to a larger collective. If anything, their political actions were fueled by a burgeoning sense of community than pure self-interest; and 2) Participants had no real notion of what was in store for them once they committed themselves to a student movement. The risks and consequences they would have to endure in the process of creating change had yet to become apparent. Thus, the process of thoroughly weighing the costs versus the benefits of their participation would have been difficult for them to engage in, as none of them knew for certain what would be in the end.

Since the 1980s, when scholars began to seriously reconsider the problematic assumptions of human behavior guiding resource mobilization theory, the study of social movements has steadily embraced a more social psychological perspective of the decision-making process by which an individual commits herself to movement participation. Many have argued that solidarity, identity, social networks, as well as the cultural contexts of the movements themselves are more influential in securing an individual’s commitment to act on behalf of a movement than any kind of personal self-interest (see Hirsch, 1986, 1990; Mueller, 1992).

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<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed description and analysis of resource mobilization theory and the early days of social movement research generally, see the work of Ferree (1992) and Ferree and Miller, (1985).

To varying degrees, participants' stories have borne out such a perspective. Their motivations for taking part in the student movements on campus were numerous, varied, and rooted in a host of dimensions including: the need to establish an identity as a committed young man or woman of color; close friendships and kinship bonds with other students of color; the pan-ethnic nature of the movement organizations, where the needs of students of color as a whole were to be addressed; and emotional responses to certain institutional conditions and campus events.

Even so, the guiding thoughts, ideas or perspectives that may have accompanied their choices were extraordinarily difficult for participants to put into words. We know from their rich testimony that there was a range of social, institutional, emotional, and relational factors at play in the shaping of their activist commitments. We also know from their testimony that establishing the commitment to take action was not a one-time event. Participants' said that their decisions to continue fighting for their causes were often reformulated during the course of a movement and dependent upon the degree to which they remained convinced of, among other things, the larger movement's ability to bring about the needed change and their own ability to make a contribution to the cause.

The single, strategic moment, however, in which they firmly embraced the notion that they would commit themselves to a larger, common cause, remains frustratingly out of reach. At best, participants like Rosa and Esme were able to characterize their decision-making processes as a matter of answering an inner call, a gut-level tug telling them to follow their intuition and take part in challenging the University. Rosa said: "I felt like I just had to do this...It was my big moment and I knew I had to take a risk. I just couldn't walk away and leave my friends behind to do all the work."

This is hardly surprising according to other extant literature on social movements. For decades, scholars have tried to pinpoint the exact moment in which a person decides to become part of a protest and commits to taking action on its behalf. Such instances—if they can be captured at all—remain poorly articulated and



understood, however. According to sociologist Francesca Polleta (2002), part of the reason it is difficult to plot protest participation in this way is because of the language that activists and other scholars have historically used in their descriptions of social movements; generally, such language emphasizes the notions of spontaneity and organic occurrence, downplaying the deliberate planning and strategy that often occurs well before a movement “bursts” onto the scene.

All of this is to say that while participants did indeed make the commitment to act on behalf of a student movement, we cannot presume to know the exact decision-making processes they engaged in and from which they based their decisions. As a result, we cannot compare internal motivations across participants to see how and in what ways they may have differed or were consistent with one another.

This lack of specific details related to a definable moment where one crosses the threshold to activism suggests that, at least to some degree, the process of becoming an activist for participants required making a leap of faith into the unknown. Regardless of how thoroughly they tried to define the potential outcomes of their movements, none of them knew what they were truly getting themselves into once they signed on and became an active member of a student movement. Far from being irrational, the leap of faith participants committed could be construed as a sign of trust in themselves and in their friendships with the other students of color who had become integral parts of their lives.

### **Assuming Responsibility for the Movement**

The life stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm suggests that the closing step in their activist development involved assuming personal responsibility for the student movements of which they were a part. This dimension reflects a fundamental truth about activism: to be an activist, a person must be actively engaged in the work of creating social change.

As mentioned earlier, the general role participants assumed were that of a social movement member, an individual who devotes an extensive amount of his or

her time to a movement (in lieu of money, for example), usually working behind the scenes in support of its efforts and its sponsoring organization. To hear participants tell it, the work they often took up could hardly be considered exciting but it was still purposeful, nonetheless.

In the cases of Web and Rosa, the tasks they carried out varied from writing newsletters, to helping draft new campus space proposals, to staging tours, to providing administrative and emotional support for the other members of the Student of Color Coalition. In Esme and Ennis' cases, their roles ranged from organizational liaisons, to event publicists, to meeting coordinators, to general stand-ins for various campus protests.

Malcolm and India worked behind the scenes but in different capacities, distinguished by gender. Malcolm spent a great deal of his time acting as a good soldier, helping to develop strategy and working with student leaders to clarify tactics, counter challenges, as well as the Movement's short-term and long-term goals. India, meanwhile, took on the role of secretary to the Black Student Union, providing various forms of administrative support while also acting as a liaison to the black sororities on campus, encouraging their support and participation.

On the surface, these efforts may not appear so vital or important by their nature; in reality, however, they can be critical to social movements and their plans for social change. All of the key responsibilities that a social movement must attend to in order to achieve their aims are dependent upon these smaller tasks (see Snow & Oliver, 1991). They are part and parcel of larger salient processes such as creating awareness among the general public; attracting sympathy, support, as well as allies and resources; shaping public opinion and discussion; redefining once-accepted norms; challenging authority; and convincing others to join the movement.

While participants themselves did not speak of the effects behind their efforts, one need only consider the changes in University policy, procedure, and practice to see how truly influential they were. Save for the Tower Takeover (which as a movement only partially met its aims), Rosa, Esme, and the others' movement

participation wrought lasting institutional change in terms of the University's admission policies, the kinds of student services it would provide for undergraduates of color, and the institutional consciousness of and commitment to diversity, to name a few outcomes (see Peckham, 1994).

Collectively, we might also think about participants' efforts as the work of whistleblowers, individuals who uncover injustice and shame the sources that feed its perpetuation (Jasper, 1997). Nearly every task they undertook was done in the name of uncovering the hollowness of the University's commitment to its students of color or its inability to provide the kind of learning environment it promised it would. As the work of whistleblowers often is, the efforts participants engaged in were still risky business, albeit of its own sort. In publicly aligning themselves with a movement that also espoused certain racial and political perspectives, India and the others opened themselves to all kinds of criticism from individuals who did not agree with their stance, their tactics, or their views of the University. The works participants' undertook may not have been high-profile but they were still precarious and risky nonetheless.

### **Negotiating Challenges**

Not too soon after study participants had committed themselves to working on behalf of their respective student movements, Esme, India and the others found themselves in the midst of an entirely new process: learning to negotiate certain physical, psychological, intellectual, and social challenges that required them to seriously reevaluate both their intentions and decisions to take part in a political student movement. For most of the study participants, such negotiations were not a one-time occurrence, but an on-going element of their activist engagement that occurred over and over again, usually prompted by the emergence of both anticipated and unexpected challenging circumstances.

In the world of sociology, the ways in which activists negotiate the challenges that arise during the course of his or her efforts to create change is one of the oft-

overlooked aspects of social movement participation. Most scholars have seen fit to examine the obstacles that social movements face as a collective entity or whole organization but rarely have they explored the effect of such tests at an individual level, from the personal perspective of a single participant (see Tarrow, 1980).

According to the accounts participants rendered, there were numerous challenges to be faced as college activists. In certain moments, these challenges could be physical as they were for Rosa, Esme, Web, and Ennis. Extended periods of time spent among the cold, cramped confines of the Union Tower, sleeping upon the concrete floors of the make-shift shanties that were erected on the campus Diag, and spending long hours standing in protest and shouting often made for uncomfortable, achy existences.

These challenges could also be psychologically or emotionally based. While every participant endured their own moments of overwhelming anxiety, frustration, and anger, Ennis and Esme also suffered the public humiliation of standing as the brunt of racial epithets and racist jokes. The same held true for Malcolm and India, who were regularly singled out for their looks and presumed lack of intelligence by their white University counterparts.

From the perspective of their intellectual pursuits, every participant had to further contend with parents who were not fully accepting of the time spent away from the classroom; angry classmates who were critical of their efforts; and professors and lecturers who were unwilling to make any sort of concessions in terms of paper deadlines, absence policies, or grades. Too, participants all faced the challenge of confronting campus authorities who they believed held the power to punish as well as expel them outright if it was deemed necessary.

In addition to the myriad of emotions and feelings these challenges prompted, they spawned introspection and reflection among participants, moments where they questioned the wisdom of their choices and the righteousness of their actions. For certain participants, like Web and Esme, such tests prompted a serious evaluation of their places and roles in the movements they supported. Web's questioning was a

reflection of the growing incompatibility between the protest cycle of the Takeover and what he assumed would be expected from him in terms of his own personal cycle of commitment. While he was wholeheartedly committed to the Coalition and its aims, he never anticipated that his support would require living in the Union Tower for 37 consecutive days.

For Esme, the nature of the protest had become incompatible with her expectations and understandings of the United Coalition Against Racism and its goals. When it became apparent that her expectations could not be reconciled with the changing nature of UCAR, she chose to focus her activist efforts on building a Latino Studies program at the University. In these respects, the challenges participants faced prompted to reconsider time and again how relevant and effective their actions (as well as the actions of the movements they were part of) were in creating the kind of change they intended to make.

This particular aspect of participants' activist engagement also reveals the human side of activism that does not always receive the consideration it deserves. To negotiate the many challenges that came at them, participants had to draw on parts of persons other than their politics. They had to draw on their emotional maturity; their cognitive and critical thinking skills; their courage and bravery in the face of risk; their patience and loyalty; and their inner faith.

