

Title: Partying in a Progressive La-La Land

Narration: As a black queer woman coming to Brown, I didn't think I would need much help in assimilating. I'm from Oakland, a diverse and liberal city in California. But I've always gone to small mostly white private schools, so I'm very used to constantly being around a lot of white people. As a first year, adjusting to Brown's workload has been somewhat manageable, but assimilating into the party scene has been more complicated than I expected. In my opinion, Brown's party scene is very much segregated by race and I've noticed that this is something that's not really talked about. The discomfort I felt and the questions that emerged from exploring Brown's party scene motivated me to talk the students who frequent these various party spaces. I talked fellow to freshmen, upperclassmen, a member of Brown's black fraternity (Beta Omega Chi), as well an Asian-American athlete on Brown's track team to gain insight into Brown's party scene.

The first Brown party I went to was an off campus event at a club called the Colosseum. I went off with newfound friends from my floor, excited by the novelty of the situation. A short Uber and a long wait in line later, I found my way into the Colosseum. The club was a large and open dance-floor, crowded with a sea of bodies, that bobbed in sync to the music.

The space was lit with purple and pink lights, with a bar on one side and a stage with speakers on the other. There were splashes of people of color scattered throughout the dancefloor, but it was clear that the event was mostly white. The two DJ's, two white guys, played mostly top 40 pop music, with early 2000's hip hop thrown in every thirty minutes or so. As soon as I walked in and started dancing, I immediately felt hyper-aware of my identity more so than I had in recent memory. I was used to being surrounded by mostly white people. But, being in a crowded space with white people I didn't know felt almost suffocating.

After that experience, I had more of a desire to find party spaces with other people of color. Because of it's reputation as a positive party space, the next party I went to was a Harambe House party. Harambe is a residential space designated for Black identifying students at Brown. The party took place in the Harambe House lounge, a small room with lots of windows. The music played was a mix of rap, hip-hop and dancehall. The space consisted of mostly people of color, who were very comfortable in dancing and hyping each other up. Harambe definitely lived up to it's reputation of being a fun space with good music, in which I could be somewhat care free. At Harambe, I felt less restricted and "watched" than I had felt in other party spaces at Brown.

I talked to other freshmen to see what they thought about Harambe parties.

D: But like Harambe House, the party was very diverse there were a lot of different people there. I also probably felt like it was the most fun in my opinion.

A: Harambe house is always a very comfortable environment for me. In terms of my own body, much safer there than at like a sports party.

E: No one feels awkward going there even if you're not a student of color. Like nobody cares. Everyone just wants to have a good time.

N: However, even in having a good time at Harambe, I thought about how some of the people I choose to associate with are white and showed signs of discomfort in going to a party space clearly meant for people of color. And, although Harambe is a very welcoming environment, I began to question what it meant for me to bring white people there and whether that was problematic on my part. To understand more about the significance of Harambe as a party space, I talked to a friend who identifies as a Black male and is a part of Beta Omega Chi, Brown's black fraternity which also occasionally throws parties.

K: A place like Harambe and even Olney House, which is where my frat is, they're black spaces, you know it's a black frat and that's a black residential space, but a lot of our parties actually are multiracial. And, you know it's a good thing because you get to meet different people and such. But, also there are times where we're throwing a party out of protest from other parties and other spaces. We have limited space, it might not even be a widespread invitation and we just have other people who don't identify as black entering the space, and it does change the dynamic. You know, we just feel as though, other parties aren't inclusive towards us, so let's have our space. And if our space is now said to be automatically inclusive, then we just feel as though we have nothing that is our own.

N: Even at a space where I had a good time, race continued to play a role in my partying experience.

The next party that I attended was a sports party. Walking into a sports party was the party experience that reinforced for me that there are in fact racial divides at Brown parties. In one of the first few weeks, in a point of the night where you're willing to go just about anywhere, I ended up wandering the party, in an attempt to track down some straggling friends. I vividly remember walking into the house and being overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who remained somewhat still. It was ridiculously crowded and hot, and country music played in the background behind the chatter. It took me a moment to register that I didn't notice any other non-white people in the room. But at the moment of this realization, I walked out with much more intention than with I had walked in. Again, I talked to my friends to understand how they viewed Brown's sports parties.

J: I'm like completely stereotyping but like, sports that I associate with like douchey white boys, like lacrosse, I wouldn't necessarily want to spend a bunch of time in that house because I would associate it with more like fratty behavior.

K: Now I've gone to sports parties and once again I felt comfortable, I liked the music, I liked the atmosphere, but that was because I knew people. I could imagine people who didn't know people associated with the sports team, who might not feel as comfortable.

D: On the end of the spectrum towards like no diversity: the sports parties that I've been to were just like all white students.

A: I don't even know if it's just because it looks like this stereotype when you go to a sports party, but it ends up being the closest Brown comes to having your like stereotypical college, fratty party of mostly like white males just looking to get laid in a very heteronormative way.

B: This halloween, I was wearing a dress, and it was like the first time that I was wearing a dress in public. And it was really liberating and I'm super comfortable at Brown and I felt like I could do that. But I went to like the sports houses and I jokingly turned to my friend and was like, "Do you think I'll get beat up for like wearing this costume?" And I know I won't, or I probably won't but here still is that sort of fear.

N: Realizing that my friends and I aren't people who go to sports parties often, I talked to another fellow freshmen, an Asian-American female thrower on Brown's track team, to better understand the racial makeup of sports parties.

