Landscapes of Affect
Exploring the Concept of Safe Space and Identity Formation at Grinnell College

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INTRODUCTION

On Friday, February 27, 2008, employees of Grinnell College’s mailroom discovered a packet of forty-five typed and folded letters that were addressed to thirty-four individual students. The messages of the letters expressed overt, threatening sentiments of homophobia and hatred.

On Friday, March 5, 2010, the posters of a student running for a position on the next year’s Student Government Association executive cabinet were defaced with slanders against Latino/a students; “GO HOME” was one of the injurious statements scrawled on one of the posters.

During the period between Monday, May 10 and Friday, May 14, a person or group of people vandalized a student vehicle with the word “DYKE”, and then on Saturday, May 15, a student discovered a “Queer Safe Space” sign that had been defaced with the message “FAG BAG QUEER UNSAFE SPACE I KILL GAYS” in a dormitory hallway.

Grinnell College’s mission statement claims, “The College exists to provide a lively academic community of students and teachers of high scholarly qualifications from diverse social and cultural circumstances.” Three of the college’s published core values unequivocally constitute Grinnell as a community that values, welcomes, and affirms diversity and acceptance, these values being: 1. “A wide diversity of people and perspectives”; 2. “Personal, egalitarian, and respectful interactions among all members of the college community”; and 3. “Our strong tradition of self-governance and personal responsibility”. If Grinnell College explicitly constitutes it an academic community comprised of students, faculty, and staff committed to the tenets of social justice, equality, and affirmation, why does the College possess a record of incidents of bias, prejudice, and oppression? If Grinnell is an intentional community formed

1 Grinnell’s full mission statement and core values can be found at http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/president
upon a dedication to social responsibility and a commitment to diversity, why must students deliberately establish “Queer Safe Spaces” and other spaces that are designated safe for a specific group of people?

Clearly, a margin exists between what the College declares as its mission and core values and the actual lived experience of members of the college community. Grinnell theoretically establishes itself as a place and community where people from all backgrounds, identities, and diversities thrive, but the instances of hate-motivated expression suggest that the realities of members of the community do not necessarily match the creed of Grinnell as an institution.

It is here my research began—at the disjunctions between the values of the College and the imagined social atmosphere they create and the actual experiences of members of the community. This project critically analyzes the idea of “safe space” and how students’ conceptualizations of different spaces on campus either inhibits or encourages the free expression of their multiple social identities. I interviewed twenty-three Grinnell College students and collected their perceptions of the level of diversity and acceptance on campus as well as their perceptions of safe and unsafe spaces at Grinnell. The students’ narratives and assessments of space saliently demonstrate that, both physically and conceptually, Grinnell is composed of margins, multiple layers of meaning, and boundaries. Students’ social identities dramatically influence their judgments of safe spaces, and their perceptions of safe space deeply impact the constitution and expression of their multiple identities.

The main objective of my research is to collect and present students’ stories and perceptions of space on campus to better understand the nuanced, complicated ways in which identities and spaces are constructed, affirmed, challenged, and/or subverted; thus, the conclusions I draw from the interviews develop from how the experiences of Grinnell College
students correlate (or not) with the theory concerning space and identity. Ultimately, I argue that Grinnell is not an empty, blank canvas; rather, every space, both physical and imagined, is imbued with meaning and significance, which profoundly shapes the lived experiences of members of the college community. From the free expression of social identity to the amount of mobility and safety a student feels on campus, the multiple layers of meaning and understanding associated with campus spaces influences every movement and expression a student makes at Grinnell.

This paper begins with a literature review of contemporary theories in anthropology, sociology, and cultural geography concerning space, experience, and identity formation (Massumi 2002; Massey 2004; Thrift 2004; Cresswell 1996 and 2005; Hubbard 2005; Mitchell 2005; and Stewart 2007). I then explain the ethnographic research that I conducted from January 2010 through April 2010 at Grinnell College. I describe my research sample, the structure of the interviews, and the methods I used. Next, I discuss the three primary social identities that seemed to factor most strongly in students’ conception of safe space and acceptance at Grinnell: race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. I present the stories, narratives, and opinions informants shared with me during our interviews and tease out the common themes and sentiments running through students’ responses. Afterward, I connect students’ responses with the theory regarding space and identity to demonstrate the ways in which space and social identities are simultaneously constituting and opposing each other.

SPACE, RELATIONS, AND MEANING: SPACE AND IDENTITY THEORY

Because space and place are nebulous, abstract concepts that contain physical, abstract, social, personal, and metaphorical aspects, no definite definitions of space and place exist, especially in the field of cultural geography. Physical geographies construct a landscape of
concrete, built boundaries which influence movement and behavior through and around these boundaries. Sociologists and geographers (see Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; and Lefebvre 1991) have developed spatiality away from the idea of space as simply a fact or geographic reality in which action occurs to considering space as sites of social construction composed of networks of social action imbued with meaning and signification. Space is no longer considered to simply be the location where occurrences happen; rather, space is formed through the interrelationship of meanings, ideologies, identities, and social narratives. Space, through its multiple layers of meaning, also possesses the power to form and influence identities, understandings, and systems of power. For as Phil Hubbard (in Atkinson, et al. 2005) claims, this relational conception of space and place, “explores the mutually engaging relation between the two, implying that both space and place are made and remade through networks that involve people, practices, languages, and representations. Ultimately, the fact that place and space cannot be conceived of outside the realms of culture should make us wary of making any simple definition of space or place. Perhaps, then, the key question about space and place is not what they are, but what they do” (47). Space is action, performance, and interaction so that perhaps, as Hubbard suggests, space cannot exists without being couched in culture and behavior. Harmonies, tensions, agreements, and contestations among social actors—in effect, the extant social relations—construct space, yet without space these relationships would not exist. Contemporary cultural and anthropological theories focus on the social relationships and systems of power that influence the experience of space as well as the expression of social identities and behaviors. The interrelationships and systems construct networks of connectivity and meaning, as Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec posit, “We do not live in a homogenous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities. . . we live inside a set of relations that
delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (1986:23). Social relationships creating space simultaneously construct social realities. Contemporary geographers and anthropologists concerned with social space explore the networks of connectivity to better understand the constitution of space and social identities.

Indeed, prominent theorists, Brian Massumi (2002), Nigel Thrift (2004), and Doreen Massey (2004), emphasize the multiple levels of organization, the plethora of interrelations, and the webs of connectivity that converge in the construction of social spaces and experiences. These theorists discuss spaces as intersectional sites of cooperation, negotiations, tensions, trajectories, and layers of meaning. In regards to the relational, contingent, and yet fluid nature of space and identity formation, Massey asserts, “If space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations, if we make space through interactions at all levels. . . then those spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too” (2004:5). Conceptualizing spaces as the location of consequential interaction destabilizes the rigidity of spatiality while recognizing the fluidity of experience and identity, which are two key constitutive agents of space.

In an attempt to concretize an operational definition of space that further separates the notion of social space from the flat understanding of space as the physical location where action happens, Mitchell offers the concept of landscape to represent the matrices of interrelations, identities, experiences and connections that constitute space in contemporary social geography. Mitchell argues, “The landscape (as form, meaning, and representation) actively incorporates the social relations that go into its making. The landscape (in all its senses) is both an outcome and the medium of social relations, [and] is a representation of what is and what can be” (in Atkinson, et al. 2005:49-50). This definition of landscape incorporates the social relations
suggested by other theorists while also integrating nuances of fluidity and possibility. Mitchell strategically makes landscapes flexible and complex to differentiate them from previous conceptions of space that were flat and unvarying. He further complicates the concept of landscape by incorporating systems of power and their effect on space and experience in definition, “But the question of course, is always which people landscapes invite in and which people can find no place in them. To the degree that landscapes are sites of alienation . . . exclusionary practices in landscapes are rife” (in Atkinson, et al. 2005:53). So, the relations and connections occurring within landscapes create sites that are inherently exclusionary, imbued with meaning, and that operate under the influence of networks of power. This establishes the idea that although space is constructed through social relationships and experiences, space still maintains some power to permit or inhibit certain behaviors, interactions, and narratives from being expressed and experienced within particular landscapes.