### **Enduring Changes & Consequences**

As Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm's participation in their respective student movements came to a close, they still had to contend with what we might consider to be the final chapter of their activist stories: enduring all of the changes and consequences that had spun from their attempts to foster a more equitable and tolerant University. Although they had participated in different movements with their own respective measures of success and efficacy, nearly all of the study participants underwent remarkable changes to their self-concepts, their understanding of social change and its making, and their overall perspectives of the

University. In attempting to affect institutional change, they had been affected themselves, changing in ways that were both personal and political.

From the vantage point of self-concept, participants like Rosa, Web, Esme, and Ennis made it clear that their activist engagement had redefined them in crucial ways. They were no longer the green, naïve or blindly idealistic individuals they had been at the start of their undergraduate careers but mature, sentient individuals with a greater capacity for discerning fact from fiction and integrity from deceit. Through their activism, participants also developed greater insight into their own characters and spirits. They realized that they could stand firm in the face of intimidation; they possessed the requisite courage and strength to extend themselves in risk; and when it most mattered, they could exhibit great loyalty, holding fast to their friends as well as their ideals.

Politically, study participants underwent other significant changes, particularly in their understanding of the complexities surrounding the task of working for social justice. In Web's case, he recognized that one's tactics and strategies had to be able to keep pace with all of the twists and turns that accompanied the unfolding of a protest. Conflict was dynamic and fluid, he realized, and required more than cookie-cutter tactics like marches and demonstrations to manage it. In Rosa's case, she had come to see the importance of creating an organizational infrastructure that was flexible enough to move on several issues at once. The Coalition, in her estimation, had been sidetracked by the issue of Michigamua and when the protest had not produced the desired change, the rest of its goals suffered as well.

Esme and Ennis' growth in understanding, on the other hand, did not center on tactics or infrastructure but the overall process as a whole. Social change, they pair had come to realize, required time and patience; it did not occur overnight, no matter how much they wished it were otherwise. The ability to take the long view of one's activist efforts was critical, they both claimed, or one ran the risk of burning out and giving up prematurely. Esme's experiences with the anti-racism movement, in particular, had taught her about the need for self-care. There were always going to be

other political battles to fight and one needed to learn how to pace herself and to anticipate the long haul.

As for Malcolm and India, the two were matter-of-fact and less complimentary about the changes their activist engagement had wrought. While they had always believed themselves to be fairly skeptical of the country's major social and political institutions, they each claimed that their activist engagement had pushed their distrust of the authorities and leadership behind them to a new level. "I doubt authority figures and institutions even more," India had admitted. "And I doubt if it is possible to effect the permanent, substantial change the worlds needs through protest. I used to think it would work but now I'm not so sure." To certain degree, Malcolm said, it was difficult to assign any sort of discernible change to his participation in the Black Action Movement. His role in the Action Movement seemed nearly inevitable. "We did what we had to do," he stated flatly of his days as a Black Action movement member. "We were treated like numbers. We were anonymous and invisible until we stood up for ourselves. It wasn't much of a choice after a while."

Before study participants could recognize the changes in perspective and outlook that had occurred in their lives, they spent time wading through moments of insecurity and darkness, many of them coming directly after their participation in the movements they supported had drawn to a close. Malcolm and India could not recall with much clarity what the days after the Black Action Movement were like but for the others, they were noted for their challenges. In Rosa and Web's cases, the days after the Tower Takeover were remembered for the deep frustration, anger, and stress that accompanied them. Thirty-seven days in the Tower had been hard on the pair in nearly every way imaginable. Emotionally, they felt spent, burned out by the constant struggles with Michigamua and campus administrators. Academically, they had taken a hard hit, earning failing grades and low marks because of all the classes and assignments they had missed. Personally, Rosa and Web also struggled with the lack of concrete resolution to the issues they had raised; for all of its efforts, the

Coalition had not achieved what it set out to and they felt responsible for its lack of achievement.

Esme was no stranger to feelings of frustration and anger having endured them herself as she walked away from the Anti-Racism Movement and focused her efforts on building a Latino Studies program at Michigan. The Coalition's ever-increasing focus on African American students proved to be a source of great dissatisfaction to her. As a Latina, she felt almost as invisible and voiceless as she had before she first joined the protest.

Although Ennis saw the Anti-Racism movement through to the end, he too found little immediate peace upon its closing. Yes, the Coalition had successfully raised the University's consciousness of racism and diversity, but it remained to be seen if campus administrators would make good on their promises to transform the institution into a more equitable, tolerant place. The thought that they had been insincere in their promises rattled Ennis more than he cared to admit. Additionally, he knew his grades had plummeted, numerous paper deadlines and quiz sessions had come and gone and Ennis had been absent for nearly all of them. He worried for the remainder of the term just how far behind the academic eight-ball he had put himself and what it would take to get back on track.

These short-term consequences would give way to long-term issues that were ever more problematic, particularly from the vantage point of participants' educational progress. All of them admitted that their engagement in activism had thrown their academic lives off-track in significant ways. Web, emotionally distraught and worn out, would withdraw from the University for an extended period of time. Rosa returned the following semester with a grade point average that was significantly lower than before her Takeover participation and extra coursework to complete for her majors. Esme suffered significant burnout as well, eventually taking an additional six years to finish her degree. Ennis stayed in school but had lost significant ground in terms of preparing himself for graduate studies. Malcolm would graduate as expected; when he applied for admission to the University's School of Business,



however, the Dean personally rejected his application claiming that he was too much of troublemaker to earn admission to the Michigan business program. India, on the other hand, would never finish college, her scholarly momentum lost due to marriage, pregnancy, and BAM activities.

Why so many academic problems? According to study participants, it was largely a matter of relevancy or, more accurately, the loss of relevancy. Just as their activist engagement had resulted in changes of self-concept, so too did it change how Emse, Rosa, and the others viewed the University. Where they had once looked to the institution for a sense of genuine belonging, they now understood that it did not house the kind of community they had been led to expect. What then, was the point in spending more time on a campus where they felt like outsiders? Web, for example, felt keenly betrayed by Michigan's sponsorship of Michigamua; such support flew in the face of a true commitment to diversity, one of the main reasons he had chosen to attend the University in the first place. He stated:

I had to ask myself: 'What does this mean? What does it mean for me that I, in going to Michigan, am contributing in some way, supporting, perpetuating the existence of a place that is really messed up? What am I doing?'

Additionally, participants struggled with the relevancy of their coursework and classes. After weeks of fighting against significant, real-world social ills such as racism and discrimination, it was difficult to find meaning in coursework and classes that had little to do with their new identities and political commitments. "I struggled to pay attention in class," Ennis had admitted. "Everything seemed irrelevant compared to fighting racism."

Remarkably, however, none of the participants was willing to completely renounce their ties to the University on a permanent basis. While Michigan had not proven itself to be the moral, supportive institution they once took it for, each one of them still readily acknowledged its powerful status in society. It was on account of this status that they all said they would continue in their roles as alumni to push for

greater access and equity on campus. “You know, my loyalty, my pride, that’s all very marginal now,” Rosa had stated. “No, I don’t think it’s the greatest experience for students of color to come here but we have to be realistic about things. We need to be represented on campus.”

### Summary

One of the leading theories governing the study of social movement participation argues that the process through which people come to engage and support a particular movement is, at its core, a socially constructed one (see Klandermans, 1992). That is to say that people come to activism through the active meaning-making, communication, negotiations, and decision-making they engage in on their own as well as with others. Also essential, scholars note, are the emotional, moral, and cultural requirements they bring with them (Jasper, 1992). Typically, these requirements are cultivated from a broad spectrum of social interactions, relationships, and life experiences (Melucci, 1989).

The process underlying the activist transformations of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm is no different. As their stories attest, their paths to activism were shaped by a panoply of social influences which came in a multifaceted array of guises including:

- The hospitable spaces they knew as *home*, where parents and guardians took deliberate care to instill in Rosa and the others the critical activist sensibilities such as agency, moral discernment, and a shared sense of purpose;
- The less positive, but still influential public spaces of *school* and the *neighborhood* where participants were routinely challenged by the lack of diversity and multicultural understanding in these locales, prompting them to begin cultivating a deeper awareness of themselves as people of color as well as a consciousness of the polarizing power of race;

- The social relationships they established with *threshold people*, individuals who not only provided them with a much-needed sense of community and belonging but perhaps more importantly, helped them to see and embrace the imperative to actively oppose the practices, policies, and procedures that subordinated their communities of color;
- The invitations they received from *threshold organizations*, social and political groups that offered participants a real chance to enact their growing political commitments, as well as allow them to experience the a sense of solidarity and community;
- The prevailing *historical circumstances* and *institutional conditions* which stood as both a source of inspiration providing example after example of how other people of color attempted to transform the social and political order governing their lives and the necessary villain that needed challenging, the purposive target to confront for all of the fearful and threat-based emotions they experienced; and
- The unfolding of *mobilizing events* and *moral shocks*, public and private moments in which their consciousness of injustice was heightened and their sense of moral outrage was provoked.

Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm's activist transformations were not, however, completely dependent upon these influences alone. Individually, each of them engaged in their own internal decision-making processes, reflecting upon what it would mean for them to participate in a student movement. As previously noted, such moments of reflection were difficult for participants to put into words but the results would ultimately prove to be the same: Each one of them would commit themselves to activism, standing shoulder to shoulder with their peers, working intently on creating a more just and equitable institution of higher learning.

## Chapter 8

### **Learning from the Stories of Rosa Cortez, Web Murphy, Esme Rodriguez, Ennis Campbell, India Taylor, and Malcolm Jones**

There is a moral to every story, so the adage goes. Amidst all of the characters, plots, and actions present in the tales we tell often runs a deeper stream of meaning, a larger lesson that is supposed to speak in some way to how we might make our own way through the world. According to the non-fiction writer, Philip Gerard (1996), all stories—especially those that are grounded in the experiences of everyday life—possess an “apparent subject” and a “deeper subject” (p. 7). The apparent subject is in the facts and details, the particulars that provide a basis for understanding the topic at hand. The deeper subject is constituted by the larger, more profound insights about human behavior that the topic in some way reflects.

