Yale Daily News

FRIDAY, APRIL 17, 2026

WEEKEND



JULIAN RAYMOND

ARE YALE EXTRACURRICULARS RACIALLY SEGREGATED?

// BY HANA TILKSEW

Earlier this month, MAISON at Yale held its annual fashion show at the Omni Hotel. The event had all the glamour you'd expect from Yale's most well-known fashion collective: sleek set design, beauty samples for VIP guests and a mix of student and professional models. What differed from previous iterations of the show was a greater attempt at diversity.

Shades of Yale, an a cappella group that focuses on music from the Black diaspora, opened the show. Nancy Walker, a Connecticut native who has been designing for 30 years, displayed clothes inspired by African heritage made of mudcloth, wax prints and cowrie shells. That was not accidental: Conscious efforts towards diversity were being made to reckon with past allegations.

In 2024, Jaxon Havens '26 uploaded "The Pretty Boy Manifesto" to his Instagram profile, detailing why he chose not to participate in that year's Maison show as a designer. Havens referred to MAISON's leadership as "fashion snobs" and raised a number of issues, such as lack of compensation for designers and "excluding certain bodies from modeling." The cloud of exclusion has hovered over MAISON ever since, spurring conversations that go beyond Havens's grievances — especially about race.

"There's definitely some validity to this statement," co-president Josh Chen '27 said when asked if MAISON lacks racial diversity. MAISON was founded by a predominantly East Asian group of friends, and according to Chen, that demographic's dominance of the club has continued. "Especially as new members are interested and start looking into the club, especially at the beginning, if they're seeing a predominantly East Asian group, that could very easily create feelings that, 'Oh I might not belong with this group of people,'" he admitted.

Kellsie Lewis '27 founded Fashion Lifestyle at Yale, often referred to as FLY, in 2023 "to add an additional option" to the fashion lineup on campus. "As Black and brown artists are largely underrepresented in the broader global fashion realm, FLY seeks to be a space where diversity is the norm rather than the fantastical," Lewis wrote in an email.

In theory, MAISON and FLY are both serving students with the same interests. However, even interest in fashion has become stratified across racial lines at Yale. Theoretically, the admissions office admits students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to have us intermix — befriend one another, learn from one another, and have tough conversations about belonging together. Instead, there seems to be a sentiment on campus that this space is for "us" and that space is for "them."

Self-segregation seems to be the de facto choice at Yale. I spent the past couple of weeks surveying friends, acquaintances and complete strangers to discover why.

Sudanese-American student Allam Elmana '29 said he found himself spending most of his time with other Black students as a consequence of his extracurricular activities, which include Desta, Yale's Eritrean-Ethiopian dance team; the Yale African Students Association; the Yale Black Muslim Student Association and the Yale Africa Innovation Symposium. "I feel like people find their friends in their extracurriculars," he said, adding that he "unintentionally" ended up with friends of the same race.

Allam's experience is one that rings true for much of Yale's Black community, including myself. Yale University is the poster child for the predominantly white institution. It's wealthy, prestigious and older than the United States of America. But somehow, as a Black transfer student, I've never been so surrounded by a community that resembles me.

Back home in California, most of my friends were not Black. That was largely due to circumstance — I went to a high school where the Black population was small, and my neighborhood was situated in the predominantly white part of town. The fact that my friends didn't look like me never bothered me. Things changed when I moved across the country to attend Yale.

Naturally, moving so far was nerve wracking. In my anxiety to find spaces that reminded me of home, I gravitated towards the obvious: cultural spaces where I felt welcomed. After a year on the board of Desta, and attending events hosted by the Yale African Students Association and the Eritrean-Ethiopian Students Association, I've realized that for the first time in my life, most of my friends are Black.

There are no spaces on campus advertised as exclusively white. However, a lack of formal decree does not negate social understanding. "I'm part of mostly cultural clubs, but the competitive clubs, I was kind of worried about applying for," Elmana said, citing student organizations centered around law or consulting. Clubs focused on funneling students through the pre-professional pipeline are often ethnically homogenous. Since many of them keep their selection process shrouded in mystery, we can't be sure whether this is intentional or coincidental.

But imagine a wide-eyed first year approaching one of these groups' tables at Bulldog Days, already nervous about going from simply joining clubs in high school to having to sit for multiple rounds of interviews. She gets to the table and realizes no one looks like her. Does she care? Should she?

"As a freshman, I wanted to be part of a fashion-forward space, but not one that required me to minimize my expression or risk discrimination. Creating FLY became a way to intentionally curate a safe space on campus," Lewis wrote.

What does it take to not fall into the trap of self-segregation at Yale? Which is the effortful path, and which is the subconsciously chosen one? My own experience is that gravitating towards Black spaces came naturally. Is the lack of ethnic diversity around me Yale's doing, or my own? If I feel unwelcome somewhere, is it a reflection of the group or my own projection?

"Last year and this year, we've made it a point to take, accept anyone and everyone who wants to be a part of this organization," Chen said of MAISON. "So anyone who's submitted an application is welcomed with open arms into our org."

Despite having her own fashion organization to run, Lewis ended up walking in MAISON's 2026 show as a student model. She was curious to see whether MAISON had truly adjusted where criticism had been leveled.

"This past year, I noticed visible efforts toward change — greater inclusion of student designers, more diversity across their social media, and shifts in leadership," she wrote. "While I can acknowledge recent improvements, my individual experience doesn't erase the organization's legacy. E-boards change, legacies remain."

If asked whether racially segregated groups on campus should exist, I don't know what my answer would be.We benefit from surrounding ourselves with a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. In theory, there wouldn't ever need to be groups that prioritize making space for one ethnic group or another like FLY. But we don't live in a utopia where established institutions always have their arms open, even if they say they do. When the alternative is not playing at all, it's no wonder Yale students are forming their own teams.

Contact **HANA TILKSEW** *at hana.tilksew@yale.edu.*