Here, Tim Cresswell introduces the concept of a moral geography, which expands space’s power (or perhaps rather people’s power within certain spaces) to prohibit specific behaviors, identities, people, or movements from occurring (in Atkinson, et al. 2005:??). Creswell defines the moral geography as a location with rules and expectation where some people are included while others are left out. With this definition, space becomes politicized. Landscapes and spaces form the setting for the enactment of social relationships, politics, power, estrangement, norms, and meaning. But, it is crucial to emphasize that landscape and space are no longer considered to be passive backdrops to the processes of social interaction because they are permeated with meanings, connections, and negotiations that effectively include and exclude actions and individuals. As Creswell reinforces, “Value and meaning are not inherent in any space or place—indeed they must be created, reproduced and defended from heresy. One way to
illustrate the relation between place and behavior is to look at those behaviors that are judged inappropriate in a particular location . . . it is when such actions occur, I argue, that the everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behavior become obvious and underlined. The labeling of action as inappropriate in the context of a particular place serves as evidence for the always already existing normative geography” (1996:9-10). Thus, a specific collection of actions and behaviors becomes normalized in certain landscapes, and those who violate the normalized, acceptable behaviors are subject to exclusion and alienation from the space. Landscapes dictate what is appropriate or unacceptable, and those operating within the landscape following its prescriptions.

**Affect, movement, mobility, possibility**

Once the idea that space exists as a network of interrelational behaviors, identities, discourses, power dynamics, and moral prescriptions became well-established and accepted as a legitimate manner to conceptualize space and social interaction, scholars began to explore the instantaneous decisions and actions that occur within the networks of space so as to better understand mobility, possibility, and action in politicized spaces. This analysis of second-by-second everyday practice is called affect (see Stewart 2007), and it captures descriptions of actions occurring in space but also learned experience, voluntary and involuntary behavior, forms of thinking, engagement with political and social realities, and the context in which behavior occurs. Similar to early definitions of space and place, a concrete definition of affect eludes scholars because it is an amorphous, contextual concept. Thrift unequivocally asserts, “The problem that must be faced straight away [when discussing affect] is that there is no stable definition of affect. It can mean a lot of different things” (2004:59). Although no clear meaning of affect exists, three scholars Brian Massumi (2002), Kathleen Steward (2007), and Nigel Thrift
(2004) provide descriptions of behaviors, experiences, emotions, and processes that constitute affect. Massumi suggests that affect is about the praxis, movement, potential, and direction that informs every movement; Stewart emphasizes what she calls “surges”—the “things that happen” at any given moment (2007:2)—which influence and shape behavior and interaction. Thrift focuses on the emotions, contexts, and thought processes surrounding the concept of affect. These three scholars demonstrate the nebulous nature of affect, but like space and landscapes, affect can be most simply understood as a convergence of social actors, behaviors, emotions, decisions, powers, and knowledges, which ultimately shapes experience, movement, and understanding.

In an interview titled “Navigating Movements” (2002), anthropologist Brian Massumi explicates his conceptualization of affect, in which he defines affect largely through everyday practices and movements. Massumi’s conceptualization locates affect in the decisions and rationalizations behind bodily movements occurring in space. Accordingly, his definition focuses on the relational nature among knowledge, movement, and space. He states that affect represents the “margin of manoeuvrability (sic), the ‘where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do’ in every present situation” (2002). Affect involves being completely engaged in the world, actively making conscious (and at times unconscious) decisions concerning the next action. Bodies are in constant negotiations of relations of experience and political realities. Indeed, Massumi claims, “A body is defined by what capacities it carries from step to step. What these are exactly is changing constantly. A body’s ability to affect or be affected—its charge of affect—isn’t something fixed. The experience of a change, an affecting-being affected is redoubled by an experience of an experience. This gives the body’s movements a kind of dept that stays with it across all its transitions—accumulating in memory, in habit, in
reflex, in desire, in \textit{tendency}” (2002). Affect is fluidity based on experience, memory, and habit. It is the decisions bodies make every second based on histories of past behaviors, acquired knowledge, and possibility. At every given moment a body contains the potential to move, act, or react in myriad ways but an assessment of potentials, outcomes, and consequences coupled with previous experience and knowledge influences the next step. Bodies, identities, and mobilities are in constant flux, simultaneously liberated and constrained by the networks of relation and experience existing in spatial settings.

For Kathleen Stewart (2007), the crux of affect lies in the fluidity and possibility in every single movement and action. Affects are banal and everyday, but they are not trivial because they structure and influence mobility, decision-making, identity, experience, and forms of knowledge. Affects bestow banal movements with signification so that even the most seemingly insignificant action carries weight, because it does. Every movement contains a junction of experience, knowledge, sensation, expectation, habit, and possibility. According to Stewart, “[Affects’] significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad . . . but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance. They are a kind of contact zone where the over-determinations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place. To attend to affects is to trace how the potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too” (2007:3). Affect uncovers the structures of understanding and power behind every action. As Stewart stated, affect is not representational—it is what bodies know when they act. Affect is the manifestation
of knowledge, politics, and levels of experience occurring in movement and in space; they operate on possibility and according to experience, but their exact directions or manifestations cannot be completely, accurately predicted. Stewart claims, it is this impreciseness that makes affect fluid and fascinating, “The politics of any surge [read: affect] depends on where it might go. What happens. How it plays itself out and in whose hands. Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take places. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of a hat. But it’s affects that give things the quality of something to inhabit and animate” (2007:15). So, affect creates ideologies, politics, power, and identities as well as gives networks of relation and bodies their animation and vibrancy. Through affect we understand our identities, our surroundings, and the momentary potentialities at our disposal at each moment of movement. Whether consciously or subconsciously, bodies act according to the systems and structures that surge at every moment of action.

Nigel Thrift (2004) cautions against conflating and essentializing affect as simply emotion or feeling, and he clarifies that while emotions do factor into affect, ultimately affect is a contextual and holistic form of thinking and acting dependent on experience, possibility, and potential. Emotions, such as anger, joy, fear, trepidation, happiness, can be considered affects because they rise and subside in the body and profoundly influence behavior and action; however, according to Thrift, emotions do not fully reflect the extant processes of affect because by only considering emotions as the motivations for affective behavior obfuscates the networks of relation present in social interaction and spatial setting. Thrift asserts, affect can be “understood as the richly expressive/aesthetic feeling-cum-behavior of continual becoming that is provided chiefly by bodily states and process (which is understood as constitutive of affect) . . . [but] context seems to be a vital element in the constitution of affect. Very often, the sources of
emotions seem to come from somewhere outside the body, from the setting itself” (2004:60). Thus, emotions can be discussed when thinking about affect but they must be contextualized and related to social networks existing in space. If space, identities, movement, and experience are relational, their intersecting discourses must be analyzed together; a single aspect of human experience, such as emotion, cannot be wholly representational of affect or explain the moment-to-moment decisions and movements that bodies make in reaction to a stimulus. To emphasize this point, Thrift posits, “Because there is no time out from expressive being, perception of a situation and response are intertwined and assume a certain kind of ‘response-ability’ (Katz, 1999), an artful use of vast sensorium of bodily resources which depends heavily on the actions of others (indeed it is through such re-actions that we most often see what we are doing)” (2004:60, emphasis added). Our experiences, perceptions of space, and identities remain in constant dialogue with our surroundings as well as with other bodies and ideologies operating concurrently in the local and global vicinities. The conceptions of oneself and of space emerge from the interrelational, momentary trajectories and interactions that occur on multiple levels. Hence, identities are constructed, affirmed, and challenged through interrelationships and instantaneous interactions. Identities are not monolithic, stable notions of self; rather, they are layers of layers of meaning and experience arising from the convergence of space, movement, meaning, systems of power, habit, and negotiation.

Now that I have outlined the contemporary theory relating to space and identity formation, I proceed to discuss my ethnographic research, the methods that I employed, and the stories informants shared with me.
METHODOLOGY

The main method of my research endeavor involved collecting personal narratives from students at Grinnell College concerning their experiences and perceptions of safe and unsafe spaces on campus. Initially, my research focused specifically on the concept of “Queer Safe Space”, marked spaces that are designated completely safe and comfortable for students, faculty, and staff of all sexual orientations, at Grinnell. So, I sought interviewees by sending electronic mail messages to the members of the distribution contact list of the Stonewall Resource Center (SRC), Grinnell’s primary student organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and ally community. Because I served as the Program Coordinator of the SRC, I had access to the mail account and was able to send multiple messages asking for participants. I interviewed twenty-five students. The majority of informants were Anglo-American—twenty-one white informants compared to two African American students, one Hispanic student, and one student who claimed a “mixed” identity. I intended to obtain more of a racially diverse population sample; however, since participation in the interviews was completely voluntary, I could only converse with those students who responded, most of whom happened to be Anglo-American. Unfortunately, I was not able to meet with any international students, either. Throughout my discussion of this research process, especially in my analysis of the results and their implications, I am very conscious of the racial demographics of my research population. I do my utmost to always contextualize my analysis within my sample and am careful not to over-generalize or extrapolate claims to the larger student body or to students who do not identify with the majority of this research population. Despite the lack of ethnic diversity, the ages, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, and political orientations of the participants provided a more varied amount of voices, ideologies, and identities to the study.
I interviewed seven members of the first-year class of 2013, five students from each of the 2012 and 2011 classes, and five students from the class of 2010. Twelve participants identified as female, nine as male, one indicated their gender to be “other”, and one student did not report their gender identity. Three students identified as gay, two as lesbian, four as bisexual, six as queer, five as heterosexual/straight, one as “other”, and two students did not report their sexual orientations. As far as religious affiliation, I interviewed four Christian students, four students reported being “Non-Christian”, thirteen informants claimed they did not affiliate with any major religious tradition, one student reported their religion as “other”, and one student did not report a religious tradition. The majority of participants (eighteen out of twenty-five interviewees) described their political orientation as Liberal, whereas only one participant was a Conservative/Republican, and six informants reported their political orientation as “Other”. The variety of different social identities makes my investigation and results more nuanced, but again, I recognize the results represent a specific population of campus and individualized experiences and viewpoints.

