

# I Slay Demons While Drinking Coffee: Racism and How it Affects Black Peoples Mental Health

I Slay Demons While Drinking Coffee: Racism and How it Affects Black Peoples Mental H

---

I Slay Demons While Drinking Coffee: Racism and How it Affects Black Peoples Mental Health

---

Thesis Title

Durell Carter

---

Author's Name

December 1, 2020

---

Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

A THESIS APPROVED FOR

Master of Arts in English

By

Rebecca Quoss-  
Moore

Digitally signed by Rebecca  
Quoss-Moore  
Date: 2020.12.01 14:37:19 -06'00'

Committee Chairperson

Leslie Similly

Digitally signed by Leslie Similly  
Date: 2020.12.01 15:08:39  
-06'00'

Committee Member

Timothy Petete

Digitally signed by Timothy Petete  
Date: 2020.12.01 14:57:57 -06'00'

Committee Member

Committee Member

Table of Content

Introduction..... 3

Chapter One: Black Men Don't Cry ..... 5

Chapter Two: Black Professors, White Academia ..... 22

Chapter Three: Black Students, Public Schools ..... 35

Chapter Four: "You're a Credit To Your Race" ..... 47

Works Cited ..... 69

## Introduction

One of the first things that I remember about my childhood was crying because I couldn't reach my toy basketball goal that my mom bought me for Christmas. I tried dunking on it, but I couldn't stretch my arms out far enough, and my little four-year-old legs didn't have the boosters in them to get the job done. My father tolerated my tears for twenty minutes—and then he grabbed me by the shoulders and told me that nobody cared about my tears and that I needed to work harder. So, I stopped crying about things that I thought people wouldn't care about. Not being picked to be the prince and being relegated to the beast, the wolf, the bear, or the reindeer in all of my schools plays; watching my parents get divorced in the most uncivil way; being confronted with the fact that my brother and I were going to be raised by my grandparents because my dad ran away; and watching my mother's mind deteriorate due to a sickness that does not produce fever-like symptoms. I still reserved the idea that tears, feelings, and expressions are best reserved for moments that truly warrant them—and nothing seemed to clear that bar.

Growing up around my white friends, I noticed there was a huge difference in the way they expressed themselves in comparison to the way my Black friends and I expressed ourselves. We laughed at the painful moments and cracked jokes on each for caring about the things my white friends cried to their mom and dads about. I would watch my white friends' parents comfort and hug them, something that always made me feel uncomfortable because I believed those were moments of weakness.

Racism was not a foreign concept to me, but I never talked about my pain to anyone until I got to graduate school. I was taught not to express my sorrow and the feelings that I buried deep under all of the emotions that I never articulated out loud. I would have felt like less of a

Black man if I embraced those feelings and expressions. I have spent the majority of my life feeling paranoid, depressed, and anxious around people due to being taught that emotions and feelings were not included with the Black male experience.

Black people are consistently faced with discrimination, prejudices, stereotypes, police violence, unattainable glass ceilings, hyper-sensitive white people, and a system in place that allows all of this occur to Black people without consequences being set in place that would protect not just their physical wellbeing, but just as importantly, their mental wellbeing. Interpersonal racism can be just as damaging as macroaggressions or blatant name-calling. Compound this with a culture that believes that talking about pain, feelings, and insecurities are signs of mental weakness, and it is not surprising to see that mental health issues arise as a common reason for deaths in the Black community (CDC 12).

The focal point of this argument is to connect mental health issues to racism through the correlation of poetry and creative nonfiction. Conversations about pain, feelings, and mental health have long been difficult for me to engage, no matter how many English classes I have taken over the years, and there is still an innate sense of wrongness that comes from expressing my Black experience out loud to another human being. In August 2019, I began seeing a therapist to discuss my issues with depression and social anxiety. During one of our first meetings, he advised me to continue to use poetry to articulate the problems and tribulations that I deemed as painful and problematic. Here, I frame my own work, both reflective and poetic, alongside a researched meditation on some of the systemic influences on my experiences. The examples and situations that will be discussed are how racism in the workplace affects mental health, how experiencing racism in the classroom affects mental health, and how racism experienced in an interpersonal relationship affects mental health.

## Chapter One: Black Men Don't Cry

Racism's weaponization against Black bodies cannot be debated, but the effects on the recipient's mind are not spoken about enough. The conversation regarding mental illness has long been taboo in Black communities. The conversation can lead to remarks of being called mentally weak or soft-minded. These attacks are damning in the Black community. They can cause Black men, especially, to refuse to seek the mental health care needed to solve specific traumatic issues when confronted with systemic racism, microaggressions, and blatant disrespect.

