

**Experiences with diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces
of Erasmus University's campus**

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“When we have to think strategically, we also have to accept our complicity: we forgo any illusions of purity; we give up the safety of exteriority. If we are not exterior to the problem under investigation, we too are the problem under investigation. Diversity work is messy, even dirty, work” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102).

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the experiences of students of color with diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces of Erasmus University's campus. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Sara Ahmed's concept of non-performative diversity, this study explores how diversity and inclusion policies often function as a marketing strategy that maintain rather than disrupt existing power structures. The campus, conceptualized as a white space, embodies an institutional culture that privileges whiteness, creating the image of a white universal norm. Students of color are then rendered as 'bodies out of place,' seen as a diversity problem that needs to be 'solved.' Through interviews with students of color from Erasmus University, this thesis argues that they are positioned as the embodiment of diversity, placed within a specific box to meet the university's diversity agenda. By focusing on 'difference' as a means to celebrate diversity, the university effectively maintains exclusionary practices, as it does not challenge white normative standards. To explore these concepts, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students of color from Erasmus University. The interviews were interpreted using a thematic analysis. The findings show how students of color are burdened with the responsibility to address conversations of race and racism, all while navigating spaces that remain deeply racialized. The students also reported that diversity and inclusion policies are superficial and exclusionary, often centered around gender diversity while neglecting an intersectional perspective that recognizes the material realities of race and other identities.

KEYWORDS: diversity, universities, nonperformativity, racism, white space

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2024, students gathered on the campus of Erasmus University, protesting the university's ties with Israeli universities. Initially starting out as a small protest, it quickly evolved into a space where students came together to share knowledge, food, arts and crafts, and kindness in solidarity with Palestine. For the following days, students renamed Erasmus Food Plaza into Shireen Abu Akleh Square, to honor and remember the Palestinian journalist who is known for her time covering the Palestinian resistance. However, after eleven days, the university sent riot police and arrest vans to evict the students from the square to make space for a Wellbeing festival. Erasmus University, which prides itself on its 'positive societal impact,' regarded the students as outsiders within their own campuses, constantly reminding them of their provisional status in otherwise white spaces (Duran et al., 2022). The campus, where students learn, build relationships, study, eat, and rest becomes a space where their safety, belonging, and comfort are constantly challenged (Foste & Irwin, 2023).

This case illustrates the relationship between race, space, and place¹ in higher education and mirrors broader historical and institutional struggles over the right to physical space (Duran et al., 2022). For example, the university tries to live up to the positive societal impact and has organized the gathering of funds during the Russian-Ukraine war (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2022). This sentimental attitude for changemaking was however missing during the case of the protesters against the Israeli ties of the university. Though the university has protocols on how to act during the occurrence of worldwide phenomena that

¹ I acknowledge that "space" and "place" are distinct concepts (see Gieryn [2000]). Space refers to the embodiment of things, meanings, and values, while place is understood as abstract geometries detached from material form and cultural interpretation. This thesis focuses on how racism and whiteness are reproduced in spaces, thereby shaping places.

affect their students, conducting this protocol is selectively not done when the sentiments are aimed towards non-Europeans.

Physical space in academia plays a crucial role in reflecting and reinforcing power structures within institutions. Drawing on Foucault's theories, space should be understood not merely as a physical entity but as a medium through which power is exerted (Liu, 2014; Miloje, 2015). Similarly, Blanchette (2012) suggests that the use of space is not simply a logistical decision but is deeply embedded within cultural and political aspects of academia. In addition, Duran et al. (2022) explain that race and space have historically functioned to establish boundaries and demarcate who belongs where. Thus, by examining the physical space, systemic racial inequalities and power structures are 'made' visible (Neely & Samura, 2011). The campus then becomes a political site of contestation, where marginalized students, especially those of color² navigate their position as perpetual outsiders (Lefebvre, 1991; Embrick & Moore, 2020).

This thesis focuses on campus spaces and diversity and inclusion policies, which are often praised for being inclusive and progressive (Harwood et al. 2018). From diversity statements, diversity training, and diverse students on banners and posters, it is clear that diversity and inclusion has become an integral part of the institution. However, studies indicate the campus experience differs between students of color and white students. While diversity and inclusion policies claim to foster an integrated and comfortable campus environment, such initiatives often serve to obscure practices of exclusion, replacing them with 'colorful,' happy faces to show that diversity is something that Erasmus University has

² I use the term *students of color* to refer to racial minoritized students from multiple racial/ethnic identities. My intention is not to generalize all racially minoritized people but to acknowledge the solidarity among racially minoritized communities and their shared experiences due to whiteness and racism.

embraced (Ahmed, 2009; Kimura, 2013). Instead, these initiatives position students of color as the ‘Other’ by integrating them into the ‘dominant’ space, rather than facilitating a space that includes all students (Wilson, Meyer & McNeal, 2012).

As a woman of color studying at Erasmus University myself, I want to raise the following research question: *How do students of color experience diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces of Erasmus University’s campus?* I aim to explore the notion of diversity and inclusion within the university by highlighting the voices of students of color through conversations, narratives, and storytelling. While many scholars have focused on the effectiveness of such policies, this thesis does not aim to do so. Some literature tends to highlight the strategic management of diversity and inclusion, suggesting that diversity and inclusion generates competitive advantages (Andresen, 2007), treating diversity as a business model aimed at enhancing organizational performance.