In this final chapter, we will reexamine the life stories of Web, Rosa, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm, this time in light of their own respective morals and deeper subjects. What key insights should we come to given the stories that participants shared with us? From the vantage point of research, what do they further teach us about the engagement in activism that perhaps we had not fully considered before? What elements of the activist process require additional exploration? Finally, for those of imagining the possibility of creating new generations of student activists, what do these life stories help us to understand about how such an end may be achieved?

As the discussion presented in the pages ahead will reveal, the answers to these questions are rooted in a wide range of subject matter concerning peer influence and identity, the emotional and relational nature of activism, and the transformative effects of threshold people and moral shocks, among others. It would be a mistake, however, to take the ideas or notions discussed here as any sort of final word on college student activism and the underlying forces that may fuel it. The life stories that lie at the center of this study are far too individualized and personal for the drawing of such universal, definitive conclusions.

Indeed, it is best to take this chapter and its contents only for what they are: theoretical points of departure for further discussion as to how these kinds of transformations in political identity can occur, the factors that may influence their unfolding, and the future research efforts that might be launched in the name of understanding the overall process in greater depth. Hopefully, the stories of Rosa, Esme, India, and the others have provided a useful window for looking at college students more closely and considering the perspectives that have been cultivated in relation to their political lives.

### **Key Insights**

One of the extraordinary characteristics of stories is that they can endure multiple interpretations; what we take away from them in terms of meaning or significance ultimately depends upon our perspectives as readers. The same holds true for the stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm. They can be read a number of ways. For some, their stories stand as classic representations of the mythic “hero’s adventure,” the coming-of-age tale in which a young person is transformed into a hero or heroine after enduring a series of physical and mental trials which thoroughly test their mettle and inner fortitude (Campbell, 1991, p. 151). For others, their life narratives may appear as cautionary tales, vivid reminders that the engagement in activism possesses its own exacting costs. For still others, these stories may be taken as informative narratives about everyday life, simple but educative tales that reveal how different people inhabit the world.

However one chooses to interpret the life stories that lie at the heart of this study, there is no escaping the ways in which they constantly circle back to the central notions of peers and identity. Indeed, if these stories have contributed to any kind of key insights, they are based upon what they reveal about how powerfully influential peer relationships and the quest to know one’s self can be to the engagement in activism.

## The Power of Peers

Peers have long been recognized for their ability to affect the behavioral choices and attitudes of their fellow college students (Weidman, 1989). In recent years, for example, peers have been cited as major influences in the undergraduate consumption and use of alcohol (Taylor & Francis, 2006); in the participation of diversity-related activities (Milem & Umbach, 2003); and in the formulation and adoption of particular racial attitudes (Levin, 2003). Given the pervasive nature of their influence, it is hardly surprising that they would also be found to play a pivotal role in the activist transformations experienced by study participants.

Yet to speak of peers in the context of this study is to speak of a surprisingly multifaceted form of influence, one borne of personality; the remarkable ability to adapt to different social and political conditions; and of course, the power to broaden another's consciousness, all elements that stand in direct contrast to the one-dimensional, reactionary portraits early scholars painted of young activists and their fellow protestors.

As the stories of Web and the other participants have made clear, one of the main reasons that they were drawn to their activist peers was because of the communal and charismatic personas they presented. Participants described them in remarkably similar ways: charming, community-minded, intelligent, and well-humored.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps most critical of all, they were viewed as secure in their identities as people of color, a quality every participant hoped to emulate on their own one day.

Beyond their charm and congeniality, what also made these peers so influential was the instrumental ways they helped study participants grow and develop, first as individuals and later as activists. Initially, they played the roles of community guides and friends, introducing participants to other members within

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<sup>47</sup> Such positive impressions were helped, no doubt, by the social contexts in which participants typically encountered them. Esme and the others reported meeting their activist peers in largely pressure-free, non-political, casual circumstances such as social dances, parties, residence hall gatherings, and organizational meetings.

their respective student communities, encouraging their sense of belonging, and initiating the growth of their identities as young men and women of color.

Over time, these peers would act as consciousness raisers and educators, opening participants' eyes to the harsher realities of campus life and teaching them to think critically about power structures, to question authority, and to be outraged by the pervasiveness of educational inequality. In the previous chapter, we characterized this intellectual influence as a form of oppositional consciousness, whereby Web, Ennis, and the others' awareness of oppression and systems of domination was heightened, ultimately establishing in their minds the justification for collective, political action.

Later, in the wake of certain troubling campus events, these fellow peers became political strategists and organizers, creating an empowered sense of political possibility among study participants as well as a greater sense of solidarity and collective identity, key sensibilities they had always wanted to experience but never had the chance to cultivate before. When they became convinced that there was no way to create the kind of institutional change they believed was necessary, these same peers would assume the identities of activists, showing participants how to channel their frustrations into purposive action and extend themselves in risk for their beliefs. In short, these peers stood as powerful models of transformation, communal engagement, and personal commitment.

It is also worth acknowledging here that much of the influence these peers seemed to wield was achieved primarily through non-coercive means; according to study participants, they were granted considerable respect and freedom to determine for themselves what kinds of commitments and risks they could undertake. None of them ever described the actions or attitudes of their peers in any pressured sort of manner, an approach once presumed necessary to activist recruitment. Nor did participants speak of being presented with propaganda or any other manipulative rhetoric. What they did speak of was the sharing of personal stories and experiences whose themes strongly resonated with their own.

When considered in light of the extant literature on college student activism, the overall portrait of peer influence that emerges is deeply relational and rooted in the personal bonds and friendships that undergraduates form with one another, more so than politics, ideology, or political strategy. There is an intimate, personal quality to this type of peer influence, informed not only by the common desire to create institutional change but identity, belonging, and community.

What does such an insight imply for future analyses of college student activism? In one respect, it suggests the need to broaden our perspectives as to how these changes in political identity can occur and the motivating forces that may be behind them. If we focus primarily on the relationships, events, contexts, and interactions that are political or ideological in nature, we run the risk of overlooking the influence of the everyday people that can contribute to a student's activist development.

The fact remains that other than siblings (which Malcolm alone mentioned), study participants did not cite any other college-level individuals as having as powerful or significant influence in the shaping of their activism; neither faculty nor teaching assistants nor administrators nor student affairs staff were mentioned in their stories. If the influence of one's peers outpaces all of the other potential college-related factors when it comes to the process of becoming an activist, then scholars of student activism must explore the nature of these relationships from every facet possible. The more we know about student activists and their peers, the more we stand to learn about the process of becoming an activist generally.

### **The Power of Identity**

The idea that one's identity and one's activism can be interconnected is not new either. Theories abound as to how the two are linked. Some sociologists, for example, have argued that individuals engage in activism as a way to contend with a spoiled or stigmatized identity (see, for example, Kaplan & Liu, 2000); protest is viewed as a form of collective coping, allowing those who feel they have been



unfairly or grossly mischaracterized to actively fight their stigmatization as well as the feelings of rejection or failure that are often engendered in the process. Others have claimed that protest participation is driven in large measure by the condition of one's self-esteem (see Owens & Aronson, 2000). From this perspective, the engagement in activism is viewed as a way of bridging how a person feels about herself and the way she perceives the acceptability or appropriateness of the social role that has been assigned to her.

As the stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India and Malcolm made evident, identity was also a central element of their activism. On the one hand, they challenged the University because of what they perceived as its intolerant climate, biased institutional policies, and general inability to provide an affirming and healthy quality of life for its students of color. On the other, they openly defied the University because of the deeply personal ways they interpreted these institutional circumstances, defining them as oppressive conditions that unfairly and adversely affected their peoples. Even the varied paths they followed to their activism were rooted in identity-related conditions such as self-verification; the need to belong; the desire to fight stereotypes and stigmas; and the basic intent to explore further their own identities as people of color.

That the activism that Web, Rosa, and the other participants engaged in would be so closely tied to their identities makes considerable sense given where they stood in terms of the life course. At the age of 21, study participants were firmly entrenched in young adulthood. According to psychology professor Dan P. McAdams (1993), young adults are usually preoccupied with questions of identity, belonging and purpose and often experiment with "alternative ways of acting, feeling, and believing" as a way of discovering who they truly are (p. 93).

And yet, to contend that participants' activism was shaped by something as intimate and non-ideological as their identities is still a complicated assertion. As political scientist Amy Gutmann (2003) has noted, identity-based politics (as well as the individuals who embrace them) are not often treated as the legitimate form of

politics they truly are. Critics of identity-based politics argue that it is fundamentally unfair and illegitimate to claim any kind of democratic freedoms, rights or resources based on one's identity.

In an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, Gutmann (2003) argues, however, identity-based politics nonetheless reflect a basic truth: Who we are, how we define ourselves, shapes in powerful ways not only what we need from our democracy and its institutions but what we want from them and what we expect they will accommodate. The same appeared to hold true for study participants. Their calls for greater access, tolerance, and equity were not entirely motivated by politics but perhaps even more so, by what they wanted for themselves as members of a greater collective good.

What does such a perspective suggest for new studies of college student activism? In one respect, this perspective points to the need to be more attentive to the identities that young adults bring to their activism generally. Notions of self-definition, self-concept, and self-understanding may be just as critical to consider as political ideology or partisan affiliation when it comes to the activism of college students. From a methodological perspective, the influence of identity suggests that in order to develop a fuller understanding of student activism, scholars must utilize research methods (such as biography and narrative) that allow us to access those identities and consider the whole of the life experiences that shape them.

### **Other Important Insights**

Of course, it would be a mistake to presume that the only insights the stories of Web, Rosa, Esme, Ennis, Malcolm, and India have to provide are those related to peers and identity. Collectively, their narratives also stand as testaments to other important ideas. One such idea is rooted in the importance of diversity. Previous studies have already established how central a diverse student body is to the learning process (see Dey & Gurin, 2001). Because the case for diversity has often been made on behalf of predominately white institutions, however, the core argument has usually

focused on what white students gain from living and learning among their peers of color.