African-American men are taught, essentially from birth not to cry, or any feelings that can be taken as a sign of discomfort. Black men are taught that these expressions can be considered as a sign of weakness and that displaying weakness is unacceptable (Watkins, Walker, and Griffith 305). When you compound the traits and characteristics that Black men are taught to perform and withhold from the world, and combine that with the existence of systemic racism, prejudice from peers, and the everyday potential of being a victim of hate violence, the mind is sure to be negatively affected. Shirley Hill, the author of *Inequality and African-American Health*, discusses the immediate impacts of prejudice and racism that burden Black people. Hill illustrates that life strains and Black people's battle with racism can affect their health.

Theorists have documented a direct link between social stress and sickness, with stressful life events predicting illnesses as serious as heart disease. They have also pointed out that chronic life strains diminish feelings of self-esteem, self-worth, and the sense of mastery over life, and thus have a detrimental impact on health. Life strains that are deeply

entrenched in the social and economic organization of life are often impervious to individual coping efforts. (Hill 16)

Hill's illustration of the effects of mental health is alarming, considering the lack of skills taught to fight mental health issues in the Black community (Watkins, Hawkins, and Mitchell 240), which partly springs from "a medical mistrust of the health care system that is indicative of the racial and cultural history of people of color" (Watkins, Hawkins, and Mitchell 243).

Tracing the history of racist influences on mental healthcare, Hill identifies examples like that of "Williams Weaver, a Southerner who was a superintendent of the census, [who] argued that the African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of Freedom" (36). Though this rhetoric was spoken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black men's mental health a subject of racist practice in the medical establishment, as Daphne C. Watkins has addressed in her work throughout the 2010s. More modern medical history may include less blatant racism, but neglect and misinterpretation still obscure productive engagement in the field. Combating racism while maintaining a strong sense of self requires communication (Waktins, Allen, Goodwill, and Noel 393), a skill set not passed down from the Black patriarchy. This lack of skill set can be a cause of concern for Black men as they enter the workforce and face stereotypes that affect their upward trajectory (Sellers, Nieghbors, and Bonham 508). This is becomes more prevalent for Black men once they enter the professional workforce and are forced to interact with people outside of their culture.

Black men who go into professional careers are, more times than not, met with skepticism over their fit of the culture, or their intelligence, or morality. When confronted with these prejudices, Black men are left with a decision to make: submit to the Angry Black Man Narrative that is placed upon them by the white people in control of the narrative, or tip-toe

around specific issues, conversations, and interactions to avoid performing certain of the stigmas, forced roles, and stereotypes being forced on them. Negative or even noninteraction with colleagues can perpetuate feelings of low self-worth and make one question their direction in their career (Sellers, Nieghbors, and Bonham 509).

Black men's white colleagues are more apt to create social groups that do not include them or cannot adapt to their Black colleagues' lifestyles. Adia Harvey Wingfield provides a depiction of what life is like for Black men in the workforce. Wingfield states

While Black women, because they were perceived as less threatening, could speak out about the treatment they received, Black men had no such luxury. Their attempts to repudiate coworkers' assessments of them as frightening people meant that they could not afford to actually get angry or vocalize their displeasure at various offenses. They feared that colleagues would perceive such assertions as evidence of the very stereotypical traits Black men were attempting to downplay. Gendered racism, therefore, structured Black men's responses to racism such that they tended to repress any emotions, statements, or behaviors that could possibly be construed as militant, angry, or belligerent. (206)

Wingfield's depiction of what Black men's struggles look like in the professional world is troubling, considering how normative these practices are. When Black men speak at work, their culture, upbringing, and identity are on the line. The risk vs. reward is not balanced, making the probability of the hypervocal Black person in any office being fired more an eventuality than a possibility.

The workplace pressure combines with learned behavior and repression from childhood. When Black men are raised not to vocalize their feelings or problems and then are pressured not to make themselves too visible to employers or colleagues, the likelihood that they will report



discrimination is minimal. Furthering Wingfield's conversation regarding the depiction of Black people, it is essential to address the stereotypes that she believes white people have put in place to hinder Black people's place in the world, which encourages the categorization of certain Black men as "athletes" or dangerous "criminals," on first sight, while middle-class Black men are presented as effeminate "sissies" or non-threatening "sidekicks" to a white protagonist" (199). Underlying all these images are the same old stereotypes of Black men who are less likely to voice displeasure with their employer, which helps keep the toxic professional setting. By not being able to disclose or open up about these issues, Black men are forced to bottle up emotions and are at risk of losing their job.