The problem here is that most literature on diversity tends to treat it as a means to resolve ‘the’ problem (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). The implication of such statements is, that we pretend to know what the problem is and that diversity policies offer the solution to such problems. Within this approach, studies are often focused on evaluating diversity policies to determine if they are indeed effective. In addition, most literature on diversity has been race-neutral, erasing how the campus space is imbued with racial meanings (Duran et al., 2022). As Samura (2016) suggests, “research on college students’ experiences has not prioritized space as an explicit dimension of analysis” (p. 127).

This thesis critically examines how spaces on campus become imbued with racialized meaning, how such spaces are maintained, and how students of color experience diversity and inclusion policies within those spaces. Rather than solely focusing on effectiveness, I aim

to adopt a holistic approach and consider diversity and inclusion from an alternative perspective. Inspired by Sara Ahmed, we should ask: what does diversity *do* instead?

2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework focuses on the experiences of students of color with diversity and inclusion policies, particularly on bodies out of place and white spaces.

Drawing on insights from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and works of Sara Ahmed this thesis seeks to challenge what is often accepted as normal and aims to expose racial and racist practices. (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). For this reason, this framework examines the fundamental dichotomy between diversity and inclusion policies and its practicalities, providing a theoretical context for this thesis.

2.1 Non-performative diversity

Diversity can be understood as a conceptual framework that works to enact both action and inaction at the same time (Ahmed, 2012). On one hand, diversity allows for action by providing students with space and resources to study and learn about race (Lang & Yandall, 2019). On the other hand, diversity also opposes any race work that threatens the institution's status quo. Consequently, certain languages and acts are intentionally avoided when describing the racial climate of an institution. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity as a framework for her the exploration of non-performatives, Ahmed (2006b) describes non-performatives as the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse [does not produce] the effects that it names" (Butler, 2011, p. 12). Ultimately, Ahmed (2012) defines diversity as 'non-performative,' suggesting that diversity fails to deliver on its promises.

Indeed, diversity and inclusion policies have resulted in a relative increase in the physical representation of people of color (Doan & Kennedy, 2022). In fact, many universities have stated their ‘commitment’ to promote diversity and inclusion. However, it is important to consider the implications of such statements. (Kimura, 2013). The presumption that universities are more progressive on equality issues because they claim a commitment to diversity, and therefore cannot be racist, needs to be reevaluated. As Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) explain, when institutions claim their commitment to diversity, it becomes non-performative, as it becomes integrated into the institution without any fundamental changes in institutional practices or culture. The act of ‘saying it’ does not suggest that actions are put in practice (Kimura, 2013). Within this non-performative strategy, racist incidents and allegations on campus are then perceived as harmful to the university’s reputation (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The claim of institutional commitment to anti-racism then becomes nothing more than empty words, showing that diversity failed to deliver what it has promised (Kimura, 2013).

2.2 The spatial imaginary of whiteness

Bodies out of place

The reason diversity is rendered non-performative, is because it exists in the realm of the ‘white spatial imaginary.’ Lipsitz (2011) suggests that the white spatial imaginary implicitly centers the organization of space around white values and ideologies, while simultaneously promoting the implicit, and sometimes explicit notion that these spaces are non-racialized, (Embrick & Moore, 2020; Duran et al., 2022) creating the image of a white universal norm; the belief that whiteness is neutral. In addition, Foste and Irwin (2023) argue that white spaces are defined by the embodiment of white cultural logics, artifacts, symbols, and desires,

which ensure that white people benefit from these spaces. As Brunnsma et al. (2020) state, white spaces inhabit a specific aesthetic originated in a “cultural assemblage of white tastes, preferences, and experiences that create an emotional economy of whiteness, a white ‘vibe,’ that ‘makes sense’ and ‘feels right’ to those who have been socialized to the white habitus” (p. 2010).

Drawing from Black geographies, we come to understand how bodies of color navigate representations of space, creating alternative ways of imagining the world (Joshi et al., 2015). These alternative imaginations show how students of color experience the campus in unique and often hostile ways. Given that campus spaces are embedded in whiteness, one of the consequences is that people of color, are not anticipated to inhabit these spaces, leading them to feel out of place (Anderson, 2015). To think about space as racialized requires a shift in thinking about how we understand physical space (Duran et al., 2022). This means that we must think of space in inherently political terms. Space, in and of itself, takes on specific racial meanings in the white spatial imaginary. For example, some spaces are associated with safety, and desirability while others are viewed as unsafe, and inferior. In the context of the campus space, universities have been white. If we understand that those who inhabit certain spaces embody specific attributes, it becomes clear that the campus is assumed to represent whiteness, portraying itself as neutral and detached from any political implications. Likewise, Puwar (2004) argues that spaces, although seemingly neutral, are in fact always racialized and gendered. Thus, as students of color navigate white spaces, the white spatial imaginary functions as a cultural and ideological tool of white supremacy to marginalize them in these spaces (Embrick & Moore, 2020).

From this perspective, students of color experience othering through deliberate actions and the lack of action from teachers, staff, and other students (Borrero, 2012).