It is the stories like those collected in this study that should remind us how essential students of color are to the growth and development of other students of color. Without them, study participants would never had been able to fully cultivate the genuine sense of belonging and community they all sought; nor would they have able to establish strong identities as people of color and come to a greater form of self-understanding and self-definition. Diversity matters, these stories have clearly indicated, to students of color and their growth as well.

It is also difficult to read these life stories and not be struck by the constancy of struggle that students of color have had to engage in to see the promise of educational equality fully realized. Despite the many years that separate Web and Rosa from Ennis, Esme, Malcolm, and India, their attempts to transform the University of Michigan into a more tolerant and equitable institution are remarkably alike, not just in form or tactic of course, but overall purpose and intent. The similarities in the conditions they endured as undergraduates—the alienation, the lack of support, the harsh scrutiny, and the undeserved questioning of their legitimacy as meritorious admits—suggests that, in many ways, study participants experienced the same University, marred by the same inequality and intolerance.

Of course, few social institutions, if any, have devised an enduring way to minimize the power of race to divide communities and adversely affect the relationships that people might cultivate on either a collective or individual basis. This is the other inescapable notion that unfortunately shines through each one of the life stories presented in these pages. Underlying each participant's hope and desire for institutional change was the basic desire to live and learn freely, without being by hampered by misconceptions about skin color. In the end, it proved to be too monumental a hope to fully realize, a hope that remains largely unfilled even today.

## **New Questions, New Avenues for New Research**

Studies that are centrally concerned with exploring the social determinants of human behavior often foster as many questions as they do answers. This is entirely understandable, of course. Given the broad array of processes known to inform the shaping of human thought and action (complicated processes involving highly subjective matters of perception, interpretation, and meaning-making), discerning the hows and whys behind the ways people behave can become a complex undertaking, one that does not readily lead to exhaustive or absolute conclusions. When a study involves the examination of a risky, unpredictable form of behavior like activism, new questions are bound to arise.

As thorough as this examination has attempted to be in its exploration of a college student's development as an activist, there remains much to be discovered about the underlying process and its defining elements. Certainly, the steps presented in the previous chapter have contributed some much-needed humanism and organization to the study of college student activism; as a line of intellectual inquiry, however, this study represents but a fraction of the scholarship that can and should be undertaken if we are truly interested in understanding how young people are turned on to the vital idea of changing the world. In this section, new questions and new avenues for research are outlined; they are drawn specifically from the process presented in Chapter Seven.

### **Threshold People & Threshold Organizations**

One of the larger lessons that the life stories presented in these pages speak to concerns the highly relational nature of activism. According to what Rosa, Web, and the others have revealed, no one becomes an activist all on his or her own. The acquaintances we make, the friendships we forge, and the groups we become a part of can all play a role in our establishment of an activist identity. We need these other people it seems, to help us cross over from our private existences to those of a more

political, public nature. They help open our eyes, show us what is possible, and model in important ways how we ourselves might act.

In the last chapter, we referred to such individuals as threshold people and threshold organizations; the essence of their influence was rooted largely in the oppositional consciousness they inspired regarding structural inequality, systemic injustice, and institutional power relations. The application of this terminology, it was argued, better captured the nature of the relationships study participants experienced than the concept of social networks usually invoked in studies of social movement participation.

While the terms threshold people and threshold organizations may have moved us closer to a more accurate rendering of peer influence and its relation to student activism, its application raises questions about how much we truly understand when it comes the overall relational aspects of student activism. Are there other kinds of threshold people and organizations that help foster the engagement in activism? If there are, who are they comprised of and what is the nature of their influence? Other questions we might consider:

- In what ways, if any, do they foster the adoption of an oppositional consciousness?
- By what means do they attempt to facilitate a college student's crossing over from student to student activist?
- If we were to look across different types of student activism, how would these individuals and groups differ? In what ways would they be alike?
- What difference, if any, do these individuals and groups make to the type of activism a student engages in?

Future studies of activism may consider exploring these questions as a way of further defining the important individuals and groups who help college students find their voices, formulate their political and social commitments, and foster the faith and trust necessary to extend themselves in risk.

## Mobilizing Events

Another important lesson to be taken from the life stories in this work centers upon the critical role external forces like history and political conditions play in the establishment of the commitment to activism. If activism is relational, as participants' stories suggest, it is also contextual. No one becomes an activist in isolation, much less on his or her own. Outside events, particularly those of an unjust nature, heighten our awareness of what is wrong with our surroundings, what needs changing, and who we need to hold accountable for the perpetuation of problems or wrongdoings.

In the previous chapter, we invoked the term mobilizing events, a characterization which sociologists have relied on to describe the historical and social occurrences that social movements draw from in the framing of their agendas, recruiting strategies, and base building. For study participants, these mobilizing events were institutionally based, highlighting in an open, public manner the degree to which the University of Michigan had failed to uphold its promise of a diverse and inclusive learning environment for its students of color.

The acknowledgement of these events was important, not simply because they helped to explain where participants derived their sense of moral and political urgency but also because of the tactical framing work they called attention to, strategic efforts that have rarely been discussed in the context of college student activism. Although study participants did not provide detailed descriptions of this framing work, future studies could explore in greater depth the ways in which student activists transform such public occurrences into the establishment of a student movement. Plenty of other questions remain, including:

- What other types of mobilizing events inspire the building of a student movement?
- Do certain kinds of mobilizing events work better at mobilizing and attracting potential student activists than others?
- In terms of attention-calling acts, how do student activists determine what they will consist of, in form or function?

- Are their attention-calling acts that are more persuasive than others?

Exploring these questions allows for a more nuanced understanding of the strategic work that student movements engage in, to be sure; they may also help minimize the unfortunate stereotype often applied to student activists, namely, that they are by nature impulsive, reactionary individuals, easily manipulated into rebellion.

### **Moral Shocks**

Just as activism can be relational and contextual, it can also be highly emotional. If the stories that participants recounted are any indication, there exists a wide-ranging repertoire of feelings and sentiments capable of fueling the engagement in activism. These emotions include feelings of shame, humiliation, indignation, anger, fear, anxiety, and even pride. To hear participants tell it, such emotions are an important part of the activist process. They drive home unavoidable messages about vulnerability, strength, power, and powerlessness before serving as a call to action.

As noted before, sociologists often refer to the moments surrounding the experience of these emotions as moral shocks or those instances when an individual endures such a keen sense of outrage that they are moved to engage in some form of extraordinary political action. Study participants were moved to join student protest organizations and groups through multiple forms of moral shocks such as stories of injustice, overt acts of racism, and direct confrontations with authority.

While studies of student activism have made general reference to the emotional nature of activism, few have examined the roles emotion and passion play in any rigorous or thorough manner. There are a number of questions that might be researched. For example, how are moral shocks interpreted and transformed into the resolve to work for social change either by potential student activists or already-established activists looking to build a campus movement? Other questions that deserve exploration include the following:

- Do different types of student movements require different types of moral shocks to spur potential activists to action?
- In addition to feelings of threat and vulnerability, what other kinds of emotions can moral shocks engender that are effective for recruitment and movement-building purposes?
- Does the type of moral shock experienced affect the nature of protest and its outward characteristics?

Answering these kinds of questions is central to understanding the emotional dynamics which often surround a student's engagement in activism. They can provide necessary insight into the frames of mind that guide a student's activism. They may also give us an indication of the overall emotional investment with which college students approach their engagement in activism.

### **The Invitation to Act**

Yet another key lesson to be derived from the life stories of Web, Malcolm, and their fellow participants focuses on the way in which individuals are initially introduced and brought into a social movement. Because of its highly relational nature, participants have told us, the act of joining others in protest does not always have to be a pressured, manipulative affair as scholars of recruitment have long suggested. Simple invitations, extended by people we know and trust, is sometimes all we need to commit ourselves to a movement or movement organization.

In Chapter Seven, this particular moment in the activist process was referred to as the invitation to act, a simple characterization for what appeared to study participants as basic requests made by friends. According to study participants, the nature of these invitations was non-coercive and open, much more like a call to support a group of friends than any kind of political or tactical recruiting strategy.

Those interested in examining how student movements build their member bases, for example, might look to see whether or not they rely on invitation-type approaches or specific recruiting tactics. Is one approach more effective when it comes to base-building than another? Recalling Web and Esme's struggle to maintain



a sense of relevancy over the course of their protest participation, are there specific pitfalls associated with either base-building approach?

The invitation to act also presumes a certain consistency in the way people understand and recognize one another at the outset of a protest. What happens to these relationships when hierarchical distinctions like leaders and members are suddenly thrown into the mix? In a related vein, what happens when an activist's initial expectations and understandings of the protest do not adhere to their experience? What then? When compared to the other dimensions of the activist process, the invitation to act likely pales in significance. Yet, it could be an important gateway to understanding other salient, activist-related processes that have not generally been given much attention.

### **Making the Commitment to Act**

In comparison to the other aspects of the activist process that study participants underwent, the specific thoughts and emotions that guided them in the critical moment when they decided to commit themselves to the student movements that were emerging on campus remain largely unarticulated. Only Rosa was able to say what the moment had been like for her and at best, she could only describe it as a gut-level tugging on her conscience. The larger lesson here? Just as it is relational, contextual, and emotional, the engagement in activism can also be instinctual. After encountering threshold people and their organizations, experiencing certain mobilizing events, enduring moral shocks, and being invited to act, there is but one simple choice that remains: to engage or remain on the sidelines.

Of all the dimensions outlined in the previous chapter, making the commitment to act is the one element that has defied a full characterization. Participants were unable to offer many details about what occurred during this particular moment (or moments). Why this was so, one can only speculate. Perhaps the choice to join the others in protest was so obvious, so straightforward there was no need for any kind of deliberation. Then again, it could be that the moment (or

moments) was full of so many emotions, thoughts, and expectations, that they were too difficult to put into words.