Black men in the professional setting are forced to assimilate and accept the role of outsider. The systems that are in play for white people to succeed in the workforce work against Black people. The fact that as of 2020, there are only five Black CEOs for Fortune 500 companies is a key indicator of the problem in the workforce (Wahba). The lack of Black employers, the lack of Black employees, and the lack of understanding can damage a Black man's psyche. With minimal or zero outlets to express frustrations or similar frustrations, anger is bottled up and, at times, festers and triggers more significant issues that can cause more detrimental mental and physical health issues. Black men are forced to perform to maintain more than a paycheck.

### Poetry Connection

When discussing Black masculinity, one of the things that often does not come to mind is poetry, which we associate with feelings and self-consciousness. As mentioned in my critical analysis, there are performative actions that are attached to Blackness, especially with Black men. The conversation regarding how Black men address their feelings is one that needs to be more prevalent in the Black community. The stereotype of Angry Black Man is attributed to the notion that Black men are only capable of expressing negative emotions—that they cannot or should not express emotions synonymous with joy, heartbreak, or relief. These emotions are typically associated with weakness regarding how a Black man should carry themselves and what they should express to people around them. The poetry attached to this chapter is meant to convey a tone and subject matter that is not correlated with the common notions of Black masculinity. The poems “Why I Put a Pink Bandana on my Pitbull,” “Waving Goodbye from the Other Side of the Bridge,” “Ashy Tears,” and “I Wear Steel-Toed Boots When I Water Roses” are discussing emotions and feelings that Black men are taught to keep to themselves—and that some people, outside of the community, seem to believe them incapable of feeling. These poems were created to fight back against a notion and narrative that strength is only found in silence, responding instead that strength can be found in expression and in addressing the tumultuous environment we try to survive every day. Black men who are working in environments heavily populated by white people are seen as threats and potential culture disruptors due to stereotypes attached to them. In my poetry, I focus on this stereotype society has stamped on Black men and discuss how the stereotypes affect Black boys as they get older and how the stereotype is dangerous to Black men, as well.

One of the focal points in “Why I Put a Pink Bandada on My Pitbull” is the idea of the power of stereotypes and why this pressure to sway from the stereotype is almost imperative for a Black man’s survival in a white environment. Brandon A. Jackson and Wingfield discuss the difficulty of being a Black man in a professional setting and being forced not express emotion. Because “visible displays of irritation on their part may evoke the ‘angry Black man’ trope and lead white colleagues to perceive them as threatening, dangerous, and out of control, creating adverse career consequences and curtailed occupational advancement,” Black men constrain themselves from expression in the workplace (Jackson and Wingfield 276). This stereotype attaches to Black men both inside and outside the workplace, diminishing the opportunity for Black people to express themselves freely. Black men should not have to suppress themselves to the point of silence to appease their white peers, but, unfortunately, society acts quickly against Black people who express themselves in ways that make white people uncomfortable.

The poetry attached to this chapter is meant to depict the effects of the Angry Black Man stereotype and the damage that can occur to young Black men’s psyche when they do, in fact, buy into the stereotype. The poem “The Reason Why I Put a Pink Bandana on my Pitbull” attacks the tropes we attach to beings society deems dangerous, and how they attempt to preserve themselves from being seen as a threat. One of the leading causes of death for Black men is police violence (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 16793-4). Because of this, Black men are taught at an early age how to navigate around surroundings that are not welcoming to them.

To further illustrate the dilemma regarding Black men and the belief of their inability to express emotions, I chose to include the flash fiction piece “Ashy Tears” because it portrays how deeply the idea of not revealing emotions to other men is ingrained into our psyche. I believe that the repression of emotions and feeling with Black males are taught them from generation to

generation; young Black men are often not taught how to identify emotions to adequately express how they feel.

Black men are typically forced by society to repress their emotions and carry weight on their shoulders that may not always belong to them. Earlise Ward and Maignete Mengesha discuss how social pressures around masculinity in the Black community can endanger Black men's mental health. Partly critiquing Watkins work, they acknowledge that her reviews and research have supported work in understanding "psychosocial coping, economic status and income, and racism and discrimination [as] factors that contribute to depression and depressive symptoms among Black men" (386). However, as they go on to address

Although the Watkins et al. review makes a significant contribution and provides information about risk factors for African American men, it overlooked analyzing additional contextual information that may positively inform treatment of depression among this group. For instance, in Watkins et al., there is no information about prevalence of depression in this group, treatment-seeking behaviors, and barriers to treatment seeking. (Mengesha and Ward and Mengesha 386)

Ward and Mengesha are stating that Black men's mental health issues stem from social problems Black people may face, but almost, and equally importantly, are noting that mental health professionals do not have enough resources or data to truly comprehend the issues that plague Black men, nor do they know how to remedy this problem.

