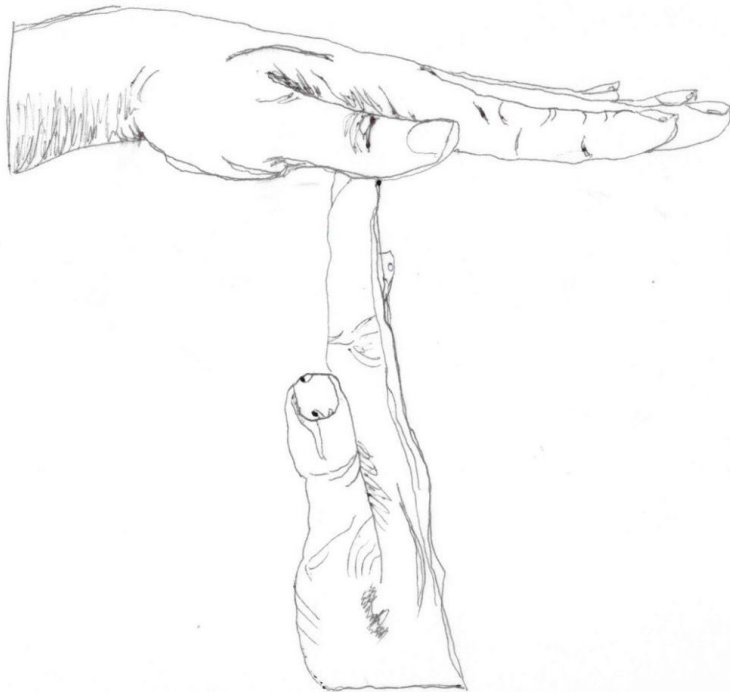




Interrupting Privilege is Different in the Year 2020

By Meshell Sturgis



Artist Credit: Meshell Sturgis; Photo Credit: Quinn Russell Brown

National, racial, and class privileges are illuminated in this new age of social distancing and economic downturn. Early this year, the slogan “[viruses don’t discriminate, and neither should we](#)” circulated through much of UW’s messaging. The campus, which has a [22.5% Asian and 15.5% international undergraduate population](#), deployed such rhetoric as a supposed shield against the uptick of xenophobia and hate

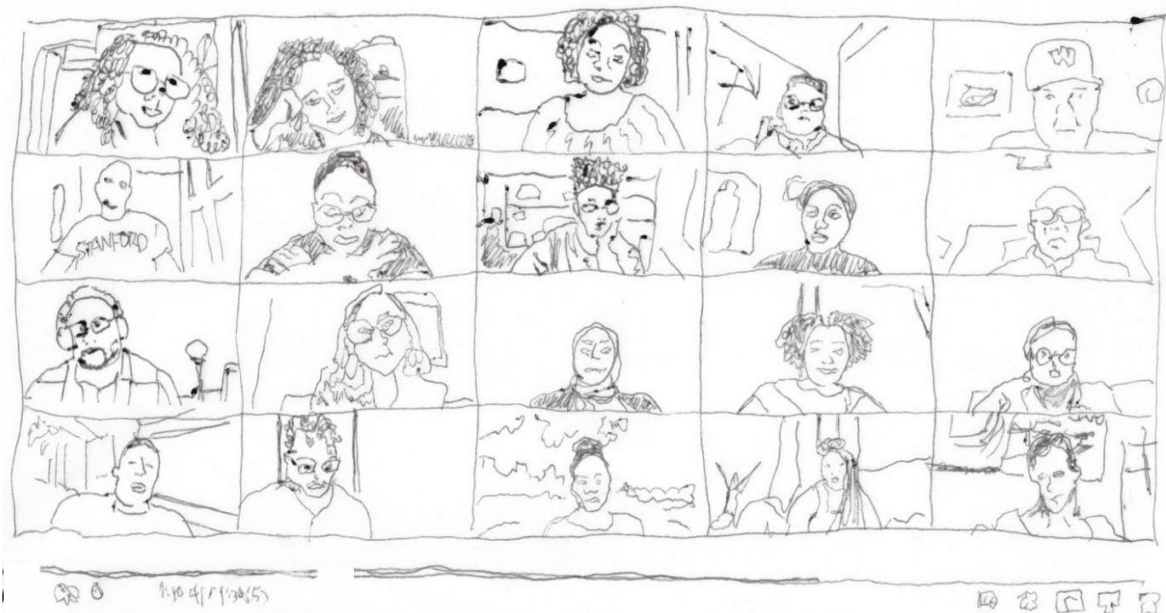
crimes since the coronavirus spread. Seattle's International District is an already [growingly hostile place](#) that has been particularly [hard hit](#) with White supremacist vitriol. Despite the scientific race-neutral spread of COVID-19, it has become increasingly clear that humans and their systems do discriminate. Effects such as racial battle fatigue and weathering, insufficient healthcare, and access to resources, as well as higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, and pre-existing conditions have led to [disproportionate infection rates amongst people of color](#) during this public health crisis, especially [the Black community](#).