Future studies could explore this aspect of activism in further depth, focusing on a variety of questions:

- Is there such a thing as a single, definable moment when a college student determines he or she will become an activist?
- If there is, what kind of decision-making process comes into play?
- Do potential activists weight the pros and cons before they join a movement?
- What goes through their minds as they are making such determinations?
- How fully do they consider the consequences?
- Or do they ignore the idea consequences altogether?
- What kinds of stories do college students on the verge of joining a protest tell themselves about what lies ahead?

Exploring these kinds of questions would help shed light on what stands as an obscure, shadowed part of the overall process, one that is too important to let remain so. Without greater clarity and detail, we cannot move forward in our understanding of the internal motivations and considerations that college students go through in their determinations to create change.

### **Assuming Responsibility for the Movement**

In addition to all of the other lessons they have imparted, the life stories presented in this study also have something important to teach us about what it takes to conduct the actual work behind creating social change. More so than the propensity for rebellion, they have revealed, the engagement in activism requires a serious capacity for responsibility, to see that tasks both big and small are carried out as needed.

Earlier, we defined the roles participants played as that of social movement members, individuals who devote an inordinate amount of time to their activist causes, usually working behind the scenes to support them in whatever way

necessary. Social movement members are not generally considered leaders; they comprise the bulk of a movement's membership base and usually tackle duties as assigned. According to Esme, India, and their study counterparts, the work they undertook encompassed a wide variety of tasks including the drafting of newsletters, staging tours, serving as liaisons to other campus groups, and providing different kinds of administrative support.

While this study has provided some detail in regards to the kinds of work social movement members often undertake, it also highlights the need to explore further how student activists support and sustain the campus movements they help create. One of the most obvious questions that might be explored concerns the differences that exist between the type of work leaders take on and that of general members. How is the distribution of work defined in the first place? Further, who decides how the work is allocated? Other questions could include the following:

- In light of the stories of Rosa, Esme, and India rendered, what role does gender play in the kinds of work that are assigned to members?
- In what ways do the tasks that members undertake fuel the larger tasks and responsibilities of the movement, i.e. creating solidarity, raising awareness, or shaping public opinion?
- What might cross-case comparisons of student movements reveal about the kinds of work student activists engage in to create campus change?

Addressing these kinds of questions would allow us to understand further the inner workings of student activist organization and movements. They may also help to illuminate the relational dynamics that undoubtedly unfold between leaders and members alike.

### **Negotiating Challenges & Enduring Consequences**

Finally, the life stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm have critical lessons to impart about the challenges and consequences of actually being an

activist. As their stories made clear, joining a movement is only half of the battle when it comes to being an activist. The other half of the battle is learning to balance a series of other critical processes: how stay connected to the movement and its organizers when you would rather pull away; how to maintain a sense of relevance when you are no longer sure your efforts are making any kind of difference; how to continue believing that the movement and its people can achieve their aims when nothing seems to be going as planned; and eventually, how to pick up the pieces after the protest is over and everyone has gone home.

In Chapter Seven, we categorized these moments in the activism process as negotiating challenges and enduring consequences, terms that were meant to address the myriad of physical, psychological, intellectual, and social effects study participants endured both during and after their engagement in activism. Previous studies have only considered the long-term effects of engaging in activism and usually from the perspective of political orientation and civic participation (see Merton, 1968). As this study has revealed, however, there are significant short-term effects that merit further examination as well as longer-term effects that are physical, emotional, and educational in nature rather than simply political.

According to their stories, Web, Malcolm, Ennis and the other participants grappled with concerns about personal comfort and safety, unfulfilled expectations, and parental support and acceptance while they worked on behalf of their respective student movements. After these movements had disbanded, they contended with situations that included among others, poor grades, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, and bouts of keen frustration due to the lack of institutional responsiveness. Longer term, there were issues of burnout, impeded educational progress, and more positively, sophisticated changes in participants' understanding of conflict and how to create social change.

The range of challenges and consequences suggests that these particular moments deserve greater attention in future studies. With respect to negotiating challenges, we might explore questions such as:

- What kinds of coping skills or mechanisms do student activists employ when they encounter an unanticipated obstacle?
- Among the range of challenges that a student activist can face, which ones are the most difficult to contend with? Which are less difficult to overcome? Why?
- Are there certain types of challenges that prompt the abandonment of a movement? Are there others that harden a student's activist resolve?
- Do student activists supporting different causes endure the same challenges? Are there differences? Why do they exist? What do they tell us about the political cause at hand?

With respect to enduring consequences, we might ask questions like:

- What kind of consequences reduce the probability of further activist engagement?
- Are there others which heighten the probability of the future engagement in activism?

Not only would the exploration of these questions lend more insight into activism as a lived experience, but it could help us understand further where students derive their endurance and faith in a movement, how they manage risk, and ultimately what keeps them in the activist game.

### **Other Avenues for Research**

In addition to pursuing new lines of inquiry based specifically on the process presented in the previous chapter, there more broad-based studies that might be undertaken. Future studies, for example, could focus in greater depth on pre-college environments like home, the neighborhood, and school to refine our understanding of how these contexts influence or shape the engagement in activism. We know from study participants that these environments played a critical role in setting the stage for their activism by imparting important sensibilities related to agency, morality, and a shared purpose. Given the innovations and changes that have

occurred over time within these types of social institutions, it is likely that there are a range of family patterns, school climates, and neighborhood cultures to be considered. Perhaps there are altogether different types of hospitable spaces that prepare students for activism as well.

Future studies might also explore the role of religion and its influence on the engagement in activism. Although participants did not speak in great detail about their religious beliefs, it is telling that every single one of them was educated in Roman Catholic schools, both at the elementary and secondary grade levels. Rosa and Ennis, in particular, attended Jesuit Catholic high schools, a vein of Roman Catholicism known for its emphasis on social justice and service to others. The links between a student's religion or spirituality and his or her activism deserves further exploration.

Above all, the life stories of Rosa, Web, Esme, Ennis, India, and Malcolm have established the importance of collecting more stories about a college student's growth and development as an activist. Certainly, their narratives have broadened our perspectives of activism both as a process and as a lived experience. As noted before, however, these stories represent a small portion of the others that remain to be captured. The possibilities are limitless; studies could launch explorations of students of differing racial identities, families, economic status, educational backgrounds, college or university affiliation, and types of activism.

### **Creating New Generations of College Student Activists**

Now that the stories of Rosa Cortez, Web Murphy, Esme Rodriguez, Ennis Campbell, Malcolm Jones, and India Taylor have been recounted and examined for what they can tell us about the general process of becoming an activist, the question that remains is how these narratives might be used to inform the practice of creating new generations of college student activists. While it is beyond the scope of this work to define in detail what such an initiative and its attending programs would look

like, it is possible to outline what its core components might consist of, the necessary elements which ought to guide its construction.

### **A Peer-Based Element**

Clearly, any activist-oriented program or initiative would have to be peer-based, allowing its participants ample opportunity to meet, interact, and work in collaboration with other student activists. Of course, like the descriptions that participants rendered of their peers, these individuals would have to possess several important characteristics: 1) They would have to be actively engaged in community empowerment or social change initiatives; 2) They would also have to possess both a broad knowledge and political consciousness of the institutional systems and structures that perpetuate oppression and inequality; and 3) They would be committed to mentoring others students and helping them recognize their own capacity to create change.

To be sure, we could easily broaden our conceptions of threshold people to include others in addition to student peers. A full-scale activist initiative, for example, could provide access to a more expansive mix of people such as faculty, activists, community organizers, non-profit staff, volunteers, and social justice advocates, among others. While their specific roles and duties would vary, a central element of their practice would have to be related to cultivating an empowered oppositional consciousness among their student charges as well as an understanding of themselves as people of color.

### **An Identity-Based Element**

Our activist initiative would have to be identity-based as well. This is to say that its programs would have to accommodate a wide range of political causes and agendas which in some way reflect the varied and diverse backgrounds that today's undergraduates possess. According to political scientist Tony Robinson (2000), identity-based, social problems like racism and sexism are rarely addressed in

adequate measure by campus community service or service learning units because of their messy, conflict-ridden nature and the fact that their solutions require hard-core advocacy and political organizing. These types of political causes would be part of the typical curricular offerings around which student participants could organize their activist efforts.

Stated somewhat differently, this activist initiative would have to be guided by the central notion that because of the differences in how we define and understand ourselves, we can be called to different types of activist citizenship. As Web's and Esme's stories illustrated in particular, troubling questions of relevance and significance arise when members can no longer see themselves in the movement they have been supporting. Considerable attention would also have to be paid then to the individualization or customization of a student's activist program.

### **An Experiential Element**

Given the stories study participants rendered in relation to what were referred to as moral shocks or those unanticipated moments of personal outrage that resulted in the dramatic burgeoning of their political consciousness, our activist initiative would have to be experiential in nature too, allowing student participants to explore a political issue in an up-close and personal manner. The intent would be threefold: 1) to broaden their understanding of a particular political problem, beyond the typical means associated with policy analysis or scholarship; 2) to give them an opportunity to bring their emotions and their passion—two key elements of activism—to their social-change efforts; and 3) to ignite their resolve in establishing a more sustained commitment to working towards the problem's solution. The specific forms these types of experiences would take would most likely differ (internships, advocacy assignments, service opportunities, etc.); they would all be guided, however, by the common aim of engaging students in more than an intellectual, detached manner.

### **A Dynamic, Social Movement-Based Element**



Another important characteristic of this activist initiative would be its emphasis on dynamic and engaged change-making efforts as they occur in particular among activists, social movements and social movement organizations. As participants' stories made clear, the work they became engaged in required knowledge of recruiting tactics, protest strategies, conflict management, agenda framing, and conscious-raising, all key tools that social movements use to foster change.