Othering refers to the process by which ‘the Self’ and ‘the Other’ are constructed through identification of a desirable characteristic that ‘the Self’ has and ‘the Other’ lacks (Brons, 2015). In practice, ‘the Other’, must conform to white normative standards to be accepted in white spaces. These standards are reflected in diversity and inclusion policies, reinforcing white bodies as the unmarked norm (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). In other words, diversity and inclusion is ‘reenacted’ to maintain the normative expectations of the campus space, reinforcing it as a white space and positioning students of color as ‘out of place’ (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). To think that diversity policies ‘solve’ the problem of diversity, is then to assume that students of color are the core of the problem that needs to be ‘solved’ (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). From this perspective, universities use diversity and inclusion policies to obscure their deliberate exclusion of students of color. As Joseph-Salisbury (2019) suggests: “while some bodies are seen to belong, others become ‘space invaders’” (p. 6). For example, at institutions such as universities, the white spatial imaginary works to problematize the presence of Black people and other people of color within these spaces by for example, assuming that they are disruptions to the space’s normative sensibilities (Foste & Irwin, 2023). This becomes particularly evident when protesting students were evicted from the campus, highlighting that the campus was never a neutral battleground to begin with.

In the realm of diversity and difference

Though often implied rather than explicitly stated, universities maintain a competitive edge to claim prominence in the academic marketplace (Iverson, 2007), “in which white, heterosexual, upper-class men are the managers and those who ‘look different’ are managed” (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022, p. 884). Similarly, Ahmed (2006a) suggests that diversity is

embedded in marketization, driven by the need to “manage diversity, or to value diversity as if it was a human resource” (p. 746). Diversity allows universities to hide systematic inequalities under the banner of difference, meaning that universities rather focus on cultural differences and a (seemingly) diverse student body than to acknowledge that racism is present within the institution (Lang & Yandell, 2019). Consequently, ‘difference’ is managed as a public relations problem that must be addressed to uphold the university’s image (Lang & Yandall, 2019). For example, by using students of color as a token in publications, posters, and advertisements to highlight the university’s commitment to diversity and inclusion (Lang & Yandell, 2019). In other words, diversity policies are based on the visible representation of students of color rather than the basis of their equality (Ahmed, 2007a; Kimura, 2013).

The system of white supremacy positions diversity as an integrated aspect of academia, rather than directly addressing practices of inequality that have historically established universities as white property (Patel, 2015). Thus, diversity and inclusion policies are deemed effective to ‘manage’ difference because they do not challenge the existing white normative structures at the university. By engaging in non-performative discourses of diversity, universities fail to recognize the presence of racial inequality within their institutions (Kimura, 2013). Instead, universities shift the burden onto to specific groups, making students of color become the ‘spokesperson’ on diversity, effectively treating them as the embodiment of diversity (Kimura, 2013; Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). Consequently, students of color experience an increased burden to advocate for and initiate conversations about racism, defending themselves against their white peers (Doan & Kennedy, 2022).

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

As students of color are part of the marginalized demographic targeted by diversity and inclusion policies, it is essential to provide space for those who wish to share their experiences and insights regarding these policies. Building on earlier studies by Sara Ahmed (2006a), where she conducts interviews with diversity practitioners in Australian universities, I adopted a similar qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Drawing from Donna Haraway (1988), where she states that knowledge is situated, this method allowed me to understand the distinct perspectives of each student rather than relying on a generalized understanding of a phenomenon as this is not the purpose of the study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

3.2 Data collection

The qualitative research methods used for this thesis are semi-structured, in-depth interviews, providing space for the participants to recall and reflect on their experiences with diversity and inclusion policies at the university. In addition, this method allowed me to use narratives as a powerful tool to effectively understand the lived experiences of students of color in relation to white spaces such as the university (Joshi et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2022). I conducted nine interviews with students of color from Erasmus University. Due to the iterative nature of qualitative research, the sample size was not predetermined (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This approach enabled me to gather a substantive range of perspectives regarding diversity and inclusion policies, although I acknowledge that not all perspectives could be accommodated due to time constraints of the thesis.

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, as participants had to meet certain criteria that fit the research purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). More precisely, the sampling criteria for this research required participants to be a person of color, currently enrolled as a student at Erasmus University. As explained before, diversity and inclusion policies are oftentimes aimed at students of color, which makes them a demographic especially vulnerable to power structures within the university. For this reason, this thesis focused on students of color in particular. Furthermore, Erasmus University was chosen as the geographic location as opposed to other universities due to my familiarity as a student here. Using a snowball sampling method, I reached out to initial contacts within my network that were willing to participate in the research (Parker et al., 2019). Four participants were found by this method. The other five participants were found via agreeable participants who suggested additional contacts interested in sharing their ideas and thoughts.

The majority of interviews were conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams, as most participants expressed their preference for an online interview due to practical reasons. However, the few interviews conducted in person took place at various locations, including one in the comfort of the participant's home, and the others in different buildings across the Erasmus University campus. These interviews were recorded with my phone, except for one instance where the recording failed. To retain the participant's ideas, I wrote down notes afterwards, which were subsequently approved by the participant.

3.3 Data analysis

The qualitative interviews were transcribed using the software 'Good Tape.' Any additional edits to the transcripts were made in Microsoft Word. After transcribing, a thematic analysis

was conducted in the program ATLAS.ti to describe and interpret the conversations I had with the participants (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). A thematic analysis considers that knowledge emerges through the subjective experience of individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2012). From this perspective, knowledge is co-constructed in and through interaction with the participants, moving away from the notion that knowledge should be obtained through objective modes of knowledge production. This method allows me to thoroughly capture experiences and perceptions grounded in the material realities of students of color at the university. Based on the analysis, 155 open codes were identified, which are organized into three broader themes presented in the results section.