The lack of opportunity to express pain due to poor mental health coping skills is explored in the piece "Ashy Tears." The boys' inability to comprehend or need to discuss what they feel when they come across a potentially life-changing moment is a result of a culture that urges young Black men to not discuss feelings or emotions with other men. The end of the piece

is a larger signifier of how detrimental this problem is. The phrase “It will all be fine” is a way of saying “it’s all good,” a term commonly associated with blowing off stress or a problem without discussing it. This connects directly to one of Ward and Mengesha’s findings on the effects of racism and discrimination between Black women and Men. The authors state that “self-concealment was found to be related to psychological treatment-seeking behaviors such that self-concealment was a barrier to the openness of psychological treatment-seeking among the African American men in this study” (Ward and Mengesha 394). One of the problems with this mentality is the baggage of pain that is being carried around by that person without being able to dispose of it anywhere.

The poem “WGOB” is incorporated because of the softness of the tone while still covering a topic that most men deal with when discussing breakups. The tone is vital when talking about a topic that is relatively taboo for men to discuss with other men. The words that were chosen for this poem were intentionally used to create soft, emotional imagery to further fuel the idea that saying goodbye to someone you once loved is a situation that does not know race or gender. When we tell Black men to express themselves, we encourage them to allow themselves the space to voice feelings without the backlash of being referred to as “soft” or “feminine.” These labels have caused damage amongst young Black boys in the Black community, to the point where depression and anxiety over the fear of expression themselves cause physical health concerns (Chae et. al 789-792; Cunningham et. al 923).

Trauma has an impact on the physical and mental well-being of Black men that does not get brought up enough due to the topic not being popular amongst Black people and due to white people not understanding the issues that may cause trauma for Black people. Due to the misconception of Black people being violent, unpredictable, and immoral, Black people, and

especially Black men, are forced to repress emotions and feelings that concern their wellbeing. In 2020, Black people witnessed George Floyd, a Black man who was forced onto the ground by a group of police officers abusing their authority, which ultimately led to George Floyd's murder. Breonna Taylor's murder by police officers sent the world into an uproar, causing millions of people to react and protest. For some people, these occurrences were just moments, but for Black people, these were possible realities that young Black people are warned against at an early age. These moments were a potential catalyst that may have caused some Black people to revisit moments of trauma that can then be turned into depression.

Oppression and racism have the power to alter the mindset of an individual, causing them to develop self-destructive tendencies that can hinder the growth of the individuals' developmental and social development; thus, making it necessary for Black people to find a solution to prevent mental health issues from being passed down to generation to generation. As a Black man writing this, I can attest to the idea that mental health and discussion of feelings is not met warmly. Telling family members that I was seeing a therapist caused some people to question my mental integrity to the point where my family felt the need to put me on the prayer list at my local church for spiritual sickness. The idea of me being mentally depressed caused so much confusion and made it to where my own family questioned my "toughness." When feelings are repressed, and people are encouraged to dismiss pain without processing the moment that caused pain, people do not learn how to handle or cope with what triggered them, thus creating a cycle that can possibly spin for generations.

The poems attached to this chapter are meant to portray the struggle of dealing with moments that can cause duress while still trying to figure out how to maneuver in a way that is still culturally acceptable by Black people. Mental health being a taboo topic to discuss for Black

men is hindering not just their physical health but is also potentially damaging to the Black community. When Black men are not taking their mental health into consideration, the effects are felt by the families they are from or the families that they themselves are raising (Watkins, Hawkins, and Mitchell 244). The idea of Black masculinity must evolve, or the pattern of young Black men not knowing how to express their pain will continue to grow alongside the struggle that follows them.

Why I Put a Pink Bandana on my Pitbull

*I judge my maturity*

*by the number of fake smiles*

*I can manifest*

*Without feeling knives*

*Drive themselves into my spleen*

I'm Buster Douglas in the 10<sup>th</sup> round, thinking to myself,

“I might fuck around and win this thing.”

When I determine steel chairs are more functional

On its four legs, instead of laying across

Another man's chest.

Violence looks as natural to me,

As a gun in a lonely kid's hand.

With one exception:

Sympathy for my eventuality

Will be begged for from my grandma.

I believe in love and passion,

souls that speak through fingertips,

therapy through shared pain, Kid Cudi,

And that people burn beautiful things

to justify the existence of flames.