This approach could also be tied to larger discussions and evaluations where students are given the opportunity to reflect and then define for themselves the movement roles they might best play. Study participants did not have the luxury of such reflection, of course. In most cases, their roles were predetermined for them. If they had, perhaps Rosa, Esme, India, and the other participants would not have been plagued by questions of relevance and efficacy to the degree that they were. Despite the varied nature of the work they carried out, their participation eventually took on a static, almost staid quality, one that defies what we know generally about how activists and social movements often pursue the work of social change.

According to political organizer and theorist Bill Moyers (1997), there are four interrelated roles activists and social movements must play in order to create the change they seek. First, they must be viewed as *good citizens* seeking the public good. Second, they are required to act as *rebels*, publicly calling attention to wrongdoings or social ills usually through some dramatic, direct action. Third, activists and their movements must take on the role of *change agent*, organizing people and promoting solutions with the specific intent of establishing a more participatory and democratic form of engagement in resolving the social issue at hand. And fourth, they have to assume the role of *reformers*, working to ensure that their goals are translated into official laws and policies.

A curriculum that specifically addressed the dynamic nature of these roles would not only foster a greater understanding of how social change is created but grant students the opportunity to consider their own abilities and skills as citizens, rebels, change agents, and reformers.

## **Advising & Counseling Elements**

Finally, our activist initiative would have advising and counseling functions in place that allow for authentic discussions of risk, commitment, and self-care. According to study participants, their engagement in activism wrought numerous consequences, most of them unanticipated and with significant implications for their educational progress, emotional stability, and overall sense of balance. If we expect students to develop enduring, life-long commitments to this form of citizenship, we will need to provide them with the interpersonal tools so that they can learn to balance their activist commitments with other salient life responsibilities like their educations, families or career aspirations.

How effective such an initiative would be remains to be determined. What should not be in question is its necessity. Clearly, civic life in America is no longer as vibrant or potent as it used to be. The signs have been with us for some time now: We live in culture permeated by radical individualism, where people pursue their own interests regardless of the costs to others (Bellah, et al., 1985); our large-scale social institutions no longer display the same power to encourage communal concern and collective responsibility as they once did (Bellah, et al., 1992); a defeatist ethos of cynicism and apathy has overtaken our commitment to an active, engaged citizenship (Daloz, et al., 1996; Loeb, 1999); and the civic and social organizations that used to mark American community life are no longer as pervasive or influential in bringing people together as they once were (Putnam, 2000).

The restoration of America's civic spirit—grand task that it is—requires us to try new, even unconventional approaches such as the one suggested here. Other, more traditional means of citizenship like voting, for example, have yet to pay the social or political dividends we need as democracy. Those who inhabit the role of activist represent a great deal of potential given their steadfast commitment to politically affirming ideals like justice and equity, not to mention their proven ability to create sweeping, historical social change. By all accounts, they best mirror the kind

of political commitment and engagement we sorely need to see more of in the world today.

## **Appendix A**

### **Letter of Introduction (Knowledge Informants)**

February 29, 2008

Name  
Street Address  
State  
Zip Code

Dear XXXX:

This letter comes to you from the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education where for several years I have been exploring the question of how young college students become activists. Understanding the process by which young people learn to translate their personal convictions into public, political action has been a long-standing interest of mine, in part, because of my own experience as an activist in college. More importantly, however, the question holds a particular salience for me because of its potential for revealing the ways in which young people might find meaning and purpose in cultivating a commitment to social change.

As the enclosed description of my work notes, I have decided to anchor my research specifically here at the University of Michigan. I have done so mainly because of the University's rich, storied tradition of activism that is believed to date back to the late 1800's. Drawing from three generations of students, I will be interviewing former and current Michigan undergraduates and gathering their life histories in the hopes of understanding how biography and history affect the making of an activist.

It has become readily apparent to me, however, that I need also to include the perspectives and stories from those who have witnessed the rise and fall of various student movements that have taken place on campus over the years. This is the main reason that I am writing to you today. I am hoping that you might be able to act as a knowledgeable informant, someone who can enrich and extend my understanding of student activism as it existed (and exists) at the University by providing your own views and perspectives of students who become activists, their attempts to create change, and the ways in which they have effected change on campus and within the larger society.

Essentially, your participation in this study would entail the following: 1) setting aside some time to talk with me about your experiences; and 2) being open to share your opinions and memories. The particulars (when, where, and how long we talk) will be completely determined by your schedule and availability.

I will be following up this letter with a phone call to you in the next week to see whether or not you are interested in sharing your memories and perspectives. In the meantime, should you have any questions, I can be reached by phone and e-mail listed on the bottom of this letter.

I hope that you will seriously consider this request for your participation.

I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Chris N. Navia

Enclosures: Study Overview  
Consent Form

**Appendix B**  
**Dissertation Overview**

## **Biography & Social Change: How Several Generations of University of Michigan Undergraduates Became Activists**

The central purpose of my dissertation is to gain a greater understanding of how young people of color—in their roles as college students—come to walk the path of activism: a dynamic course demarcated by politics, a desire to create lasting social change, and perhaps most importantly, the engagement in a collective struggle with others.

While there are a number of compelling reasons to undertake such a study, those that sustain my work are rooted in political and intellectual concerns about the escalating numbers of current college students who do not readily embrace politics or the idea of long-term political participation (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1999); the inability of scholars to go beyond analyses of self-interest and individual benefit to account for why people become activists (Mansbridge, 2002); and perhaps most importantly, the absence of narratives that focus on the social change efforts that young people of color have put forth in the name of more democratic and just educational and social institutions (Barlow, 1996). In short, my dissertation addresses a topic that has serious implications for democracy, our understanding of social change, and our knowledge of history.

Additionally, my work operates from a perspective that is not readily advanced in most analyses of higher education institutions and college students generally. That perspective honors the capacity of young students to dramatically and forcefully shape the colleges and universities they attend in fundamental and enduring ways. As Dey & Hurtado (1994) have noted, we tend to think of college students primarily as individuals to be acted upon and molded. Yet, as history has shown us time and again, they can be powerful sources of transformation and change all by themselves.

Ultimately, I believe that my work will contribute new knowledge by providing an understanding of how young college students of color cultivate their lives and identities as political beings. I also believe that my study will provide a different perspective of history, one that brings to the forefront the contributions and efforts of individuals who have struggled to create change in the name of justice, equity, and access. Finally, I believe that my inquiry into the process of becoming an activist will be instructive in showing others how to cultivate a commitment to the common good and how they can do so in the welter of their everyday lives.



## Central Research Questions

The main question to be explored is:

**How do students of color—in their own words—portray the experience of becoming an activist?**

Supporting this question are several subsidiary ones:

- What are the major influences that students of color cite as critical to their development as activists? What is the nature of these major influences?
- What are the experiences and stories that provide a context for understanding the activist development of students of color?

## Guiding Concepts

To date, there is no extant theoretical framework that specifically addresses the process by which individuals (young or old) become activists. As such, my dissertation is guided instead by several core theoretical concepts that have been drawn from the work of sociologists C. Wright Mills (1959), Herbert Blumer (1969), and Joseph Kling.

According to Mills, our lives emerge from the confluence of biography and history. They are marked by the generations we are born into, the mores and values of the societies we inhabit, and the continual “push and shove” of history (p. 6, 1959). This is why, Mills argued, those practicing the craft of social science must try to understand men and women not simply as private individuals but as “historical and social actors,” people within whose lives the making of history and societies occur (p. 225, 1959). Mills’ idea is reflected in my study most specifically in its emphasis upon both biography and history. I will be looking at the biographical, historical, and social circumstances that inform the process by which a student of color becomes an activist.

A second core concept that informs my work is based on the scholarship of Herbert Blumer (1969) and his methodological position of symbolic interactionism. Blumer argues that to fully understand how and why human beings behave they way they do, we have to understand first and foremost how they create meaning around the objects that comprise their world. Studies of human behavior (of any sort) then, have to take into consideration the process by which meaning is created. Most importantly, he claims, scholars have to examine that process of meaning-making through the eyes of those they study. This requires a form of inquiry that is naturalistic, qualitative and which give primary emphasis to human experience. Based

on the work of Blumer, the methodological approach I have fashioned for my study is qualitative and also emphasizes meaning-making, interpretation, and experience.

The other guiding concept that informs my work is drawn from Joseph Kling's (1995) work on social movements. According to Kling, stories and narratives are central to understanding how people come to take part in social movements; they reflect the deepest ways people understand who they are and to whom they are connected. Any study of social movements and those who participate in them then, must collect and examine the tales and narratives that people tell themselves about the nature of their lives. Based on King's idea, I have fashioned a research approach that recognizes the prominence of story telling as the way people naturally communicate and represent their experience.

### **Research Design**

Utilizing a multigenerational approach, I will conduct life history interviews with six former and current students of color who became activists while attending the University of Michigan. These college student activists will be drawn from three different eras: the 1960s/1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s/2000s. They will be identified through a "snowball" or "chain" sampling technique as well as the solicitation of recommendations from a panel of University faculty, staff, and administrators that have been characterized as knowledgeable about student activism and activists at Michigan.

There are several reasons for utilizing such a research design. First and foremost, this kind of design allows me to attend to both biography and history while also simplifying several important tasks: 1) identifying student activists; 2) chronicling all of the protests, demonstrations and other important events that took place; and 3) defining the key political issues about which students were concerned. In short, people, events, and issues are more clear-cut and easier to pinpoint.

Additionally, the research design allows me to examine different eras and make comparisons across generations. In doing so, I can examine the salient question of impact and the kinds of personal, institutional, and societal changes that student engagement in political and social activism produces. Furthermore, it also provides me with the opportunity to map out the legacy of activism that has been cultivated by Michigan undergraduates of color and witness not only the process by which these students move into activism differs across generations but how the process of making change may differ for them over time as well. There may be a whole host of insights to be developed about the kinds of tactics and strategies students of color learn to adopt, how they organize themselves, and the ways in which University officials respond to their activist efforts. Such insights would provide a fuller understanding of the work involved in creating change within the University and the challenges students of color face in transforming it.