This academic year, the [Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity](#) (CCDE) had already switched things up with its flagship inter-generational program about power, privilege, and difference, running [Interrupting Privilege](#) (IP) for its fourth year. Created by Dr. Ralina Joseph, the program's initiative to do work in the community was in full effect when the COVID-19 global pandemic struck. Currently, Dr. Joseph is a [Mellon/ACLS Scholar & Society](#) fellow. This prestigious opportunity has brought the IP program beyond its founding borders. While in the past, the program has partnered with the University of Washington (UW) [Alumni Association](#), this year the program teamed up with the [Northwest African American Museum](#) (NAAM). Not only has the IP shifted its discussions specifically to differences within the Black diaspora, but in response to the coronavirus, those discussions have had to move online. In light of this novel social, political, and economic situation, the act of interrupting privilege remains fraught and necessary—perhaps even more now than before.

No longer taking place in a classroom, the program finds home in the Central District, south of UW's campus near [Garfield High School](#). Dr. Joseph, along with a cohort of undergrads and graduate researchers in tow, teamed up with [Dr. LaNesha Debardelaben](#), the director of NAAM, along with staff, local community members, and high schoolers to expand the IP experience. Centering the perspectives of African Americans in Seattle in the city's "Black community hub," has shifted the focus of IP from *interracial* to *intra*racial conversations—a sort of diasporic dialogue. This has decentered Whiteness in the space.

23 high school and college students were interviewed and invited to participate in the program alongside equal parts selected community member applicants. All of the students were then paired up for a recorded discussion session that focused on experiences of race, racism, and being Black in Seattle and at school, as well as experiences related to the Black diaspora, privilege, microaggressions, and intersectional identities. Then, in the winter, the audio recordings were clipped by Anjali Brekke, a research assistant for the CCDE, and incorporated into the lectures. Sessions were part interactive, and part listening party. A total of three sessions were held at the NAAM and the fourth session took place over Zoom. Here at the end of the spring quarter, students have published short think pieces for the [IP blog](#). Some have written about microaggressions like the "[where are you from?](#)" question and others chose to commemorate the death of Ahmaud Arbery, [yet another](#) loss of Black life to "[color violence](#)." Several students speak about modes of resistance like [stirring the pot](#) and

using [Black English](#), while some spoke about the [importance of sharing our stories](#) despite whatever [feelings of fear](#). There are posts that highlight the [diversity of the Black diaspora](#), [tensions between the diaspora](#), as well as [missed opportunities for solidarity](#) across lines of difference.



Session 4 Zoom Meeting

Artist Credit: Meshell Sturgis

The late Black cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall describes cultural identity on one hand as an essential and collective history of experience and ancestors (1990, p. 223). It is what places like the NAAM come to represent as a beacon and home space for many. On the other hand, cultural identity is an unfixed “deep and significant difference” which is constantly undergoing transformation (p. 226). The IP sessions seek to foster this difference. “Difference, therefore, persists – in and alongside

continuity” (p. 227). An example of this was when we listened to [a podcast on the history of the “N” word](#) and then, in a session at NAAM, stood along an imaginary spectrum in the room, demarcating our relationship to the use of the word. Standing together like that illuminated how we each had a different perspective and still, the group shared a common understanding of history.

For Hall, the diaspora is an “unstable” point of identification, a site for the struggle over meaning, a “symbolic journ[ey]” that is “necessary for us all – and necessarily circular” (232). Perhaps this circle can be envisioned by the way we arranged our chairs during the sessions or the way we did a circle-like sociometric exercise at the beginning that visualized our intersectional differences. Or, maybe it can even be viewed by the “Brady Bunch” gallery view option during the fourth session over Zoom. The difference with interrupting privilege this year is about understanding the individual privileges of our situated positions within the Black diaspora while honoring our sociality as Black folks. Such diasporic dialogues hinge on our points of tension, contradictions, and shared struggles. We cannot go back to the way things were prior to the discovery of COVID-19, nor can we truly predict what the future holds. However, the ways in which we show up for one another in these moments, over the phone, online, and through Zoom are part of this present struggle to interrupt privilege and to center difference and equity.



Hall, S. (1990). "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In Jonathan Rutherford (Ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222-237). Lawrence & Wishart.