Why I Wear a Chain on Sunday Mornings

The first thing I do when I wake up is put on my chain  
Because it's the only place on Earth  
Where I can feel as American as a Cedar cross  
Burrowed into dirt  
Soaked by tears of people we try to forget.  
The same dirt that drank the blood  
Of the suffering,  
The pillaged,  
The damned at birth,  
For the same material that shields them  
From the worms that feed on their brothers and sisters.  
I wear my chain in the house  
because I don't want to forget that I'm free.

## Waving Goodbye from the Other Side of the Bridge

I lit my Black & mild with the embers of the bridge I burned with the gasoline you gave me when I was still learning how to push forward still learning how to only look backward in small increments, so I don't destroy what's in front of me, because the world has proven to me how replaceable I am. Smoke copulates with my lungs and births memories, memories of you dipping my snowdrops in battery acid while you called yourself my God while stroking a hand that I am ashamed to acknowledge is mine. I watch flames erase shivered psalms you once whispered to me and the neon green moments submerged into my frontal lobe moments meant to be forgotten and discarded with the same moments meant to connect you to me and vice versa. My dehydrated lips mumble that we don't need bridges because we are where we already have been and need to be. I try to laugh as much as my hate-art allows me to. I imagine a scene where you're holding my heartless, damned snowdrops, attempting to do the same thing.

## Ashy Tears

You always remember your first time seeing a dead body.

I remember being young enough to enjoy moving my ashy, scabby legs up and down, up and down on my six-speed bike alongside people who would later become phantoms of the '90s. We only knew two emotions, love and pain, and we carried both of them with us under our cuticles. Buttonwood Drive, the best street to pop wheelies on when you're a kid and the worst street to run from the police on when you're a bigger one.

The ambulance was parked outside one of our friend's house. We haven't seen him in weeks. Rumors went around saying that our friend's dad had AIDS, cancer, polio, and some said he found a way to contract both AIDS and cancer, which would have made him the unluckiest man alive. We parked our bikes to the side of the ambulance, occasionally peeking over the hood of the white, freshly washed van.

We watched two pale, solemn-faced men walk out of our friend's house. They were being chased by screams and wailing, sounds that my neighborhood forbid us from ever making. The two men were carrying a stretcher covered in a white sheet, with our friend's father in between the two. Our friend walked out of the house, tears, mucus, and saliva running down his face, bleeding into each other until they fell from his face onto his white t-shirt, until he sat down on his front porch while his mother wailed from the living room floor.

We said nothing to him. We didn't console him, offer him our deepest condolences, or tell him we would pray for him. We got back on our bikes and drove around the neighborhood in silence until the light posts came on. My mother asked me what we did all day and I looked her in the eye and told her nothing, because nothing is what I wanted to remember, wanted to feel, wanted to think. We never spoke about the dead body with each other, nor did we talk about what we were going to say to our friend.

Our friend moved away a month later. We never got back in touch with him. I still remember the body, the wailing, the tears, the emptiness, the ride home, and the lie that I told myself when I went to sleep that night right before I went to sleep: We will all be fine.

## Social Identity Theory

You want my death to be as American as a number one from McDonald's,  
 and as civil as Chris Rock watching white-men detonate the N-Bomb in front of him.  
 You want my flowers dipped in bleach before they lay them on my grave,  
 along with the last name my father gave me when he was bored one day in Virginia.  
 You want my ashes spread up and down the aisles of the classrooms I've taught in,  
 or inhaled by my coworkers who replaced my name with "him?" when they first saw me.

Remember when I learned the phrases  
 Catching a fair one, and running the fade,  
 And used them to let your friends know  
 That my hands do more than type sermons  
 To my imaginary church of Black folk?  
 I'll double back and park my fist through colors,  
 Shapes that offend the laws of my nature.  
 I listen to DMX once a week to stay in shape  
 And keep a "I Wish a Nigga Would" in the  
 Passenger seat, so it can let me know where  
 The nearest low road is located.

Please don't wear all white at my funeral.  
 I don't want to stain my grandmother's  
 white scarf I bought her for her birthday  
 (When I was young enough to accuse Hell  
 Of being a figment of my grandpa's imagination,  
 And peace being solved through Bloody Knuckles)  
 With the pain still clinging to the dirt under my fingernails.

I Wear Steel-Toed Boots When I Water Roses

*My grandmother watered flowers that would die prematurely.  
I've never witnessed her crying at their grass-stoned funeral.  
"If a rose refuses to retain its nutrients, there is nothing I can do."  
I laughed, kissed her on the cheek,  
and proceeded to throw the roots into the trash bag.*

I once dug a six-foot hole to show my brother how hard my shovel can strike  
The Earth.