3.4 Ethical considerations

During the research process, topics such as race, racism, sense of belonging, and exclusion are discussed. In order to create a space where participants felt safe to share their stories, multiple ethical considerations were made. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the topics to be discussed. Participants were also requested to sign a written consent form, wherein it stated that the interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The consent form also explicitly stated that participants have the right to stop the interview at any given moment. To safeguard participant privacy, personal data was processed to prevent identification of specific individuals. This involved the use of pseudonyms, aiming to ensure respondent privacy while enhancing the readability of the texts.

3.4 Operationalization

The interview guide and questions were divided into four sections. The first part covered introductory questions, such as why the participants chose to attend Erasmus University and

whether they participated in any extracurricular activities like student organizations and clubs. The second part addressed concepts like sense of belonging, representation, and otherness, asking questions such as, ‘do you feel like you blend in?’ and ‘can you recall any specific experiences or interactions that have made you feel excluded at the university?’ The third part introduced statements about diversity taken from the Erasmus University website, and participants were asked for their thoughts on these statements, for example, “EUR strives to be an inclusive university that: is active in developing policies, procedures and practices that promote that inclusive culture,” and “(...) attracts and retains talented students, faculty and staff broadly representative of the diverse perspectives in society” (Erasmus University, z.d.). The interview concluded with questions about the participants’ challenges with diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as, ‘do you believe that the university’s diversity and inclusion policies address your needs and concerns?’ While these questions have been carefully thought out, they do not determine the course of the interviews. Instead, they served as guiding questions to gain a well-rounded understanding of the participants’ experiences.

3.5 Positionality

My position as a student of color at Erasmus University and a former intern at Diversity and Inclusion office of my faculty may have impacted the research process. However, I argue that my positionality provided me with unique and valuable insights that I might not have otherwise gained. Indeed, my positionality may have introduced certain ethical sensibilities, such as partiality. However, this thesis did not claim to produce objective knowledge. Rather, its aim was to listen, and engage into conversations with the participants, allowing me to learn from their experiences and perspectives. Grounded in Haraway’s (1988) concept of situated knowledges, it challenged traditional ways of knowledge production by recognizing

that knowledge reflects the social identities and worldview of the researcher. As a person of color, I have personally experienced racism and exclusion in various aspects of my life, and as a student of color from Erasmus University, I also understand the challenges of attending a white institution. In this case, my position as both a student of color and a researcher enables me to share experiences, ideas, and conversations with the participants, fostering a sense of understanding and safety.

4. Results and Analysis

Navigating diversity and inclusion as a student of color presents distinct challenges that are unique to every person. To explore this, I interviewed nine students of color of Erasmus University. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they all share the mundane, everyday experiences of being a student of color at a white institution. Below, each participant is presented with their personal characteristics, including a pseudonym, their age, ethnicity, and program of study.

Table 1

Characteristics of the participants

Name	Ethnicity³	Age	Program of study
Faye (she/her)	Chinese	19	Business and Law
Eden (she/her)	Curaçaoan	23	Sociology
Hailey (she/her)	Black	23	Sociology
Nara (she/her)	Indian	24	Sociology
Aylin (she/her)	Turkish	23	Social Studies

³ I asked the participants for a description of their ethnicity to reflect their unique racialized experiences. This is what the participants personally identified with.

Indra (she/her)	Surinamese- Hindustani	23	Psychology
Sasha (she/her)	German and African American	21	Public Administration
Jade (she/her)	Somalian	25	Sociology
Sade (she/her)	West-African (Igbo)	22	Psychology and Law

Counter-narratives play a crucial role in CRT scholarship because they provide a means to challenge white normative expectations (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). By using counter-narratives, CRT brings attention to marginalized voices that might otherwise go unheard. For this reason, my analysis utilizes a CRT framework to illuminate how diversity and inclusion are understood through the eyes of students of color at Erasmus University.

4.1 Navigating the white campus space

Otherness and Exclusion: “I feel like I’m constantly like a walking protest.”⁴

While the university prides itself on ‘creating positive societal impact,’ it is worth questioning what this means for the participants whose experiences often suggest otherwise. Although diversity and inclusion policies have fostered a sense of belonging for some, for others, it is nothing more than a superficial facade. Nonetheless, they all collectively felt that the campus was structured in a way that heightens their awareness as ‘the Other.’ For example, most participants shared that they experience feelings of hypervigilance on campus,

⁴ Direction quotation from Eden

meaning that they are constantly aware of their surroundings and their position as a person of color. Hailey reported that: “(...) in every place I go, every room I enter, I scan the room and then count the people of color.” She shared that she assesses whether she would feel comfortable in a space based on the number of people of color she notices. She continued to explain that whenever she enters a room full of white people, she can sense that her experiences will be invalidated. Eden specifically mentioned that she feels hypervigilant about how she presents herself: “I’m very like genderqueer, (...) in my presentation and stuff like that so one, I’m kind of like deviant in that way, and then I’m Black, wear an afro from time to time or I have a scarf.” For Eden, the intersection of her identities as Black and a genderqueer person makes her feel like she is a constant threat to the white normative expectations on campus, “I feel like I’m constantly like a walking protest,” she said.