Finally, the University of Michigan is chosen as the study site because of its long, storied tradition of college student activism. Since the late 1800s, University undergraduates have championed a wide range of political and social causes, including free speech, civil rights, and more recently, multiculturalism (Peckham, 1994). Michigan's impressive base of student movements, social and political organizations, groups, and causes make it a well suited background for a qualitative study because there are a "rich mix" of people and interactions to examine (Marshall & Rossman, p. 51, 1995). Situating the study in a single setting like the University of Michigan also allows for a more in-depth analysis of how a particular context can affect the process of becoming an activist.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to the non-fiction writer, Philip Gerard (1996), the topics that we choose to write about have what he calls an "apparent subject" and a "deeper subject" (p. 7). The apparent subject is in the facts; it is all of the details and particulars that provide a basis for understanding whatever is being written about. In contrast, the deeper subject reveals the larger, more profound truths about the world and the way human beings behave.

This study also has an apparent subject and a deeper subject. On the one hand, the inquiry that I intend to undertake is concerned with process, what Becker (1998) has described as a sense of "...first this happened, then that happened, and then the other happened and it ended up like this" (p. 61). I want to know what steps are involved in becoming an activist of color and all of the things that students of color experience in making the leap from private citizen to public activist. This is the study's apparent subject.

The study's deeper subject is what it may reveal about more generally about human political behavior and the ways in which we come to define our capacity to shape history. In his book, Making History, sociologist Richard Flacks (1988) argues that, for the most part, Americans deliberately choose not to enact their ability to shape the course and content of history. The most fundamental expression of the American unwillingness to make history, he claims, is found in our firm commitment to private life and personal fulfillment.

Thus, the deeper subject of my study is also what renders it significant. In examining how students of color become activists we may be able to learn important lessons that can later serve to show others how to cultivate a critical political consciousness and formulate lives that are more communal, democratic and participatory. It may also highlight avenues that social institutions, like colleges and universities, can take in furthering democratic, participatory citizenship among its undergraduates.

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## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Protocol (Faculty, Staff or Administrators)**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Faculty, Staff, Administrators

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#### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

- ❑ Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school/college? How was it that you came to Michigan?
- ❑ Can you briefly chronicle for me the extent of your tenure at University of Michigan? In all, how many years have you been at Michigan? What positions have you held?

#### MEMORIES OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS & STUDENT ACTIVISM

- ❑ Of all the political and social causes University students have championed and the movements and organizations that have emerged on the Michigan campus over time, which ones stand out in your memory? Why do they stand out so prominently in your memory? What made them memorable for you?

Probes: Did you play a role in any of these movements?  
Are there others?

- ❑ What—if any—kinds of interaction did you have with student of color activists on campus? How about students of color generally?
- ❑ Did any of the student activism that took place on campus during these periods result in any tangible, lasting change? Has it been beneficial or detrimental?

Probes: Specifically, how did students of color efforts to change the University fare? What changed? (Policies, procedures, norms, values, climate...)

- ❑ Given the University's rich tradition of student activism on campus, do you think there is something about this institution that inspires students to engage in activism? How else would you account for its long tradition?

#### SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

These questions would be directly related to the role of the individual being interviewed and what was known about them prior to the interview. One panel member, for example, participated in the first campus teach-ins about Vietnam. The

specific questions for that individual focused on teach-ins as well as faculty participation in other movements on campus and how they interacted with students.

### **GENERAL OPINIONS OF ACTIVISM & ACTIVISTS**

- What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word “student activist”? Does a particular kind of student come to mind automatically for you? What characteristics does he/she possess?
- Does student activism have a place in the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is the nature of that place and those students?

### **WRAP-UP**

- Are there any questions that you wished I had asked?
- Can you suggest other people I might talk to about this topic?
- Are there any other sources—books, reports—I might consult for more information?



## **Appendix D**

### **Consent for Study Participation (Activists)**

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A DISSERTATION STUDY

### **Biography & Social Change: How Several Generations of University of Michigan Undergraduates Became Activists**

Christine N. Navia

Center for the Study of Higher & Postsecondary Education  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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The purpose of this study is to develop a greater understanding of how young college students transform themselves from private citizens to public political and social activists. This study is being conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation on college student activism and social change in higher education.

Your participation in this study will be in the form of one-on-one interviews with me where I will ask you to reflect upon and talk about student activism as it has occurred on the University of Michigan campus over the last three decades. You will determine the scope and nature of our one-on-one interviews; thus, you need only discuss what you feel comfortable sharing. These interviews will take place at your convenience and should require no more than an hour of your time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in it. Any time that you care to, you can withdraw your participation. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. No foreseeable physical risks or discomforts are expected to result from your participation in this study.

With your permission, our conversations will be recorded through the use of an audiotape recorder. However, you are free to stop the recording of it any time you choose to do so. Additionally, you can decline to answer any question I put forth. In the instances where you request that the tape recorder not be used, I will take notes.

Given the fact that this study is bound by particular time periods and deals with specific events and episodes that took place on campus, I am not able to fully ensure your complete confidentiality. I will provide you, however, with an audiotaped copy of the interview so that you have for your own records, a detailed copy of our conversation.

All of the data collected in this study (namely the audiotapes and transcripts) will be kept for future research. Control of and access to these materials will rest solely in my hands.

Should you need further information about this study, you can contact me, Christine N. Navia by phone at (734) 996-8688 or by e-mail at [naviac@umich.edu](mailto:naviac@umich.edu). Additionally, should you have any questions about this study's approval or your rights as a study participant, you can contact the University of Michigan's IRB main administrator, Kate M. Keever, by phone at (734) 936-0933 or by e-mail at [IRB-Behavsci-Health@umich.edu](mailto:IRB-Behavsci-Health@umich.edu).

Your signature indicates that you understand everything that has been stated above and that you voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

---

Signature Date

---

Printed Name

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview recorded on an audiotape. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

---

Signature Date

---

Printed Name

## **Appendix E**

### **Letter of Introduction (Former Student Activists)**

February 29, 2008

Name  
Street Address  
State  
Zip Code

Dear XXXX:

This letter comes to you from the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education where for several years I have been exploring the question of how young college students of color become activists. It is a question borne out of my personal experience as a student of color activist and my desire to highlight the ways in which young people might find meaning and purpose in cultivating a commitment to social change and the public good.

In retrospect, my own development into a budding activist was influenced by a number of important forces. These included the kind of family I grew up in, the people I came to call my friends, and my status as a person of color in a predominately white educational environment. Unfortunately, I cannot make any legitimate claims about how other students of color become activists based on my own idiosyncratic experiences.

This is the main reason that I am writing to you. I am hoping that you might be able to help me develop a fuller understanding of how undergraduates of color learn to become agents of social change by allowing me the opportunity to interview you about your own days as a student activist at the University of Michigan and your life in general.

Essentially, your participation in this study would entail the following: 1) setting aside some time to talk with me about your experiences; 2) being open to share your life story; and 3) filling out the enclosed questionnaire. The particulars (when, where, and how long we talk) will be completely determined by your schedule and availability.

In order for you to make an informed decision as to whether or not you would like to participate, I have enclosed several documents which clearly outline the intent of my work and detail your rights as a participant in my study. I will be following up this letter with a phone call to you in the next week to see whether or not you are interested in sharing your story. In the meantime, should you have any questions, I can be reached by phone and e-mail listed on the bottom of this letter.

One important note: You're probably wondering how I obtained your name. I was given it by XXX who thought you would be a good person to contact.

I hope that you will seriously consider this request for your participation. The actions and efforts that you put forth in your college days are an important part of the University's history and a critical element in the legacy of activism that continues on campus today. In sharing your stories and experiences, you can provide a vital perspective of how a young person heeds the call to create change and in the process, help today's young people learn to do the same.

I look forward to meeting you.

Peace,

Chris N. Navia

Born: 1970, Chicago, IL. Schools: B.A. Carleton College, 1992; M.A. University of Michigan, 1997. Publications: With Sylvia Hurtado, Reconciling College Access and the Affirmative Action Debate, 1997. With Kenneth P. Gonzalez, et al., Critical Reflections of Latino/a Doctoral Student Experiences: Toward a New Reality for Latino/a Academics, (forthcoming).

Enclosures: Study Overview  
Consent Form  
Questionnaire

**Appendix F**  
**Questionnaire**

## QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather some basic background information about you as well as capture some of the essential aspects of your activism. The information that you provide will be used both for descriptive purposes and to help me prepare for our one-on-one interviews. Please add comments wherever you feel it is appropriate.

Every item of information that you provide will be kept confidential and you will never be identified. I encourage you to fill out as much of the questionnaire as possible. You are free, however, to skip over or leave blank those items for which you do not care to supply a response.

---

**I. Contact Information: The information gathered here will be used to contact you to set up our interviews and send you copies of transcripts and write-ups.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Best time/Place to reach you: Time \_\_\_\_\_

Place \_\_\_\_\_

**II. Demographic Information: The information gathered here will be used to put together basic profiles of the people taking part in my study.**

Racial/Ethnic Background: \_\_\_\_\_

Estimated Annual Income: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Political Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Present Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Educational Degree Received to Date \_\_\_\_\_



**III. University of Michigan Information:** The information gathered here will be used in comparisons of older cohorts of U-M activists to younger cohorts of U-M activists.

Year Began at U-M: Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Year Graduated from U-M (or intend to graduate) \_\_\_\_\_

Cumulative Grade Point Average: \_\_\_\_\_

**IV. Starting Points/Initial Influences:** The following questions are intended to establish an understanding of how you first became involved in activism, what started you on that path and those individuals or experiences that were responsible for introducing you to the idea of working with other students to make change on campus. Please add comments where you feel it is appropriate.

1. Rank the following individuals or groups responsible in terms of their influence on your initial desire to become involved in campus activist efforts.