I let everyone know that the scars on my knuckles come from  
Dark Holidays.

I used to wear shoes made out of my father's insecurities and bad habits in  
White Hallways.

I've outrun wendigos and wolves so that I can claim a piece of a faux  
Nirvana.

I learned being Real outweighs the nature my grandmother planted on  
90<sup>th</sup> street.

## A Good Ol' American Heartbreak

When he opened the door, I could tell he had no idea who I was but could see what I was, giving me the chance to witness a shotgun blast smashing into the neurons that transmit fear to the amygdala. I reached my hand out to do what all people do who are brave enough to meet someone new. He reached out his hand and planted the image of him crushing charcoal, crushing obsidian, crushing midnight with his palms, into hands that wanted to know how intelligent the fingertips of his daughter were. He wanted to know my intentions with his daughter. I asked myself what Bryant Gumble would say if he was asked this question on air and then proceeded to get closer to escaping my voluntary Black hell. He finally called for his daughter to come to the room and instructed me to bring her home by midnight. I shook his hand once more, this time leaving a diamond in the sweaty meat hook he called a hand.

The next day I received a text from her, saying her dad didn't want her to make a "decision that would stain the family name." I erased her existence from my phone but saved her message. I proceeded to envision a man that can create diamonds with broken hands in a house built with veneer stone and with fiberboard floors.

## Chapter Two: Black Professors, White Academia

Academia has never been an inviting place for Black people. Colleges are continuously demonstrating to Black students that they are not on equal footing with white students by consistently hiring white professors over Black professors. The lack of diversity at universities sends a message to Black students that they are not seen as on par or as adequate as their white peers, causing Black students to leave education and finish without receiving a degree or stalling their efforts to move forward in academia. These restraints may have effects on Black people that continue forward in academia that can linger as they go ahead into their professional careers.

White people in academia perceive education differently due to them never having to code-switch or be hyper-aware of where they are and who they are around. Because of this, white professors and colleagues ignore microaggressions that can hinder Black people's comfort in their environment (Goodwill, Watkins, Johnson, and Allen 539). Where white people have the benefit of the doubt that they belong in their position due to the abundance of white people in academia, Black people are forced to fit into a box. They are met with confusion, and at times, hostility.

One of the significant causes of departure for Black professors is the culture of microaggressions and covert racism. Claudine Turner and Liz Grauerholz discuss the damage that takes place to Black people when they begin to work at a college. They state that such damage results from facing microaggressions, having their issues minimalized, and being forced to assimilate or be faced with ostracization and termination. Black professors and professors of color are typically given projects or assigned activities to showcase their ethnicity in ways that are intended to allow the university to claim more diversity and equity than actually exists in the institution. The phrase cultural taxation is used to define faculty of color being used to perform

their culture in this way, for their university, without pay (Turner and Grauerholz 214). Drawing on a 1994 article by Amado M. Padilla, alongside work by Rosabeth M. Kanter and Flores Neimann, Turner and Grauerholz illustrate what cultural taxation looks like at universities

- 1) serving as the subject matter expert and educator on all aspects of diversity; 2) acting as role models, mentors, and advocates for minority students; and 3) being the diversity representative for the unit on various internal and external committees (215)

When universities expect minoritized faculty to perform certain actions, and those same faculty push back against the requested actions, their colleagues are more likely to meet them with annoyance and, potentially, aggressions.

Black professors are more likely to be forced out of academia compared to their female counterparts. As of 2018, among full professors, “53 percent were White males, 27 percent were White females, 8 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander males, and 3 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander females. Black males, Black females, and Hispanic males each accounted for 2 percent of full-time professors” (NCES). The small amount of Black professors in academia makes it a far more dangerous profession for them in terms of career trajectory, self-esteem issues, and anxiety. Turner and Grauerholz address, for example, the sense of division such systems perpetuate between white faculty and Black faculty, highlighting that “these behaviors and attitudes constitute an aversive racist system that has powerful effects on individuals’ lives. Aversive racism perpetuates race-based communications and behaviors that, when spoken or enacted, reinforce negative perceptions of Black people” (217). When a Black person is surrounded by people that do not relate to them, do not understand the cultural tendencies, or have never been around someone of their ethnicity, the likelihood of that person facing racism and oppression is high.