When I talked with the participants about how they perceive the campus space, some reported that certain spaces make them feel heightened and uncomfortable. For example, Jade, Nara, and Hailey all expressed feelings of discomfort in general spaces such as the library, as they rarely see other students of color, “in the end, they are predominantly white spaces,” as Hailey concluded. Jade also reported that while working at the Economics faculty, she sensed a particular atmosphere— “yes, a bit condescending,” as she searched for the right word to describe this feeling. So, while she told me that, she feels comfortable on campus, she specifically highlighted that some spaces make her feel out of place. Likewise, Faye reported that within the Economics faculty, students tend to have specific worldview that clashes with hers. This phenomenon is particularly common for people of color entering white spaces, as these spaces embody white norms and ideologies, making them feel othered. For example, Sasha, a Black woman of color, reported that she feels like she cannot blend in on campus: “because I ‘just’ look different.” The tone in her voice conveyed a hint of

acceptance along with a sense of defeat. On one hand, she feels frustrated that she 'looks different' but on the other hand she is used to this feeling. Likewise, Hailey shared that she stands out as a Black woman of color, highlighting how Black women experience a particular sense of hyperawareness in white spaces where Black bodies are marked in contrast to white, unmarked bodies. Similarly, Aylin, a Muslima of color, shared that she has always been aware of being perceived differently, as people often assumed she was an international student. However, since she started wearing her headscarf, she has become even more conscious of her position as a minority. These experiences represent the ongoing collective struggle that students of color experience in a white institution.

Faye, on the other hand, mentioned that she feels comfortable on campus and believes she can blend in. Nonetheless, she is aware of her difference from her classmates as one of the few students of color in her program. However, she noted that this does not affect her since she has a good relationship with her peers. Sade also reported feeling comfortable on campus, in particular due to its international character, especially in comparison to other universities in the Netherlands, "I think that [university of] Rotterdam is where I feel most at home." From her perspective, being among international students made her feel like she belongs. Jade also shared that she enjoys being surrounded by international students. In particular, her sociology program helps her feel more connected to other students who share similar mindsets. These experiences show that within a white space, students of color find ways to make themselves feel comfortable, such as by surrounding themselves with international students or connecting with other like-minded individuals.

Indra also shared that she does not feel different because she frequently encounters other Surinamese people on campus. Still, she reported that the university fails to accommodate people with a disability: "I don't really feel that we are being considered.

Instead, it feels more like we have to adapt.” Similarly, Sasha shared with me that the university does not adequately support people who are dealing with serious mental health problems, as their mental health resources are very weak. While this struggle is not solely about her position as a person of color, I find it important to include in the analysis as it reflects a power struggle that is embodied in a white space. White spaces are per definition rooted in masculine, white, and heteronormative, and able-bodied ideologies, demonstrating that people who ‘deviate’ even slightly from these norms experience othering. Consequently, students of color feel compelled to adjust accordingly to fit within the institution. For instance, Eden shared that she feels pressure to conform to the standards of those around her, “(...) people of color, Black people they’re not a monolith but there’s still like this idea of like yeah, we have to like submit ourselves to a certain way of acting and thinking.” For example, Eden stated that Black students feel pressured to straighten their hair to be more accepted.

Although white spaces are not a monolith, they are characterized by the overbearing existence of white people and the lack of Black people (Anderson, 2015). In turn, when a Black person inhabits a white space, their white peers immediately assess them to determine whether they are a threat to the white normative expectations. From this perspective, it becomes clear that although explicit, more overt forms of racism are certainly harmful, the subtle, non-verbal acts of racism can be even more impactful, as they enact the campus as a white space, implicitly or explicitly showing that people of color are out of place. As Jade stated: “someone can really give you a look that says, ‘what are you doing here?’”

On diversity and representation: “oh, they’re all white.”⁵

Another common experience among participants is their struggle with the lack of diversity and representation in both the staff and student body. To feel at home is to experience a sense of familiarization and belonging. However, this is often not the case based on what the participants shared with me. Sasha, who is originally from New York, shared that she is used to being in an environment where there is a lot of diversity. When she arrived at Erasmus University, she was taken aback by the lack of diversity, “that’s the thing. Like, I came to Rotterdam. I came to Rotterdam because there were Black people here. But at Erasmus, there’s no Black people.” Hailey also shared that she chose Erasmus University hoping it would be diverse. Instead, she ended up being the only person of color in her class. Indra also noted that only three out of twenty students in her class are not white.

Although participants chose to study in Rotterdam due to the diverse character of the city, they were surprised by how white the university turned out to be. For example, Jade and Nara, who both live in Rotterdam South, expected the university to reflect their neighborhoods’ diversity. Instead, Jade remarked about her class that “it is diverse in terms of ethnicity, with Italian and Greek people, but less diverse in terms of race. I found that to be a bit underwhelming.” Similarly, Nara recalled that during her first class of the year, her teacher proudly proclaimed the diversity of the student body while she gazed into the class filled with white, European students. Even Sasha shared that while she does an international study program, most of her peers are from within Europe. This reveals that although the university claims to celebrate diversity, the white spatial imaginary works to maintain

⁵ Direct quotation from Hailey

structures of whiteness, favoring white, European students who do not threaten the normative expectations of the campus.