My research began with two questions: 1. What is a Queer Safe Space, and as a school social justice and civic responsibility, why do members of the college community need to constant create Queer Safe Space?; and 2. Where exactly are the Queer Safe Spaces on campus? Why do people find them to be safe? Who shapes and controls them? Who has access to Queer Safe Spaces and who (if anyone) is excluded? But, as I progressed through my interviews, I discovered that although non-normative (i.e. non-straight) sexualities influenced how people conceptualized safe space and conversely, place affected the expression of one’s sexual orientation, informants’ sexual orientation was not the only factor that shaped their perceptions of safe and unsafe spaces. I realized I needed to take a more intersectional approach and
consider how an informant’s age, ethnicity, gender presentation, and other social identities as well as their sexual orientations combined to form their notions of safe space. Thus, I expanded my research interest from specifically investigating the concept of Queer Safe Space to a more holistic exploration of the impact of space and place on a variety of social identities and communities, and how one’s diverse identities shape their notion of where is safe and unsafe on Grinnell’s campus.

The interview began with an anonymous, confidential questionnaire that asked informants to provide their class year, the academic division of their major (i.e. science, social sciences, humanities, or undeclared), biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation (if any), political orientation (if any), ethnicity, and involvement on campus with athletic or extracurricular organizations. The questionnaire served to supply the social demographics of the informants so I could analyze how their multiple identities potentially affect their idea of safe space. The next step of the interview phase involved questioning the participants’ perceptions of diversity at Grinnell, the acceptance level of racial difference on campus, the role of the administration in the establishment of an accepting community, and ultimately, if the informant believes Grinnell College is a safe space for all of its students, faculty, and staff, especially those of non-dominant identities, expressions, and values (See Appendix 1 for the full list of interview questions). I designed the questions to encourage people to talk about their definitions of safe and unsafe spaces, their intersecting identities, as well as the lived, everyday experiences of all members of the college’s community. I wanted the informants to answer the questions truthfully without imposing my own definition of safe space or guiding them to any type of tailored response. In a sense, although I created the questions and approached the interviews with my own theoretical research agenda, I allowed the informants’
voices, experiences, and conceptions of safe space and the location of those spaces to shape the interview process and the responses provided. This research is, after all, about students sharing their personal understandings.

The questionnaire was followed by an activity in which I presented the participants with a physical map of the campus and asked them to grade various places on campus according to a color-coded rubric. The participants’ responses provided incredible insight into the experiences of Grinnell students, the locations of safe spaces around campus, and the formation and expression of diverse identities in specific places. The participants designated as many spaces on campus as safe, safer, neutral or no experience, slightly unsafe, and unsafe, and I encouraged them to consider their own personal experiences, popular associations attached to specific areas, or shared rumors or hearsay about certain spaces when completing the activity. As the informants ranked areas on campus, I asked that, if they felt comfortable, they provide some explanation or reasoning for their decisions. Obviously, some participants were more willing to share their experiences (whether positive or negative) than others, which speaks to how communicable personal experiences, especially those relating to issues of safety, experience, and identity expression, are for some yet an extremely difficult task for others.

The experience of place is contingent upon constantly fluctuating temporalities, politics, and power dynamics; and the participants’ narratives cannot be interpreted through my own personal definitions of safe space and identity expression. Instead, I am documenting the participants’ structures of meaning concerning safe space and identity creation as well as highlighting the similarities (and, perhaps more interestingly, the contestations) in Grinnell students’ narratives. The twenty-five narratives communicate differing opinions regarding diversity within the Grinnell College population, the level of acceptance of non-dominant and non-normative social
identities, and ultimately, whether Grinnell actually is a safe space for all of its students, faculty, and staff. Most participants agree that for the most part, Grinnell is a safe space, but spaces of prejudice, ignorance, intolerance, silence, and oppression do exist, and they can dramatically affect the possibility of identity expression which can severely limit the mobility and freedom of many people on campus.

INFORMANTS’ VOICES: RACE AND SPACE

Is Grinnell racially diverse?

Most informants credit Grinnell with being relatively diverse given that the school is located in rural Iowa (include state minority population). They admit that the Office of Admissions strives to attract minority students from a wide variety of geographic locations, especially in the United States, and recognize that Grinnell’s percentage of students of color (fifteen percent of the student body) is remarkably higher than peer institutions. However, many of the informants also addressed the problems they notice in terms of ethnic diversity at the college, specifically pertaining to attracting and retaining more faculty members and students of color, institutional support for students of color, challenging instances of racially-based oppression, and confronting the white privilege which, according to one informant, dominates the campus. While many participants acknowledge the school does work to attract more racial minorities, they believe the college’s efforts could be more strongly focused and improved. Although Grinnell boasts a relatively high percentage of domestic students of color, only fifteen percent of the population is composed of students of color, which leaves Anglo-American students in the majority. Many participants recognized that the school struggles to retain racially diverse faculty members, which severely limits the academic and social perspectives presented in classrooms and fails to provide students of color with support systems in the academic sphere.
Moreover, multiple informants claimed they witness instances of racial prejudice and bias on an almost daily basis, and they wonder why students hesitate to challenge these forms of oppression. One white male student said that subtle racism is very much present on campus, and he has heard and seem many unsafe spaces for people who are not white. Another white male informant explained that many of the instances of oppression (i.e. using racially-charged, offensive language) have been normalized so that issues like passing comments failed to be reported or challenged. Multiple students agree with this assertion, claiming that students possess the power to challenge their peers but do not seize the opportunity to educate and eliminate racism on campus as much as they potentially could. One informant believes that if more forums or open dialogues occurred that allowed students to explore and unpack the racial biases they carry, the issue of racism on campus would potentially be reduced. Still, racial prejudice remains a pressing issue at Grinnell, one that causes very real, negative, emotional and personal consequences for the student body. For instance, one African American informant expressed her frustration that racial issues only become important when a lot of major occurrences happened to make people brutally aware of the racial relations on campus. Another informant who identified as “mixed” race supports this allegation, saying that students of color are always burdened with the task of speaking out and challenging racial prejudice; in this student’s experience, white students fail to truly care about or take action against racism until a major incident occurs—that is when everyone becomes concerned.