Parents \_\_\_\_\_

Friends \_\_\_\_\_

Minister, priest or rabbi \_\_\_\_\_

Organization that you belonged to \_\_\_\_\_

Name of the organization:

Religious group \_\_\_\_\_

Spokespeople/leaders of student movement or protest \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty member \_\_\_\_\_

University staff member \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate Student \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe:

2. What was the first political rally, protest, demonstration, sit-in, or strike in which you participated? What was its purpose? What role did you play (observer, spokesperson, coordinator)? What year of college were you in at the time?

3. What were the major political and social issues that existed around the time you started considering the idea of becoming politically active?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. If you can, please list those books, ideas, political philosophies, courses, or classroom experiences that were instrumental in prompting you to think about the possibility of becoming an activist.

**V. Before & After:** This next set of questions is aimed at understanding how your engagement in activism changed you in terms of your political values and beliefs, your perceptions of the University, and perhaps most importantly, your perceptions of yourself as an individual.

1. What five adjectives would you use to describe yourself **before** you became an activist?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What five adjectives would you use to describe yourself **after** you became an activist?

3. Please circle the number that best characterizes your political viewpoint:

	<b>Radical Right</b>			<b>Moderate</b>				<b>Radical Left</b>		
Before becoming an activist	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
After becoming an activist	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Please check the response that best describes the effect of your activism on your perceptions of the University of Michigan as:

	<b>Lowered My Estimate</b>	<b>Raised My Estimate</b>	<b>Perceptions Remain Unchanged</b>
...a welcoming place	_____	_____	_____
...a supportive environment	_____	_____	_____
...a fair institution	_____	_____	_____
...a just institution	_____	_____	_____
...committed to students of color	_____	_____	_____
...a socially responsible institution	_____	_____	_____
...committed to diversity	_____	_____	_____
...student-centered	_____	_____	_____

5. Under the appropriate box, please check (✓) the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Not Applicable
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

My activism has affected the choice of who I married (intend to marry).    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_

My activism has affected my choice of career.    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_

My activism has affected my choice of my college major.    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_

My activism has affected the loyalty I have for the University of Michigan.    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_    \_\_\_

6. Please check the response that best describes the effect of your activism on your perceptions of yourself as:

	<b>Lowered My Estimate</b>	<b>Raised My Estimate</b>	<b>Perceptions Remain Unchanged</b>
...accepting of authority	___	___	___
...pessimistic about the prospects of creating lasting change	___	___	___
...independent-minded	___	___	___
...possessing a strong sense of agency	___	___	___
...optimistic about the prospects of creating lasting change	___	___	___

...responsible for the democracy in which I live	_____	_____	_____
...a legitimate member of the University community	_____	_____	_____
...a leader	_____	_____	_____
...capable of shaping history	_____	_____	_____
...responsible for my own destiny	_____	_____	_____

**VI. Activities: This final set of questions deals with the kinds of political and social efforts you may have been involved as a college student activist. Feel free to add comments wherever you think it appropriate.**

1. Please list all of the political or movement organizations you have joined as a U-M student.

## **Appendix G**

### **Consent for Study Participation Form (Knowledgeable Informants)**

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A DISSERTATION STUDY

### **Biography & Social Change: How Several Generations of University of Michigan Undergraduates Became Activists**

Christine N. Navia  
Center for the Study of Higher & Postsecondary Education  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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The purpose of this study is to develop a greater understanding of how young college students transform themselves from private citizens to public political and social activists. This study is being conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation on college student activism and social change in higher education.

Your participation in this study will be in the form of one-on-one interviews with me where I will ask you to recount your life history, paying particular attention to your undergraduate days at the University of Michigan and your role as a student activist. You will determine the scope and nature of our one-on-one interviews; thus, you need only discuss what you feel comfortable sharing. These interviews will take place at your convenience and should require from 1.5 to 2 hours of your time.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in it. Any time that you care to, you can withdraw your participation. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. No foreseeable physical risks or discomforts are expected to result from your participation in this study.

With your permission, our conversations will be recorded through the use of an audiotape recorder. However, you are free to stop the recording of it any time you choose to do so. Additionally, you can decline to answer any question I put forth. In the instances where you request that the tape recorder not be used, I will take notes.

All of the information you provide during the interviews will remain confidential except as may be required by federal, state, or local law. Your name will never be linked to any subsequent write-ups related to this study. All of the data to be collected in this study (namely the audiotapes and transcripts) will be kept for future research. Control of and access to these materials will rest solely in my hands.

Should you need further information about this study, you can contact me, Christine N. Navia by phone at (734) 996-8688 or by e-mail at [naviac@umich.edu](mailto:naviac@umich.edu).

Additionally, should you have any questions about this study's approval or your rights as a study participant, you can contact the University of Michigan's IRB main administrator, Kate M. Keever, by phone at (734) 936-0933 or by e-mail at IRB-Behavsci-Health@umich.edu.

Your signature indicates that you understand everything that has been stated above and that you voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

---

Signature Date

---

Printed Name

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview recorded on an audiotape. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

---

Signature Date

---

Printed Name



## **Appendix H**

### **Interview Protocol (Former Student Activists)**

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Former & Current Student Activists**

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#### **PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

- ❑ Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Have you lived in the same place all your life? What kind of neighborhood did you live in?
- ❑ Tell me about your family...Do you have any brothers & sisters? Where do you fall in the birth order? How would you describe your parents? What do they do for living? How would you characterize your home environment?
- ❑ Where did you go to high school? What was the best part of high school? What was the worst part? Were you involved in any political groups or community service organizations as a high schooler? Looking back over those years, what do you think you learned about yourself?
- ❑ How was it that you came to Michigan? Did you apply to other places? Was Michigan your first choice? What was it about Michigan that drew you to it?
- ❑ What were your initial plans for college? What did you want to make of your time here? What did you think the experience would be like? How well have your expectations been met?

#### **INITIAL STARTING POINTS**

- ❑ Did you ever expect to become an activist? Did you expect that one day you would be taking part in something like (name student movement or organization)?
- ❑ Before you came to Michigan, did you think of yourself as a political person, someone who worked on social issues, would be an activist?
- ❑ Did you or your friends ever talk about social or political issues in high school?

#### **PATH TO ACTIVISM**

- ❑ Can you walk me through the steps that led to your transformation from (however they described themselves earlier) to an activist? What were some of the biggest influences on this transformation?

- ❑ What was the transition like for you? Was it difficult? Easy? In what way(s)? How did others in your life, like your parents and close friends, for example, react to the way you were changing? Were they supportive? Unsupportive? Who did you look to for guidance or support at this time?
- ❑ What were some of the challenges involved in becoming an activist? Did the process affect other areas of your life? How so?
- ❑ Was there a specific turning point, a defining moment where you just felt compelled to get involved? Or was the transition more gradual?
- ❑ Of all the movements, organizations, and causes to support, why did you get involved in the one(s) that you did? What was it about that particular movement/organization/cause that made you want to work on its behalf? Which others did you participate in? Why?
- ❑ What was the most important political event you participated in?

### **WRAP-UP**

- ❑ Are there any questions that you wished I had asked?
- ❑ Can you suggest other people I might talk to about this topic?
- ❑ Are there any other sources—books, reports—I might consult for more information?

## **Appendix I**

### **Interview Index Information Sheet**

## INFORMATION SHEET

Biography & Social Change Project  
University of Michigan  
Center for the Study of Higher & Postsecondary Education

**General Topic(s) of the Interview:** The path to activism; how a young person of color develops a political consciousness and then translates that consciousness into public action. The life story of a 21 year-old Mexican American woman and her participation in the takeover of the Michigan Union Tower in 2001.

**NARRATOR:** Rosa Cortez (pseudonym)  
**DATE:** November 2, 2001

**INTERVIEWER:** Chris N. Navia  
**PLACE:** University of Michigan  
Undergraduate Library

### PERSONAL DATA

Age: 21 Parents: Mom, writer  
Siblings: One brother, 17 years old Dad, doctor  
Home: Chicago, Illinois Currently separated

### BIOGRAPHY

At the time this interview was conducted, Rosa was in her senior year at Michigan. She was majoring in three subjects: anthropology, American culture, and English. She was scheduled to graduate from Michigan in May of 2002 and thinking about applying to graduate schools to study anthropology. She was one of 12 students of color who took part in the Tower Takeover, an attempt to oust the contentious secret honor society Michigamua from its meeting place. The interview captures Rosa in life a little less than a year later.

### INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

This interview speaks to the relational aspect of student activism. Rosa grounds her desire to become an activist and her actual doing so in what she learns and has been taught by others, namely her parents and several older classmates. She was quite reflective and open about her activism. One gets the sense that she spent time really examining her actions and trying to find meaning in them. The interview with Rosa also speaks to the negative consequences of student participation in activism, both academically and psychologically. Rosa was very forthcoming about the difficulty of maintaining her grades and also feeling safe on campus. She appears in this interview

to have emerged from the dark aftermath a much stronger and self-aware young woman.

## INTERVIEW INDEX

Biography & Social Change Project  
University of Michigan  
Center for the Study of Higher & Postsecondary Education

**NARRATOR:** Rosa Cortez

**INTERVIEWER:** Chris N. Navia

Place: University of Michigan  
Undergraduate Library  
2<sup>nd</sup> floor, group study room

Number of tapes: 1  
Number of sides: 2  
Length of tape: 90 minutes

Date: November 2, 2001

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### Counter

Side	Number	Topic of Discussion
1	002	Introductions
1	009	Birthplace and birthdate
1	010	Growing Up: Different Residences Logan Square, Chicago (until age 6) Oak Park, Chicago Southern Illinois Suburb of Chicago City proper
1	026	Neighborhoods: Once in the city Big commute to high school (train + bus) Very few young people; not very interesting; lived on cul de sac; hard to make any friends
1	030	Friendships Made friends with the kids who shared the same commute to high school; had some friends in the city but the commute made it difficult to take them any further; largely middle-class, white, suburban kids; felt like she was missing out on the "urban experience"

1      044      Family  
                         Parents are currently separated  
                         Shares a close relationship with her younger brother

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