From this perspective, diversity becomes synonymous with whiteness, and whiteness materializes within the student body. Diversity then becomes nothing more than the celebration of white culture, while students of color are used as tokens for diversity points. Due to the lack of diversity on campus, Jade and Sasha often find themselves signaling to the few Black people they encounter. For example, Jade, a Somalian woman, is thrilled when she sees another Black person on campus, “when I walk to the Spar and see someone who is also Black, or imagine, even East African, I get really excited.” Sasha, an African American woman, also expressed that every time she sees a Black person, she smiles at them, “because there’s, like, not many.” This shows that in a white space, students of color often gravitate towards others who look like them to find a sense of community and mutual understanding.

Such a sense of community is often found in counterspaces. Counterspaces have historically served as centers for political mobilization aimed at dismantling the barriers of white spaces (Harwood et al., 2018). Students of color create these spaces to provide safe spaces on campus to share counterstories, showing that they belong on campus too. For example, the ‘African Student Association’ (ASA) was created by students to foster a sense of belonging among students with African heritage. Within this space, Jade particularly feels that she can express her opinion and take up space. She continued to share that being around other people of color helped her find a sense of community, noting that “there is a kind of universal experience as a student of color in a white institution.”

Burden of responsibility: “I just want to learn; I don’t want to be teaching”⁶

Many participants shared that they frequently have to defend themselves against their white peers, who deliberately misinterpret their words and weaponize diversity against them. For example, Jade recounted a situation in which institutional racism was discussed in class. As the only Black person in her tutorial group, she felt the implicit pressure to explain institutional racism to her white classmates. As Jade put it, “this is a learning environment, but I feel like people see me as someone who needs to teach them something.” She reflects one of the many examples in which students of color become the ‘spokesperson’ on diversity, effectively treating them as the embodiment of diversity. Similarly, Nara shared that she and her fellow students of color felt an unspoken expectation to share their personal experiences with racism in class, “my class felt like a platform for white people to learn about racism.” One of her white classmates even asked her: ‘how do I solve racism?’ As W.E.B. Du Bois would say: ‘to this question, I answer seldom a word.’ These words, spoken over a hundred years ago, continue to be relevant today. Racism is not a problem that can be ‘solved,’ nor is it Nara’s responsibility to show her fellow student how to save her moral compass. Nara explained that rather than hiring a professor of color, the university relies on students of color to educate their peers about racism. Indra recounted a similar experience where her classmates expected her to explain her culture. She expressed her frustration with these expectations, saying, “I just want to learn; I don’t want to be teaching.”

Consequently, students of color find themselves in discussions with their white peers often facing invalidation of their experiences, since anything that challenges white normative expectations is likely to encounter backlash and denial from white classmates. For instance,

⁶ Direct quotation from Indra

Indra highlighted that, as a woman of color, expressing your experiences often leads to being labeled as ‘aggressive.’ As Indra put it: “I don’t really feel like I can do that [share my experiences] and have them understand, you know? Or that they might find it offensive or something.” Sasha also finds herself in emotional distress in discussions about racism with her white classmates. She recalled a situation where a white classmate defended the International Criminal Court despite their racist practices, saying “you know, with stuff like that, you almost feel like, I don’t know. You can explain it to somebody. But it can just make you feel, like, yeah, frustrated.”

4.2 Navigating diversity and inclusion policies

Reflecting on policies: “whose well-being?”⁷

Building onto Sara Ahmed’s theory of nonperformativity, diversity and inclusion policies do not produce what it claims, making them nonperformative in nature. For instance, Eden explained to me that policies are deeply embedded in respectability politics, which means that diversity and inclusion policies do not make any real difference because they operate within the structures of the university. In other words, she explained that the university only develops policies and initiatives that they find comfortable, ones that allow them to easily tick off the boxes that suit their vision of diversity. As Sasha pointed out, the decision-making board is entirely white, suggesting that the decisions are made to serve their own interests. For example, Hailey remembered walking on campus and seeing posters featuring students and staff. She noticed that every person of color was paired with a quote about diversity, whereas the white men featured on the posters were associated with quotes about

⁷ Direct quotation from Sasha

changing the world. As Hailey described, “it gives the impression that if you are a person of color, you are essentially placed into a specific category or box.” People of color are grouped in a single category to meet a diversity agenda, essentially to demonstrate that the university is serious about addressing the ‘problem’ of diversity (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). Ultimately, “you are always associated with your race,” as Hailey concluded.

In the interviews, I asked the participants to reflect on a diversity statement from Erasmus University’s website, which reads, ‘Erasmus strives to be an inclusive university that attracts and retains talented students (...) representative of the diverse perspectives in society.’ In response, Eden asked, “we’re attracting you but to what extent are we like actually putting in the work to make you feel seen?” I found her response quite profound, as it reflected the paradox of wanting a diverse student body but without constructing the campus space to include them. As Sasha reported, “they just cleared the encampment for like a well-being festival, like whose well-being [matters]?” Frustrated by the university’s hypocritical stance, she remarked that evicting students from campus neither shows concern for their well-being nor makes anyone feel safe.

In similar response, Nara concluded, “so, they might want us to study there, but they don’t create space for us.” For instance, Aylin pointed out that whilst there is a prayer room on campus, its quality is extremely poor. First, it is located in a remote area of campus in a building that is nearly closed for renovation, and secondly, it is not properly furnished. While there is some effort done to create a space for Muslim students, Aylin questioned, “but is it being done in a way that students actually want?” Moreover, Indra noted that Muslim students do not receive a day off for holidays like Eid al-Fitr, while all students, religious or not, get days off for with Christian holidays. Sasha doubts that the university has their students’ best interests at heart. “It’s really just more about their image and what they want

other, I guess, universities to think about them,” she said. Eden concluded this, saying, “I feel like we wouldn’t get that far [with diversity policies] because at the end of the day we’re just going to run into the same problem.”