Black men are stigmatized to the point of being viewed as dangerous and volatile, two adjectives that can get them vilified instantly. If you placed them in a white crowd, they would stick out to the point where they should be extremely noticeable, but that is not the case regarding how they are seen at work. Black male students are more likely to be ignored or viewed as people that are going to need extra help (Goodwill, Watkins, Johnson, and Allen 540). These notions make academic life uneasy for Black students, who feel as if they are not encouraged to ask for help, additional resources, or even reassurance from white professors (Goodwill, Watkins, Johnson, and Allen 544).

If Black students are more apt to be vilified by their professors, they would think that Black professors may face a better environment; however, due to an understanding of their position at a university as one that is typically reserved for white people, they are more apt to face racism that can hinder the ways they can respond to students. When Black men are viewed as less than by society in terms of intelligence, it can affect their efforts to build a rapport with their white students and other students who are not in the Black community. As Terrance Tucker writes, the conversation in institutions has often “linked African-American success on campus to questions of being ‘qualified’ as opposed to the negligent and often hostile environments into which they enter” (22). The constant self-questioning, the fight against students’ prejudice while having to worry about isolating white students, constantly, can cause a strain on one’s psyche.

Black professors are under constant surveillance by white peers and students who monitor these men so they can affirm their prejudices. Both high ambition (Sellers, Neighbors, and Bonham 514) and a sense of surveillance or hypervigilance (Goodwill, Watkins, Johnson, and Allen 540-541) have been linked to decreased mental health and increased stress for Black men; we can project, from this, that Black professors, in a high-ambition, high-visibility

profession, are particularly susceptible to anxiety and depression. Black men in academic positions are forced to relocate pieces of their culture and repress their identity to fit into a society that is not forced to acknowledge them; Tucker identifies this intersection when he writes that

the appropriation of African-American literature and culture on campus and in the curriculum serves as a mask for integration that simultaneously marginalizes aggressive confrontations with white privilege and resists the critiques of and changes to traditional modes of collegiate experience, literary inquiry, and academic/pedagogical training. (23)

When academic culture is designed to consume and appropriate critical forces, it necessarily fails to regulate or check those who attack Black professors for failing to live in a way that makes white people feel comfortable, with consequences for Black people's mental health.

Black professors are often handed the role of mentor to other minority students; this role, which is hugely vital regarding marketing towards minorities, is unpaid. In his chapter, Tucker speaks to this impact from the perspective of his own undergraduate career and from his later work as faculty. As he outlines, speaking and advocating for minorities while also working to gain a larger minority population for the program can be an extra burden, especially when one's white peers do not have to follow adhere to the same expectations (Tucker 35-36). When one person can perform functions without worrying about how they are representing their ethnicity or culture, they are living a privilege that their Black and faculty of color can not ignore. This can cause a strain on Black professors who have to do more at their job for the same, and sometimes less, money.

Although it is an extra unpaid duty for Black professors, mentoring Black students and being an intersectional link between Black and academic culture can prevent stressors for Black

students. As Tucker outlines, this faculty work not only improves student achievement, but also “contribute[s] to the legitimation of Black studies programs” as well as supporting spaces for “social interaction...[,] organizational meeting,” and student activism (Tucker 35-36). Having someone who can relate to the struggle of progressing in white lanes adds power to student's identities and strengthens student's grasp on the related academic subject matter. White students do not need to worry about their professor's ability to relate to them, nor do they have to worry about being seen as less intelligent due to the pigment of their skin. When a Black student has to seek help or guidance from a white professor, there is a relinquishing of safety occurring. Some white professors do not view Black people as able to perform in academia. So, if a Black student seeks guidance from them, they may not receive the best support, information, or potential recommendation that their white peers may obtain from them.

Being a Black person in the academic community is difficult for reasons that stretch beyond the subject matter. Being constantly pressured into believing their work does not matter affects the way Black professors can perceive themselves. Self-esteem issues, anxiety, and depression are the results of an unhealthy culture and institution.

### Poetry Connection

Black professors are never given the same leeway or benefit of a doubt that they are as capable of working in academia or have the same ability to reach students on a culturally universal scale as their white colleagues. In my experience in academia, I have witnessed three Black college professors be fired from or “not invited to return” to their universities. The professors who were fired were the only Black professors in their department and were vocal about the biases they witnessed during their time at the job. The professors who took over their positions were white people, professors who did not have to worry about fitting into an academic culture because the culture revolves around them. In the case where white students helped orchestrate a Black professor’s removal from the classroom, those students were rewarded instantly with someone who would not hold them accountable or attempt to challenge their perspectives, and who would instead allow them to continue to view their perspectives as simply social and academic reality. The poetry attached to this chapter focuses on the experiences of Black teachers in the classroom who are forced to assimilate to a culture that does not appreciate them or protect them from prejudice, racism, and disrespect from students and colleagues. The story “White Smiles” and the poems “Being a Black Teacher During Black History Month,” “My Coworkers Call Me the Walking Urban Dictionary,” and “What I Learned About Culture in Graduate School” all address either being a Black teacher or being a witness to an environment that does not open its arms to Black teachers and professors; for me, the result of these experiences has frequently been disillusionment with the system and academia and, at times, doubt in my own academic integrity and placement in the educational environment.