Sites of racially based prejudice and oppression

According to the majority of informants, racism plagues the Grinnell College community, but where exactly do the instances of prejudice and bias occur on campus? Campus parties were commonly cited as locations where racial prejudices in the form of hateful comments or slurs
surface, because informants believe the presence of alcohol and other substances cause students to be more free and thoughtless with their words and actions. One African American participant has noticed that if non-white students are loud in public spaces, such as the Spencer Grill in the Joe Rosenfield Campus Center, they instantly become the focus of attention and discipline; the informant feels that, in her experience, in these instances, everyone turns to look at the students of color disapprovingly and expects them to be quiet, yet this type of regulating does not occur with loud white students. Three of the twenty-five informants identified classrooms as sites of racism and oppression because of the isolation and the intensified pressure these students feel to prove themselves in the academic setting. Two of the informants said they have been the only student of color in a class on multiple occasions, and they are often asked to provide the “minority perspective” during class discussions, which can made them feel extremely isolated, commoditized, and objectified. One informant graciously shared her distressing, yet illuminative, experience with academics and pressure in the classroom. She claimed that professors, especially white male professors in the science division, in her experience, hold unfair expectations about minority and international students. The informant feels like she constantly must prove her academic prowess to other students and professors, which she finds exhausting and profoundly affects how she perceives herself as a student. Academics have always been a source of enormous pride and self-validation for this student, which is why she feels constant added pressure to prove her scholastic aptitude as a minority student. She believes that professors do attempt to make the classroom a safe space, but many of them may be entirely unaware of the environment in the classroom, because ultimately, this student feels more unsafe in classrooms than any other location on campus. Besides physical spaces on campus, one African American informant explained how the elite, predominantly Anglo-American culture of
Grinnell creates ideological and cultural unsafe spaces for non-white students. The informant believes that the majority of events on campus, especially concerts, are catered to what she called “non-minority tastes.” The school brings a plethora of alternative, indie, and folk bands to campus but not very many techno, hip hop, or rap acts. The informant enjoys neo-soul and R&B music, but she feels she cannot openly express her preference for these genres of music because most students do not share these musical interests, and that is reflected in the concerts played on campus. The informant therefore believes that racial identities are “pushed down,” or in other words, the white majority’s interests are privileged and answered. The informant ended our interview by explicating how Grinnell’s ignorance of minority culture has negatively affected her personal identity; she explained, “I often forget who I am on campus. There is nothing here to remind me of who I am; nothing in terms of African American culture—no food, culture, or music. I am afraid I will graduate a white boy. My friends don’t know what it is like to be black here. They don’t want to know, and I don’t want to explain it to them.” This student’s remark clearly shows that the lack of space for the free expression and exploration of her African American identity constrains the ways in which she can come to know and understand herself.

*Expectations and stereotypes*

So, it appears that racial minorities are held to a range of problematic expectations at Grinnell: from professors asking minority students to speak for an entire ethnicity or to provide a minority perspective, to groups and organizations expecting minority students to transform their interests to match those of the majority of the student body. Several of the informants blamed students’ and professors’ subscription to racial stereotypes as one of the main manners by which prejudiced expectations of non-white students are perpetuated. The non-white students I interviewed expressed frustration that because of their name, skin color, or hometown, unfair
predictions and stereotypes are made of them. For instance, one informant told me that her first-year roommate thought the informant could not speak English because of her non-Anglo name. This understandably made the informant uncomfortable about how she presented herself and how other people perceived her. One informant bemoaned that he is constantly mistaken for an international student because of his skin color. It is not that he does not want to be considered and international student for any reason; rather, he finds people’s ignorance frustrating that they see his skin and automatically assume he is cannot be from the United States.

Problems of self-segregation and segregation

By and large, the main challenge afflicting the Grinnell’s campus in regards to race is the rampant segregation (in many cases self-segregation) that separates racial communities into clusters or “cliques”. Ten out of the twenty participants, from a variety of ethnicities, sexualities, class years, and genders, mentioned the clustering that occurs on campus of students of similar ethnicities. Indeed, a couple of informants reported that although statistically Grinnell boasts high levels of ethnic diversity, they are hesitant to claim that the school is diverse because of the segregation that occurs in social spaces on campus. Many students form cliques based on their ethnic identities and mingling among the different groups does not happen very often. One informant has noticed that at every single Harris dance party is racially segregated; she said that black students are always choose to congregate to the in the front area closest to the stage, while white students dominate the main dance floor area and the platforms. Another interviewee highlighted the segregation that occurs inside the dining hall. She said that non-white and international students regularly eat their meals in the “Intimate Dining” section in the back area of the dining hall because they do not feel comfortable sitting in the main eating area where they

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2 Interestingly another student described the Dining Hall as one of the major panopticons on campus because of the heightened sense of visibility and vulnerability she feels there.
feel white students constantly surveill and police behavior. In fact, the same informant revealed that when she was a first-year student, an older student told her that people of color had to sit in the Intimate Dining area; as if this were the only space in the dining hall they could feel comfortable and evade harassment. This is something all members of the Grinnell community should find extremely disconcerting. Students often overlook or gloss over these manifestations of racism and prejudice. Meanwhile, the college’s administration continues to advertise Grinnell as a diverse, accepting place because administrators do not witness the self-segregation that occurs on campus, as well as the pressure professors and other students place on minority to match their expectations and stereotypes.

INFORMANT'S VOICES: GENDER IDENTITY AND SAFE SPACE

Moving from racial identity to gender identity, I notice that gender power dynamics occurring in certain spaces deeply impacts how informants’ perceive sites on campus. Sixteen of the twenty-three informants discussed issues regarding safe spaces on campus in relation to gender identity and expression. Of those sixteen students, ten identified as female, one informant identified as transgender, and five identified as male, which suggests that, at least within this sample of Grinnell students, women are more aware of safe and unsafe spaces on campus. Informants’ comments regarding gender identity and expression and safe space on campus centered around three salient concerns: transphobia or confusion about transgender issues; the prevalence of gender neutral spaces; and public spaces that perpetuate unequal gender power dynamics and facilitate sexual assault.

Transgender issues

According to the informants, a general confusion surrounding transgender issues and students with non-normative gender presentations exists on campus, which severely limits safe spaces for transgender or gender-queer students. Some students understand that many people did
not get introduced to the concept of gender and non-normative gender expression until arriving at Grinnell; however, one informant bemoaned the fact that the responsibility to educate students about alternative gender identity often falls on transgender students themselves—they must define and articulate their gender while simultaneously teaching their peers about gender expression. Even once students expand their conceptions of gender identity it does not necessarily guarantee alternative gender presentations are widely accepted on campus. In fact, three students unequivocally stated that non-normative gender identities are not accepted at Grinnell—a fact that one student blamed on a general lack of visibility of transgender people as well as vocal, supportive allies. But, on the other hand, one student claimed that non-cisgender people feel more visible on campus in a completely negative way because their bodies and presentations are regularly scrutinized, especially when these students are engaging in a very simple task, such as using a restroom. One location on campus that two students cited as an unsafe space for students of non-normative presentations is the Joe Rosenfield Center (JRC). The building does not house any single toilet (“unisex”) bathrooms which imposes the gender binary and forces non-cisgender students to “out” themselves as transgender by making them use the restroom according to their biological sex but not necessarily their gender identity. One informant shared a story of an incident that occurred last semester which makes salient how unsafe the JRC, specifically the dining hall, can be for students with alternative gender expressions. During Transgender Awareness Week in November of 2009, an employee of the dining hall refuse to allow the informant’s friend (who identifies as transgender) into the dining hall because the student’s current gender presentation did not match the picture on the student’s Pioneer One student identification card. This unpleasant occurrence demonstrates how much
latent confusion exists on campus surrounding gender identity and expression, as well as the incredible need for sensitivity education and safe spaces for non-cisgender students.

**Gender neutral spaces**

Grinnell boasts that ten percent of college-owned housing is gender neutral, and buildings around campus contain gender neutral restrooms. One male-identified student stated that he really enjoys that the school places a strong emphasis on gender neutrality because it encourages people to think critically about gender, issues of non-normative expression, and the ways in which they can be making spaces unsafe for people of non-normative gender presentations. However, two students assert that the level of acceptance could be greatly increased and that the campus needs to make progress much further to make it a safe space for non-cisgender people. One female-identified student ventured as far as to allege that gender neutrality is not widely accepted at Grinnell, especially by people who do not live in gender neutral housing. She has experienced instances when people claimed a restroom was single sex and refused to let a member of the opposite sex to use it, regardless of the person’s gender identity. The lack of completely gender neutral spaces on campus reinforces the gender binary that many students do not adhere to, which limits the different ways they can understand and express their gender identities, especially variant identities.

**Public spaces with unequal gender dynamics and sexual assault**

Ten of the twenty-three informants specifically discussed how unequal gender power dynamics factor into their conceptions of safe space and the places at Grinnell where these dynamics occur. And, interestingly, all the informants who talked about unequal power dynamics and space identify as female, suggesting that male informants’ male privilege allows them to not experience unsafe spaces because of their dominant gender identity. Female
Informants consistently reference two specific locations on campus as places that are unsafe for women: athletic facilities, such as the Physical Education Complex (PEC) and the Athletic and Fitness Center, and the Harris Center on the weekends when parties occur. One informant claimed she avoids entering the athletic facilities because she is “afraid of stereotypical jocks”, while another informant designated the athletic facilities as unsafe spaces and explicitly stated, “As a woman, I don’t feel safe” and that these represent unsafe environments for anyone who is not a “straight, buff man.” One informant shared an uncomfortable incident she experienced in the PEC locker rooms that caused her to designate the building as an unsafe space. She was a member of a women’s sports team and after practice, the team showered together in the locker room. Initially, the act felt like a type of team bonding activity, but the atmosphere quickly became uncomfortable. She said that the team openly talked and joked about sexual activity and sexuality in the shower, but the conversations were stiflingly heteronormative. The informant believes that the girls on the team valorized typical gender norms, and the dominant members (i.e. the older girls on the team) created an atmosphere that did not include space for non-dominant sexualities or gender expressions. The informant felt pressure to adhere to standard gender norms because the other girls on the team assumed everyone subscribed to them and imposed them on everyone else.