On gender and race: “our race comes first, followed by our gender”⁸

Participants shared that throughout their time at the university, their professors and tutors were often white and male. While the university has introduced several policies to attract more ‘diverse’ staff, in practice this is not the case. As Eden put it, “there isn’t a lot of diversity [in staff] I feel like and that’s since they are really lacking, so only on paper.” For example, Hailey observed that staff in food services and cleaning tend to be women of color, while white Dutch men hold top positions. Interestingly, Nara noticed that white women tend to dominate conversations related to diversity and inclusion, “because they believe they have the right to speak about race and educate others on the subject, simply because they are women.” Jade recalled this instance when she was invited to a diversity and inclusion event. The speakers included four men and two women, all of whom were white, that were asked to discuss how to amplify diverse voices, which is ironic, considering the demographic of the speakers. Astonished by this decision, she began to question why no one had raised concerns about the fact that only white people were invited. This shows that diversity is rather understood as a problem of gender imbalance between ‘men’ and ‘women,’ therefore excluding the intersecting identities such as race (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022).

In practice, this translates into the empowerment of white women, as opposed to (white) male domination. While white women may face gender-based oppression, Eden pointed out that they have significantly benefited from diversity and inclusion policies, which

⁸ Direct quotation from Nara

have enabled them to attain positions of power. For example, Nara noted while guiding a campus tour for other schools, she stumbled upon a wall featuring hundreds of white female professors in an effort to celebrate diversity. The university prioritizes gender diversity because it does not disrupt white, masculine structures of power that are embodied in the institution. Diversity then becomes a way to reproduce whiteness as the standard. In turn, women and people of color ‘only’ become part of the university when they bring additional value to the white spatial imaginary (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022).

However, Sade shared that having a white woman speak about diversity might be beneficial in spreading the message, as their voices are often more accepted and heard. Nonetheless, I argue that this perspective works to reinforce existing power dynamics. Indeed, white women can share the message, however it is important to remember that their whiteness grants them access to positions of power. This often leads to a sense of entitlement, causing them to center their own experiences. Nara stated that she would rather see a Black man as diversity officer than a white woman, explaining that “in terms of our identity, our race comes first, followed by our gender.” In similar response, Jade argued that when discussing diversity, inclusion, equality, and justice, it’s important to be mindful of your own position, “because then it feels a bit like you’re begging for a seat at the table. And that’s not the point. It’s not just about you.” When white women take up space in the diversity and inclusion discourse, it works to maintain capitalist, Eurocentric, and patriarchal structures of oppression.

Some participants shared with me that they would rather hear stories from women of color who lived these experiences firsthand. Hailey for example, explained that there is an unspoken understanding when interacting with a professor of color, saying (...) I don’t necessarily have to explain certain things,” whereas with a white professor, there is always

this implicit notion that they would not understand. For example, Eden shared that when discussing issues with (white) ‘race experts’ at Erasmus University, despite their empathy, there was a lack of understanding because they do not live those experiences and therefore cannot fully comprehend them. As Indra stated, “I’d much rather hear from people who actually experience this and have something real to say about it, than be taught by a white woman telling me what it’s like to be part of a minority group.”

However, Eden made an interesting point when she shared that we must be precise about what women of color are given the responsibility to talk about diversity. She noted that within the institution, women of color are only ‘accepted’ when they conform to specific standards of respectability. Therefore, even when women of color are assigned the diversity job, it is important to acknowledge that it functions within the structures of the institution, which limits the potential for significant, radical change.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis explores the experiences of students of color with diversity and inclusion policies, with a particular focus on bodies out of place and white spaces. Based on Critical Race Theory and works of Sara Ahmed, this thesis aims to disrupt normative white expectations by dissecting diversity and inclusion policies, revealing that it is not as progressive as it seems. Returning to the research question: *‘How do students of color experience diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces of Erasmus University’s campus,’* it becomes clear that students of color experience diversity and inclusion policies as a ‘non-performative,’ meaning that it fails to deliver what it claims (Ahmed, 2012). While Erasmus University proclaims to be an inclusive university, students of color argue otherwise, as the mere act of ‘saying it’ does not suggest that actions are put into practice (Kimura, 2013).

Following the words of Eden, “we’re attracting you but to what extent are we like actually putting in the work to make you feel seen?”

Although some students of color mentioned feeling comfortable on campus, especially when surrounded by people of color, others described it as a space that intentionally makes them feel like ‘the Other.’ In practice, the Other, must conform to white normative standards to be accepted on campus. Consequently, students of color experience implicit or explicit acts of racism, making them aware of their position as a person of color in a white space. These acts of racism enact the campus as a white space, suggesting that students of color are out of place. These standards are embodied in diversity and inclusion policies, establishing white bodies as the unmarked norm (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). This means that students who are ‘different’ from this norm, are seen as the core of the ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘solved’ (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022). Diversity and inclusion policies are designed to manage this problem of ‘difference,’ effectively reducing students of color to the embodiment of diversity. In turn, policies are constructed in an attempt to ‘include’ students of color on the university’s campus, by placing them into a single category to meet a diversity agenda. By focusing on difference as a means to celebrate diversity, the university effectively maintains exclusionary practices, as it does not challenge white normative standards.