M: I personally don't think that my identity affects the how I party, but I do definitely never see any asians when I'm partying there are very few asian athletes. And I think that a lot of times, I'm not that comfortable with it.

N: Some may say that my partying experience at Brown don't warrant negative feelings towards certain kinds of parties. Maybe my level of sobriety on certain occasions left me hyperaware. However, I believe there is something to be said about the fact that the racial dynamics at Brown's parties can have such an impact on my experience. I became eager to know if my peers noticed some of these same divides and if they had explanations for them.

D: I would say there is a little bit of self segregation, definitely not intentionally, it's just a thing that kind of occurs.

K: I would say people segregate based on race, just as they segregate based on gender, just as they segregate based on what classes they share. People segregate based off of comfortability, and at parties it's the same. Parties are a space where you can be a bit vulnerable. You would want to be with people who will keep you safe and who are looking out for your best interest.

S: I just think that the idea of being at a party with people who are like you is extremely comforting. And like, if that's sort of segregating yourself, then fine. If it's for a safe reason, if you feel like you won't be safe, if you feel like you won't be safe in an environment with mixed people, if you feel like you're going to be constantly triggered, with silly ass microaggressions,

then yeah, self segregate. It should not up to people of color to like go to a party just so like it's diverse and shit. If you're going to self segregate, you're going to do it because you'll have a better time with these people and it's just something that you have to do for yourself. It's a little bit of self-care, I think.

P: In terms of parties that I was describing before, where they tend to be predominately white, is like that people of color note that and like then their friends note that and then they don't go to those parties because they don't feel comfortable. And it's kind of just like this cycle where like nothing's going to change because like you don't want to be the first person do that and be uncomfortable.

M: I totally understand why people want to be in the same spaces where they feel comfortable and why they want to segregate. And it sucks that it's like that, but there's a reason and it's because people do dumb stuff. And i just think, if people aren't willing to have these conversations, like really honestly, while they're out instead of over a text book in Tricia Rose's "How Structural Racism Works" class, then nothing is going to change.

N: The solution to these racial divides that first came to mind for me was the idea of creating more integrated party spaces at Brown in which everyone could feel comfortable. However, the more I thought about it, I wondered if this was really the best solution. What would it take to have intentionally integrated party spaces at Brown? And would integrating lead to the erasure of party spaces made for marginalized groups?

B: Of course I'd like to see a more integrated party space, but at the same time, I'm not going to complain because at the end of the day, if everybody's happy, it doesn't really matter to me who they party with and I don't think you should force people to have to interact with people they don't want to.

P: I'm really not looking to have a more integrated party scene. I'm satisfied with the racial makeup of the parties I have attended, I would love to see them be more fun and I don't know exactly what that would take.

J: I think that when you only hang out with people of your race, it's not necessarily a good thing, but I don't think there's any inherent issue in POC wanting to surround themselves with POC. I don't know if I'll be able to justify this, but I know in my head that white people only wanting to hang out with white people is definitely problematic, but like, I think it's important for POC to have a support system of people with shared experiences. So, I don't think that's a bad thing.

B: Yeah, it's a weird place, at a liberal minded university where you know and recognize and sometimes even study your actions and the way in which you ignore certain groups of people or don't identify with other people. It's one thing to study it, it's another thing to actually actively enact change in your life.

M: Brown needs to stop think we're this progressive la-la-land where everything is ok. Because that mentality of being in this seemingly liberal accepting school gives a lot of people a get out of jail free card to those who are being exclusive, like, ending the night thinking they aren't doing anything wrong.

N: In my short time at Brown, I've had a number of positive partying experiences in which I felt completely comfortable and have honestly started to fall into a natural groove. As someone who has gotten over the initial uncertainty of coming to a new place, but who is still relatively new to this campus, I can't help but wonder how my racial identity will continue to affect my partying experience over the next four years. So, I talked to some older Brown students, one who identifies as a queer Indian woman as well as a queer white man, to see how their partying experience has evolved over their time at Brown.

M: I feel like when I go out now, I'm just going to places where I know the people who own the house or who's throwing the party. That kind of dynamic plays into the fact that when you get older at Brown, you become less willing to enter spaces that you're not comfortable in. I'm still not around nearly as many people that I identify closely to. I would be happier being in certain spaces with more people of color or more queer people, but I find it so much harder this year than last year to find new spaces, because people start getting more and more closed off. And it's natural, you're living with people and you have more intimate gatherings with people I guess.

B: Most of the parties I attend are white, and it's not this intentional thing it's just, I found a group of friends, freshman year, and obviously that group has changed, but, I think you actually have to make an active effort to have a diverse friend group at Brown, because if you don't, I know this is the case for me, and I regret it, but I just woke up one day and was like, "wow, 90% of the people I hang out with everyday are privileged white kids." As I enter the career world, I really hope to like work in an environment or meet other friends who aren't part of this homogenized group, because to be honest, I'm like really sick of my friend group, uh, by senior year.

N: I don't mean to say that everything is terrible or that Brown parties are heading towards a state of impending doom. But if we think about the fundamental reasons why we party, it's because we want to let off steam, forget our everyday lives and relax. The fact that there are racial divides in a place where everybody is supposed to have a good time underscores the serious racial divides in other aspects of our everyday lives, that affects all of our environments, some more than others. And in a time where tensions surrounding race are especially high in this country, acknowledging these divides within our own experiences is essential to ever being able to truly confront them.