In regards to the Harris Center, three female informants indentified the space as the primary arena on campus for gender inequality, domination, and exploitation. One woman commented about the “drunk athletes” that can be at the Harris parties. Although the informant essentializes and lumps all male athletes into one group, she still considers those people to be the same people who continually act inappropriately and perpetuate inequality by enacting unequal gender dynamics on the dance floor. Another female informant never personally experienced
anything problematic while at the Harris Center, but she related a story that frequently happened to her friend, which ultimately affected the way she (negatively) perceives the Harris Center: on more than one occasion, a male student followed the informant’s female friend around the building, even into the restroom. The informant’s friend told him to stop following her and she resorted to calling Campus Security to escort her back to her dorm because of the man. Beyond Harris, some female informants claimed that large parties generally constitute unsafe spaces for women. One informant plainly stated “Parties are not safe spaces for women.”, while another informant recounted an incident that happened at a party at an off-campus house in which three to four male students were being very sexually aggressive with her, and she actually had to explicitly demand that the boys leave her alone before they ceased bothering her. So, space largely informs where women can travel and feel safe on campus. The power dynamics occurring in the Harris Center and the Athletic Center reinforce male dominance on women’s bodies and influence how women understand themselves on Grinnell’s campus.

SEXUALITY AND SAFE SPACE

As I mentioned earlier, my critical inquiry of the conception of safe space and the formation of social identities at Grinnell initially began as a project entirely focused on sexuality, space, and movement. The prolificacy of the notion of “Queer Safe Space” is inescapable on campus, but simply because students, faculty, and staff are familiar with the concept of space that is blind to sexual orientation, does not necessarily signify that queer safe spaces exist, and that students of all sexual orientations operate freely, without discomfort or concern for their safety. Indeed, one informant questioned how members of the Grinnell community establish and maintain queer safe spaces, and whether by establishing spaces that are indisputably queer safe spaces, do people create an unsafe space for people with differing viewpoints. Issues of
inclusion and exclusion, visibility, silence, prejudice, and levels of acceptance of sexual minorities all figure prominently in informants’ discussions of safe space in relation to sexual orientation. Similar to responses regarding ethnicity and space on campus, informants recognize that Grinnell stands well ahead of peer institutions in terms of sexual diversity, but many problems do exist on campus that members of the community hesitate to address.

**General climate, past events, administrative support**

The overwhelming majority of students that I interviewed acknowledged that Grinnell possesses a student body with very diverse sexualities, especially for the school’s size and geographic location. Many informants claimed that students, faculty, and staff are widely accepting of non-straight sexualities because the queer community is visible and active on campus. Queer students and their allies find many friends in the college’s administration; one informant cited the fact that the Stonewall Resource Center (SRC) is fully funded by the administration as proof of administrators’ support of and commitment to equality for sexual minorities.

Although most of the informants believe that generally speaking, students of all sexual orientations on campus find a welcoming, affirming community and many could not remember witnessing incidents of blatant homophobia, a significant number of informants mentioned two major events that occurred on campus within the past four years as evidence that issues of homophobia do exist: the mailing of hate letters in spring 2008; and homophobic graffiti found on a student’s bulletin board in one of the dormitories. The considerable amount of informants that referenced these negative incidents implies that instances of blatant homophobia become lodged in the public consciousness because of their rarity. Four informants discussed the incident that occurred in spring 2008 when thirty-five students were sent homophobic letters
(e.g. “God hates fags”) through the inter-campus mail network, and then were sent hateful electronic messages through an anonymous email account. For the students who were at Grinnell when the incident occurred (i.e. students of the classes of 2010 and 2011), the hate letters indubitably demonstrated that homophobia and prejudice exists at Grinnell, and those students who were targeted claim they cannot easily forget the emotions, pain, fear, and frustration they experienced during to the incident. According to informants, one positive outcome of the hate-motivated incident, however, is that it caused members of the college’s administration to become fully aware of the problems and prejudices on campus, and encouraged administrators to work with students to provide more resources and support for the queer community.

In September of 2009, a student returned to their room in one of the dormitories on East Campus to discover that a person or group of people wrote homophobic pejoratives on the student’s door decorations and on the bulletin board. The SRC responded by essentially reclaiming the dormitory as a queer safe space by hanging “Queer Safe Space” banners, writing messages in chalk on the sidewalk outside of the dorm, and publishing a Letter to the Editor in the next week’s edition of the school newspaper. Four of the twenty-three informants reference this incident in their discussions of safe space. Like the hate mailings of 2008, this occurrence demonstrated that, while for the most part the campus is queer friendly, major pockets of prejudice against members of non-straight sexualities exist at Grinnell. One informant admitted, however, that he was very disappointed by the way in which many people reacted to the SRC’s response. Opponents of the response challenged that the action alienated some people on campus (e.g. straight people) because the reaction was brusque and unapologetic. These groups of people believed an open forum or some type of all-campus discussion would have served as a
more effective strategy to answer the incident. The informant responded to these accusations by claiming he felt upset that those people who critiqued the action did not consider how people who identify as queer experienced and were potentially affected by the incident. The hate-motivated incidents and the subsequent responses construct safe and unsafe spaces on campus for members of the queer community, and allow them to express or require them to inhibit their non-straight identities. One student mentioned every time she opens her mailbox she is afraid there will be something in there, and many students designated the dorm on East Campus in which the graffiti happened as an unsafe space. These events brand space and affect where queer people feel safe expressing their non-straight identities.

Visibility of sexual minorities

According to informants, overall, queer students find a vibrant, welcoming, and affirming community in which they can identify as non-straight and openly express same desire; however, exceptions do plague the larger Grinnell community, as well as the LGBTQIA community itself, in regards to queer visibility, acceptance, and attitudes towards people with non-normative sexualities. One female informant who identifies as queer claimed, “There are a lot of queer people on campus, many of whom are out and openly gay.” Another male student who also identifies as queer agrees, but also adds nuances to the assertion that Grinnell is completely accepting; he stated there is a “certain level of normativity [surrounding queer identities]; bisexuality is really accepted and normalized for women but not for men.” This highlights one of the major critiques informants made against the Grinnell community in terms of sexuality—lesbian, gay, and female bisexual identities are widely normalized and affirmed, whereas, students struggle to comprehend and accept those sexual identities that fall outside of the typical categories of sexual orientation. Although informants mentioned seeing same-sex couples
dancing and engaging in sensual activity at parties, one informant openly challenges the everyday level of visibility and acceptance on campus for orientations that do not fit into categories by stating, “only (the sexualities) that are extremely visible are discussed and understood, [which] makes a level of non-acceptance because people don’t understand it and then don’t talk about it.” So, it seems like informants recognize and appreciate the high level of lesbian, gay, and female bisexual visibility, normativity, and the freedom to express these identities, but other non-normative, non-straight sexualities are often excluded from public dialogues and discourses concerning sexuality, which constricts the expression and movement of students with these orientations.

Furthermore, the pressure students place on students with non-straight sexualities to be open and out, and the subsequent rumor mill that spreads students’ personal identities throughout the community causes some students to keep their sexuality extremely private and never act on their desires for queer interactions. One female-identified bisexual student recognized that regarding sexuality, Grinnell is an accepting school, but she added that within the community, “a lot of people with non-straight sexualities struggle with an ‘internal hump’ because there is an attitude or expectation that all non-heterosexuals should be out and open about their queerness, which makes coming out and being open more difficult for some students.” Indeed, because Grinnell is a small, tightly-knit community, secrets and personal information tend to travel quickly through the campus, especially among the student body. Queer students may perhaps argue that coming out and making non-straight sexualities well-known increases the visibility of queer students on campus, which ultimately alleviates the problem concerning sexual visibility I previously discussed. If Grinnell truly is a welcoming, affirming queer safe space, why do students hesitate to disclose their non-straight sexualities? One queer male student
acknowledges that “coming out is powerful” because without it there exists a “lack of community,” but he asks “if you come out to one person, how many people are you coming out to?” Grinnellians tend to politicize their social identities, and queer identities are no exception. Perhaps, students’ apprehension to come out can be read as a strategic avoidance of the phenomenon which many informants claimed happens among members of the queer community; that is, adherence to stereotypes and assumptions, lumping, and self-segregation.