Upon reflecting on my experience at the Diversity and Inclusion office, I have come to realize that most decision-making processes do not involve the group directly affected by the policies. Notably, the program I participated in was mostly led by white female diversity practitioners, introducing a problematic dynamic where they determined which initiatives were most strategically relevant. This shows that diversity and inclusion policies are focuses on gender diversity, while failing to adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes the

material realities of race and other identities. While diversity and inclusion policies are presumed to be written from a neutral standpoint, that is, from the perspective of white ‘experts,’ the reality is that these policies merely function to obscure the exclusion that is persists within the university. From this perspective, diversity becomes nothing more than a celebration of white culture, while students of color are used as a mere token to fulfill a diversity fantasy.

Limitations and future research

Given the time restraints of the thesis project, it is unfortunate that I was unable to meet with more students of color to discuss their experiences. Moreover, all of the participants I interviewed for this research were women. This was due to the fact that I contacted participants from within my social network, which is primarily composed of women of color. For future research, it would be therefore interesting to broaden the sample size to men of color to aim for a more well-rounded and representative study. Within this topic, it would also be insightful to conduct a discourse analysis centered on the language used in Erasmus University’s diversity and inclusion policies, as particular languages establish the normality and routines of institutional processes (Heller, 1995). Analyzing these language practices could therefore expose how language is both used to exert and mitigate power.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Topic guide semi-structured interview

Introduction

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Why did you decide to attend this university?
- Are you the first one in the family to go to university?
- Do you participate in any student organizations, clubs, or activities? If yes, tell me more about it.

Sense of belonging and representation

- Do you feel at ease at this university?
- Do you feel like you blend in?
- Can you recall any specific experiences or interactions that have made you feel included or excluded at the university?
- Have you ever felt underrepresented or misrepresented at this university? If so, could you tell me more about that?

Experience with diversity and inclusion policies

Have you seen that there is such a thing as diversity and inclusion at this university? / Have you noticed any efforts or initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion within the university? If so, what are your thoughts on them?

- If so, what do you know about it?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about it?

“Making Minds Matter” is a slogan displayed across Erasmus University’s website, social media platforms, and even on its tote bags, showcasing a commitment to a diverse and inclusive space for all students.

- What do you feel about this slogan?

One of the aims of the university is to attract and retain talented students, faculty and staff that are broadly representative of the diverse perspectives in society.

- Do you recognize that within the university?

Another aim is that the university strives to develop policies, procedures and practices that promote an inclusive culture.

- Do you resonate with that?
- Have you experienced any positive outcomes from the university's diversity and inclusion efforts? If yes, can you explain how they have benefited you?
- Have you faced any difficulties or obstacles with the university's efforts to promote diversity and inclusion? If so, could you tell me about them?

Towards change

- Do you believe that the university's diversity and inclusion policies address your needs and concerns?
- In your opinion, what changes could be made to diversity and inclusion policies at the university?
- How do you think the university can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment?

Appendix B

Informed consent form

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cizROLCI7NMGqHED3De1iJoEZQm88iixT8YGG1P7FI4/edit>

Appendix C

Checklist ethical and privacy aspects of research



PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Experiences with diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces of Erasmus University's campus

Name, email of student: Vivianh Dao 506012vd@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Willem Schinkel schinkel@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: January 2024 until August 2024

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES** - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted? (e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. **YES** - NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? **NO** YES -

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. **NO** YES -

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - **NO**

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - **NO**
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - **NO**
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - **NO**
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - **NO**

6. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - **NO**

7. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? **YES** - NO

8. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - **NO**

9. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - **NO**

10. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - **NO**

11. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - **NO**

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

- The thesis is about students of color and their experience with diversity and inclusion policies within the physical spaces of Erasmus University's campus. For the purpose of the thesis, it is important to illustrate personal stories and perspectives of students on diversity and inclusion policies. As race is part of identity and worldview, it is therefore important to include their racial origin in the thesis. This also shows how different racial and ethnic identities negotiate diversity and inclusion.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

- Participants will remain anonymous during the interview because the participants name will not be mentioned in the audio recordings. Pseudonyms in the research

will also contribute to the privacy of the participant. In addition, participants will complete a consent form prior to the study. Furthermore, the consent form will also explicitly state that participants have the right to stop the interview at any given moment.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

- Participants may become emotional when they talk about personal experiences with exclusion or racism. However, I don't expect any lasting negative emotional consequences.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

- I will collect data through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

- 10 participants

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

- It is unclear how many students of color are enrolled at Erasmus University.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

- The data obtained from the interviews will be saved on the internal hard drive of my laptop and also on Google documents. Furthermore, any notes made during the interview will be kept in a notebook.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

- I (Vivianh Dao) am responsible for the daily management of the data.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

- Backups of the research data are updated every day on both Google docs and my laptop's internal hard drive.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

- I will keep directly identifying personal details like names, racial identity, etc. separated from the rest of the data, by sorting them in different files and by replacing personal details by a code to make sure that these are not easily accessible.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfill promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Vivianh Dao

Name (EUR) supervisor: Prof. Dr. Willem Schinkel

Date: 24 March 2024

Date: 24 March 2024