**Stereotypes, assumptions, and grouping/self-segregation**

Similar to students of ethnic minorities, students with non-straight sexual orientations claim they feel intense pressure and expectations from other students, faculty, and staff to operate and behave a certain way because of common stereotypes they hold against people with queer sexualities. According to informant testimonies, many people in the Grinnell community harbor preconceived notions of LGBTQIA people, and they fail to critically unpack their negative conceptions of queer people before interacting with non-heterosexual people. One gay male informant said, “Within certain populations different sexualities are accepted; people generally accept [non-straight sexual orientations] but have a hard time interacting [with queer people]—because they can’t see past the stereotypes.” To concretize this informant’s assertion, a female, lesbian-identified student provided two stark examples of how students’ stereotypes about queer people affect their ways of interaction: 1. During an off-campus retreat the informant attended, she had to navigate with whom she would share a room because she could sense that some people were not comfortable with sharing a room with an openly gay person; and 2. The people who live on her residence floor know she is involved in the LGBTQIA community on campus, and that affects the ways in which they treat her. She said that other girls appear nervous or anxious when the informant is in the bathroom with them. Her roommate seems
uncomfortable when the informant changes her clothes in the room. In fact, the informant now showers early in the morning so as to not make the situation uncomfortable and so she does not feel shamed in any way. Clearly, the girls’ actions towards the informant are manifestations of the stereotypes and negative conceptions they hold about lesbians; that is, the informant would not be able to control her sexual urges around any girls, regardless of the context. This informant’s narrative saliently demonstrates that while open hostility against queer students does often exist, a “silent shunning or fear” of people with non-normative sexualities does in fact plague Grinnell.

Likewise, students tend to lump all queer-identified students into one amorphous group, or students frequently self-segregate themselves into social groups based on their sexual orientations. As the informant’s narratives demonstrated, when a student identifies as queer others immediately associate that person with the LGBTQIA community, and stereotypical assumptions and trepidations follow. Students outside the queer community assume a prolific, homogenous social community exists for people who identify as non-straight. But as one gay male informant testifies, this is certainly not the case. He claims the campus has “staple queers”, which I am defining as the small, selective group of queer students who are very out, extremely vocal, and actively involved with the LGBTQIA organizations on campus. The informant wishes the queer community were more homogenous because he often feels isolated—when he is the only openly gay person in a classroom, for instance. The informant’s comment speaks to the alleged self-segregating nature of the Grinnell queer community. One female informant supports this assertion, that the queer community can be a rigid clique, and adds that there seems to be prejudice from gay men against straight men. She believes that the sexual minorities on campus possess a lot of power because the administration supports the queer community so
strongly. The sexual minorities then use that power to alienate people when they so desire; they can utilize the politics and atmosphere of the school to enact the same kind of oppression on the straight community that members of the non-straight community have experienced.

**Learning curve and latent homophobia**

Ultimately, informants cited two critical reasons that they believed to be primarily responsible for the general lack of knowledge regarding non-straight sexualities, as well as the latent homophobia that exists in some pockets of the student body population. Grinnell advertises itself as a progressive, liberal, queer-friendly school so it would seem that students whose personal ideologies do not match those of the school’s would not consciously select to attend this type of institution. But, for whatever reason, sometimes more conservative students find themselves at Grinnell, navigating a social landscape with foreign identities and ideologies. I do not want to suggest that more conservative students are inherently homophobic whatsoever. What I do mean, is that regardless of personal ideologies, tensions do arise when students who never have dealt with issues of sexuality are hastily thrown into an irrefutably queer-friendly environment. The common attitude towards people who struggle with prejudiced issues against people with non-normative sexualities is, “This is what Grinnell is. Adhere to it or keep quiet.” Four informants reminded me that, when discussing sexual bias, it is important to keep in mind that many students did not deal with issues of sexuality or gender presentations until they arrived. Students are expected to assimilate to the Grinnell culture by quickly and obediently restructuring their thoughts and conceptions. So, first-year students arrive to Grinnell in late August and are expected to completely reform all their believes and conceptions of sexuality in roughly one week during New Student Orientation, which in many cases is insufficient time to accomplish this.
Additionally, minimal spaces exist for students to explore and unpack their prejudices against sexual minorities, which effectively silences a notable population of the student body, and in turn, provides students with enacting brash incidents of homophobia as the only viable option to express unpopular, prejudiced thinking. Five informants claimed that Grinnell’s culture of being “intolerant of intolerance”, in which those ideals and ideologies that contradict the school’s liberal, progressive atmosphere are not widely accepted, is partially responsible for the latent homophobia that plagues the campus. One female informant, who identified as queer, stated, “The people who use problematic language or act out on prejudices as an outlet because there is no way at Grinnell to talk about biases in a healthy, constructive way. There is no forum to explore biases about race, socio-economic status, gender, sex, ability, beauty, etc. Because everyone at Grinnell is so likeminded, problems and prejudices can be exacerbated.” Students who arrive at Grinnell with any type of social prejudices are not provided the opportunities to thoroughly express and deconstruct their biases. The educational programming of New Student Orientation provides a very basic primer to social difference, but the task of unpacking prejudices and becoming more accepting of difference largely falls on students themselves. Informants reported a prolific “don’t like it, don’t look at it” attitude on campus. One female informant asserted, “There is a strong social pressure not to speak out against queer people; there is an attitude that a person should avert their eyes if they don’t like what they see. It is hard to create a productive dialogue on campus when people come from so many different backgrounds and locations.” Indeed, the lack of discursive space for students to explore and deconstruct their biases causes major tensions which often manifest themselves in troubling ways. One gay male informant agrees, “People aren’t entirely honest about how they feel about sexual minorities; there is not enough visibility for people with differing views.” The lack of comprehensive
education regarding sexual difference coupled with the rampant silencing that occurs on campus creates a miniscule margin for productive discourse, and causes students to lash out in the most extreme manner against the LGBTQIA community in order to have their opinions recognized. Although one queer female informant believes, “Social change on campus comes more effectively through experience and observation rather than dialogue because dialogue is too confrontational. People who are homophobic learn more from getting to know the queer and ally community through personal experience,” other informants want Grinnell to offer more forums and educational programming to educate students through the process of deconstructing not only homophobia but racism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism, and classism as well.

To conclude this section about the interviews and informants’ responses, I will reiterate the five most prominent issues present throughout the responses concerning race, gender identity, and sexuality in relation to safe space: 1. Students’ failure to challenge small forms of oppression: Multiple informants mentioned that they witness manifestations of racist, sexist, or homophobic bias on a daily basis in small actions or fleeting comments. According to informants these incidents are rarely challenged, and only when major instances of hatred or bias occur is when people begin to become concerned about prejudice; 2. Unfair expectations and stereotypes placed on students with non-dominant identities: Students of color and of non-straight sexual orientations claim other students, faculty, and staff hold prejudiced stereotypes about them. These stereotypes and assumptions deeply affect the ways in the expectations placed on marginalized students and the forms of interaction people have with each other; 3. The responsibility to educate other students about difference: Racial minorities, students with non-normative gender presentations and identities, and non-straight students all described the frustration they feel when they must educate their peers about their identities. Although most
informants claimed they would rather explain their identity to someone that have assumption made about them, they do wish people took more initiative to educate themselves instead of placing the burden on their peers; 4. The segregation and cliques that are rampant on campus: Especially true for racial minorities and members of the queer community, informants reported the campus is starkly divided along social lines and that the clique boundaries are difficult to cross.  Students establish cliques based on their social identities and maintain those rigid groups; and 5. The lack of a forum to constructively explore and unpack prejudice: Multiple students believe that because students arrive on campus and are expected to quickly adopt Grinnell’s values while concurrently eliminating their prejudices, often bias is not deconstructed but simply silenced.  Informants claim the lack of a forum in which students can healthfully, and constructive unlearn prejudices ultimately exacerbates tensions and causes students to act irrationally in frustration and anger.

THE MOOD MAPS: DESIGNATING SAFE AND UNSAFE SPACES

Beyond students’ opinions and insights concerning the diversity of students, faculty, and staff, as well as the level of acceptance on campus of community members with non-dominant identities, beliefs, and ideologies, I asked informants to rate the spaces on campus based on their perceptions of those spaces as safe or unsafe.  I supplied informants with an enlarged map of Grinnell’s campus (Appendix 2), and encouraged the informants to label as many spaces on campus as possible with a safety rating.  The rubric of safety rating was: 1=unsafe, 2=slightly unsafe, 3=neutral or no experience, 4=safer (than neutral), 5=safe.  Students’ ratings could be as specific as a single room in a dorm hall or a hallway in an academic building, or they could designate an entire building or space with a certain rating.  Following the trends I discovered in the opinion question of the interviews, I used the ArcGIS program to create a handful of different
maps to visually represent informants’ insights. I looked at the trends in a composite map of all twenty-three maps, maps of non-white and white students, maps of male-identified and female-identified students, and finally maps of non-heterosexual (queer) and heterosexual maps.

**Landscapes of Contestation**

The first map I created compiled all twenty-three of informants’ designations of spaces of campus (Appendix 3). The composite map clearly shows spaces exist on campus that students find safe and unsafe. I analyze three building specifically, Noyce Science Center, the Athletic Center, and Harris Center, as public spaces that are imbued with positive and negative meanings. Students gave Noyce a composite average rating of 3.17, which is falls within the neutral category. However, the twelve female-identified students rated Noyce an average of 2.62, and non-white students gave the Science Center an average of 2.88 suggesting that women and students of color feel slightly unsafe in the building. Two female informants claimed they gave Noyce a lower rating because of the “straight white male professors” who teach in the building and because these informants believe that issues of social justice and equality are rarely discussed here. One Hispanic student claimed she feels added pressure to prove herself as a student of color in the science courses, and thus, she provided Noyce with a slightly unsafe rating.

Interestingly, the four science majors I interviewed rated Noyce with a slightly unsafe evaluation of 2.25. Presumably, these students are the informants who spend the most time inside the building so it is peculiar that they find the building slightly unsafe. The low ranking could potentially reflect the low number of science majors interviewed, but one informant who is a science major echoed the sentiments of the female-identified informants—people assume that
issues of prejudice and oppression are rarely discussed in Noyce, and therefore, people do not feel their variant identities are understood, affirmed, or supported.

Similar to Noyce, the seven people who presumably access the Athletic Center the most, people affiliated with sports teams, provided the building with an unsafe average score of 1.50. This could suggest that because these students spend more time in the Athletic Center more than other students, there are more opportunities for them to collect negative experiences in the building. But, one male-identified informant who participates on a sports team claimed that depending on how he is expressing his gender identity causes him to feel more of less safe in the building. Another female-identified informant related a story about negative experiences she has had in the locker room when engaging in heteronormative conversations with her teammates.

Overall, informants gave the Athletic Center a slightly unsafe composite average of 2.46. Women and men provided the building with the same rating of 2.50, while first-year students find the building to be unsafe and gave it a rating of 1.75. One female informant said that anyone who is not a “straight, buff man” does not feel safe in the building, and with first-year students it may be a matter of not having much experience with the building that influences their rating of it.

Then, students ranked the Harris Center an average of 2.63. Men and women gave the building similar slight unsafe ratings of 2.80 and 2.44, respectively. Non-straight informants rated the building as neutral (3.06), but straight informants ranked the building as unsafe with a rating of 1.70. Multiple female-identified students claimed they find the building to be unsafe because of the “drunk athletes” that can be at the parties. Informants claimed that during parties the building is filled with drunk people with lower inhibitions, which causes unequal, unsafe gender dynamics between men and women.
“Where are the safe spaces for students of color?”

This subtitle came from an African American informant who stated that everywhere on campus is an unsafe space for non-white students. She mentioned that only two intentional safe spaces exist on campus of people of color: the Black Cultural Center and the Multi-Cultural Suites in the Joe Rosenfield Center. The composite map of the four non-white students reveal that students of color feel more unsafe in classrooms than white students which was saliently reflected in non-white students’ interview responses (Appendices 4 and 5). Students of color rated academic buildings—Noyce, Alumni Recitation Hall, Carnegie Hall, Steiner, and Goodnow—neutral or slightly unsafe, compared to white students who find these buildings to be safer. White students find the dormitories on North Campus and East Campus to be more unsafe and dorms on South Campus safer than non-white students who find the dorms of North Campus to be safer than those on South Campus. Students of color also rated all off-campus houses completely unsafe, which agrees with their statements during the interviews when they stated that they feel safe on campus but as soon as they step foot outside of campus, they feel vulnerable. Differences in the ratings of the Athletic Center and Physical Education suggest that white students feel more unsafe in these spaces than students of color.

The reported Queer Safe Spaces of Grinnell College

Only subtle differences exist between the mood maps of straight and non-straight/queer students. The fifteen non-straight students designated the Dining Hall and the Joe Rosenfield Center as more neutral/unsafe than straight students did who find both spaces to be safe. Looking at the individual ratings of the non-straight students, it seems that the neutral rating of these spaces comes from the combination of some students who find them to be unsafe spaces and some students who rated them as completely safe. Furthermore, non-straight students
designated dormitories on North Campus—Gates, Rawson, Clark, Dibble, Cowles, and Harris Halls—as slightly unsafe and unsafe, whereas straight students ranks these dorms as neutral or safer. A handful of queer informants explained that they often avoid going to social functions in dorms on North Campus because traditionally only people affiliated with sports teams frequent these events, which makes queer students feel unsafe. Interestingly though, the five straight students\(^3\) marked the Athletic Center and Physical Education Center as unsafe, whereas the composite map for queer students shows these buildings to be more neutral. Again, looking at individual responses shows that many queer students ranked these buildings as unsafe but many queer students also marked these buildings as safe. Straight students rated the off-campus houses as unsafe spaces, but for non-straight students, these spaces are safer (Appendices 8 and 9).

**DISCUSSION: RELATING ETHNOGRAPHY TO THEORY**

As I mentioned earlier, the chief objective of this research project is to understand students’ stories and perceptions of safe spaces on campus, experiences in relation to space and expression of identity, and perceived levels of acceptance and oppression operating within the Grinnell community. I find difficulty in drawing definite conclusions regarding students’ experiences and assessments of the social climate of Grinnell; I want students’ stories to speak for themselves and hesitate to impose my own personal readings or interpretations (which inevitable are fraught with partiality and uncertainty) of informants’ responses. Instead, I will corroborate aspects of the responses with contemporary theory concerning the constitutive process of space and identity formation. Informants’ narratives, understandings, and conceptions of space demonstrate that space and identity are constructed through interactions, experiences, habits, and relations. Once spaces and identities are established, power dynamics are introduced

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\(^3\) Two students did not indicate a sexual orientation.
and certain behaviors and expressions of self become acceptable or inappropriate, while
subsequent barriers enforce inclusion or exclusion from spaces. Consequently, these barriers
impact students’ affective possibility and mobility. Movement, expression, and experience
become inhibited, affirmed and encouraged, challenged, or unnoticed.

**Relational identity formation**

Contemporary scholars of identity and identity formation underline the relational of
nature social identities, and students’ narratives saliently reflect the relational construction of
identities at Grinnell. Obviously, members of the Grinnell community do not live in a vacuum,
and thus it is preposterous to suggest that people simply form monolithic, closed identities that
remained untouched by social interaction. The construction of social identity occurs
continuously through interaction, connections, potentialities, and interrelationships. As Massumi
points out (2002), “It’s a fiction that there is any position within society that enables you to
maintain yourself as a separate entity with complete control over your decisions . . . What you
can do, your potential, is defined by your connectedness . . . not your ability to separate off and
decide by yourself.” At Grinnell, students engage in almost continual interactions with peers,
faculty, and staff. Students’ connectedness with other members of the community greatly
influences their movements, behaviors, and experiences, while simultaneously constructing
social identities. For example, the segregation that occurs on campus due to a student’s race or
sexual orientation demonstrates the decisions that student makes, the interactions he/she/ze
experiences, and the constitution of a certain identity. So, if an African American student feels
most comfortable sitting with other students of color in the Intimate Dining section of the Dining
Hall, primarily spends most of his time with other African American students and forms
“cliques” based on these connections, and experiences the frustration and alienation of being the
only African American student in a class whom a professor asks to provide the “minority
perspective”, all these interactions, connections, experiences, and interpellations combine to construct that student’s African American identity on campus. The student comes to understand his ontology, alter his behavior, and construct a specific identity from the moment-by-moment interactions he encounters.

If identities are constructed relationally through interactions with other identities and networks of knowledge, then they must be created in an interrelational setting—space. Because space is formed from layers of experience, identities, and social systems, it facilitates the production of relational identities. According to social theorist Robyn Longhurst (in Atkinson, et al. 2005, “Bodies and spaces construct each other in complex and nuanced ways. It is impossible to talk about bodies without talking about space and vice versa. Bodies are performed, resisted, disciplined and oppressed not simply in but through space” (93). Physical and imagined spaces on campus provide the setting for interrelational constructions of students’ identities. This becomes especially obvious when students designate spaces safe or unsafe because these spaces either promote or prohibit the development and expression of certain identities. Students’ remarks concerning spaces reflect how these spaces inform their identities in negative and positive manners. Female-identified students claiming they do not feel safe entering the Athletic Center reconstitutes them as bodies that are unjustly dominated by men; gay male students refusing to attend parties in certain dorm halls on campus because of past incidents of homophobia reminds these students that their non-straight sexual identity limits the places they can access and express themselves; students of color feeling pressure to continually prove their academic aptitude in the classroom constitutes them as inferior to white students because of their racial identity; the examples continue for every type of social identity. The nuanced layers of space remain in constant dialogue with expressions and constructions of identities on campus.
Space becomes more concretely defined when systems of power are introduced and proliferate so that particular behaviors and identities become normalized, actions are deemed appropriate or inappropriate, and subsequently individuals are included or excluded from spaces.

*Normalized behavior, inclusion/exclusion, landscapes and moral geographies*

Certainly, students related myriad examples of spaces composed of normalized, accepted behavior in which some actions are welcomed while others are considered inappropriate and regulated. Returning to one informant’s earlier claims, when students of color act vociferously in public spaces, other students scrutinize their behavior, as if attempting to coerce the student of color into silence. The actions of the policing students demonstrates that in some spaces only certain individuals possess the right to act in a certain manner, otherwise behavior that falls outside of that prescription becomes subject to control. Consequently, the overt regulation of behavior could potentially make students of color feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or barred from spaces. Framed in this manner, the Grinnell campus can be conceived as an example of Mitchell’s landscape because spaces on campus come into realization through constant social interactions that imbue the space with meaning while concurrently establishing sites of alienation. Grinnell also fits Cresswell’s definition of a moral geography in that politics, power, estrangement, norms, and meaning infuse spaces with significance so that behaviors become normalized and those outside the norm experience alienation and regulation.

*Power and identity*

A key aspect of landscapes and moral geographies is the systems of power that operate on individuals and impact behavior. Systems of power permeate space and operate on bodies engaging in social interactions, which ultimately create individual identities and realities. In fact, James Martin (in Atkinson, et al. 2005) argues that power represents the primary constitutive
aspect of social identity, claiming, “‘Having an identity’, therefore, comes with a series of associated practices through which it is concretised and involves relations of power, subordination and exclusion (sic)” (99), which further emphasizes the notion that systems of power are inescapable and completely necessary for the constitution of identities. Grinnell is entirely composed of landscapes and geographies of power—from the unequal gender dynamics reported to occur at the Harris Center to one student refusing to let another student use a gendered restroom because the student’s perceived gender expression did not match that designated for the restroom. Conscious and unconscious manifestations of power structure relations which ultimately create identities, but they also severely restrict the possibility for experience and potential for mobility for many members of the college community.

Affect at Grinnell

Here, the theories of Massumi, Stewart, and Thrift concerning affect, potentiality, and mobility become especially relevant. The theories of affect allege that bodies engage in constant, fluctuating dialogues, negotiations, and relations of experience and reality. Even in the most banal movements, past experiences are considered, potentialities are weighed, consequences are considered, and action happens. Bodies at Grinnell participate in incessant dialogue with the surroundings, systems of power, as well as other bodies and identities. Affect at Grinnell arises from the intersections of emotion, possibility, power, experience, and understandings of identity. Students are not in Grinnell, they are of Grinnell; and, within every ordinary movement, students’ conceptions of themselves and spaces at Grinnell manifest and become obvious. It happens when a lesbian female student stands at the entrance of a party, contemplating whether or not she wants to enter. Or, when a student hears an oppressive comment uttered whether he chooses to challenge the comment or simply continue about his business. Grinnell is composed
of affects, landscapes, moral geographies, and identities, all of which remain under constant negotiation, agreement, contention, or restructuring.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the fall of 2008, Grinnell College employed the Rankin & Associates Consulting firm to conduct a massive campus climate assessment project. All current students, faculty, and staff could complete the campus climate survey which was available online. Seven hundred and thirty surveys were returned, representing a thirty-one percent response rate. The survey reported that twenty-five percent of the forty respondents of color who had experienced some type of harassment on campus believe they were target and harassed because of their racial identity. Seventeen percent of these informants feared received a poor grade in a class because of a hostile classroom environment. Regarding gender, twenty-eight of the respondents admitted to being survivors of sexual assault while at Grinnell, twenty-three of whom were women. In terms of sexual orientation, the survey found that of the fifty-three respondents who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, forty-one percent received derogatory remarks, thirty-five percent reported being victims of intimidation or bullying, and twenty-six percent said they often fear for their physical safety on campus. The numbers presented in the survey report quantified the bias and oppression operating at Grinnell.

My research echoes many of the results of the Rankin & Associates climate survey, especially in terms of the experiences of students of color, students with variant gender expressions, and non-straight students; however, my project looked only at students’ experiences and added a spatial component with the mood maps to discover the sites of prejudice and oppression at Grinnell. I endeavored to collect students’ stories, perceptions, and opinions of

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4 The full campus climate report can be found on the webpage for Grinnell’s Office of Diversity and Achievement at http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/diversity/campus-climate.
diversity and acceptance on campus, as well as allowed informants to map the spaces on campus where they feel safe and unsafe. My intention was to encourage the informants to think critically about how their identities influence their perceptions of the levels of acceptance on campus and also of the location of safe spaces on campus. Throughout the interviews, I never provided informants with my own definition of safe space; rather, I told informants to define safe space however they conceive of it and designate spaces according to their conceptualizations. The results shows that spaces exist on campus that most students agree are safe and other spaces that students agree are unsafe. These spaces are the sites of identity formation for students, and depending on how students rate a space’s safety reflects the identity construction and expression occurring in that location. Identity formation and expression (or repression) is intimately connected to space at Grinnell. Informants’ stories and experiences demonstrate that they remain constantly conscious of their surroundings and the consequences of their perceptions of space on their identities. The campus appears to be a web of spaces where students feel safe to be themselves. Students’ identities shape their perceptions of space on campus, while simultaneously, space informs students’ identity construction processes.

Indeed, Grinnell is entirely composed of Mitchell’s landscapes and Cresswell’s moral geographies that are established, perpetuated, challenged, or subverted by student identities. Many layers of power remain in action at Grinnell manifested in both physical barriers and invisible socially imposed boundaries. These barriers and boundaries shape students’ affective behavior—the where they might go or what they might do at every moment. It explains why many students of color feel they must relegate themselves to the Intimate Dining section of the Dining Hall, why women feel uncomfortable attending parties in the Harris Center, and why many students avoid the Athletic Center and Physical Education Center. Through experience,
narratives, rumors, and histories, students have become aware of the landscapes and moral geographies at Grinnell, which influences their perceptions of spaces where they can safely express their identities. Each student’s movement is completely informed by their awareness of their identities and their surroundings—this can be liberating or constricting, affirming or silencing.

Ultimately, what my research shows is that space and identity constitute each other in dynamic ways at Grinnell. It is through people’s experiences of safe and unsafe spaces on campus that they come to construct and express their individual identities. Spaces are not blank canvases, and this is especially true at Grinnell where people from myriad background, beliefs, identities, and ideologies converge and interact in a relatively small space. Everywhere students go on campus, every interaction they have, and every move they make is entirely influenced by our conceptions of space and the subsequent inhibition or free expression of our identities. And, concurrently, space on campus is imbued with meaning, power, and safety.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe Grinnell College has a diverse population? In what ways?

2. Do you believe members of the Grinnell College community are accepting and respectful of non-dominant and diverse identities and ideologies? What about in terms of sexuality? Are non-normative sexual identities accepted at Grinnell?

3. What role does the college’s administration serve in making Grinnell an accepting place? Is this the administration’s duty to do this or should students be responsible for the construction of a respectful, welcoming community? How accurate do you think the administration would assess the level of acceptance among students regarding diversity? Do you agree with their perceptions?

4. Without going too much into detail, do you believe Grinnell is a safe space for all of its students, faculty, and staff, especially those of non-dominant values? If you feel comfortable, can you share a time when you felt a space was unsafe or discriminatory?
APPENDIX 2: Composite Map of All Twenty Three Informant Responses

5 Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
APPENDIX 4: MAP OF WHITE STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
APPENDIX 6: MAP OF MALE INFORMANTS’ RESPONSES

9 Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
APPENDIX 7: MAP OF QUEER STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
APPENDIX 8: MAP OF HETEROSEXUAL STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

Note: Safe spaces are in green, safer in yellow, neutral in orange, slightly unsafe in darker orange, and unsafe in red.
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