“White Smiles” is a story that depicts the all too-common-incident where a Black professional is forced to handle a situation with grace and a faux smile. The Black teacher is

trained early on to handle hatred with a smile because he (and his students and peers) understand that there is nothing to protect him should he act on his disgust. As Turner and Gauerholz articulate, Black teachers and professors are expected to assimilate or to leave. In interviewing ten Black professors, Turner and Garuherolz found several consistent themes: “they feel isolated from other Black male professionals; their professional credentials are consistently questioned; their positions of authority are challenged or ignored, and they experience tokenism and the cultural taxation associated with it” (215). This treatment of Black professors only creates a more extensive wall for Black students to consider climbing over when deciding if a career in education is worth their trouble.

The poem “Being a Black Teacher During Black History Month” depicts what a career in education has been like for me, as a Black teacher. My first year teaching in a predominantly white school district taught me that my colleagues, my students, and my students’ parents did not know what to expect from me, and, more times than not that year, I was met with trepidation and angst from people around me when I approached them in the halls, or even when I emailed them a question regarding a student. It was not until I decided to assimilate more into the school's culture that I realized that they were initially nervous around me. Parents were still very quick to email me and try to question me in terms of what I was teaching; I fielded questions that none of the other English teachers in my department encountered. My students’ parents came around towards the end of the year once they started to notice their students’ benchmarks scores were going up—and when my students finally gifted me with their trust.

This poem centers on my feelings as a public school teacher, but this feeling must be magnified for a Black professor. My sense of that magnification has been increased by the incidents I mention above, which have shaped my own understanding of my potential future in

academia. Writing for the influential *Inside Higher Ed*, Colleen Flaherty details the tribulations that Black professors go through while working to obtain tenure at their university. In the article, Flaherty describes how the academic system is rigged to discourage even those Black professors who are able to get tenure-track jobs.

In one example from this year, all-white tenure committees at the University of Virginia denied tenure to two Black assistant professors who were engaged in diversity work within their respective fields...In the case of Paul Harris, a human services scholar who studies Black students and athletes, a tenure committee accused him of publishing a paper in a “self-published” journal that was actually peer reviewed. Harris also faced questions about the representativeness of his work just as he was about to go up for tenure -- what some say is code for scholars of color and their work being too centered on issues of identity.

The conversation stems from universities trying to find ways to keep the curriculum a specific shade. As Black professors bring in perspectives beyond those accepted as normative by un-self-critical white institutions, certain professors feel that their job, or at least their standing at their job, will be threatened. If white professors are not well-versed in Black literature or Black studies, who will correctly teach the students?

Moreover, the expectation for Black teachers and professors is never only to teach. My first year as a teacher in a predominantly white school, I was asked by my colleagues to take in Black students who they had trouble with. My coworkers thought, with me being the only Black teacher in the building, that I should take time after school and spend time with these “troubled” boys. When I asked them who would pay me for my time, they just laughed. Versions of this incident occur too much with Black teachers and professors. The expectation of

putting in more work with students without the proper payment is disrespectful and contributes to larger issues of the devaluation of teachers' labor and of Black people's labor.

One of the ways the education community puts pressure on Black teachers and professors is by making them believe they must do twice the amount of work to maintain the job that their doubled amount of work in school, in their early careers, and in the larger culture has gotten them. Universities and schools make Black professionals believe that it is their obligation to create a community. There is stress involved in finding time to mentor students. Caring for students outside of work time impacts leisure time, family time, and time to research, and, as Tucker acknowledges of the Black professors he encountered as a student, "in order to excel in their careers there were moments when their mentorship of students sometimes became secondary" (35).

The poetry in this chapter discuss the isolating feeling of knowing that Black professors or teachers do not have much wiggle room when it comes to how they demonstrate stress and duress from being the only Black representation in their department or at their school. These professors face uniquely taxing stressors due to the minimal amount of landing net they are offered and the tremendous amount of expectations that they must overcome. When schools make Black teachers work harder to prove their worth to a system that has already made its mind up on that determination, factors that deteriorate the mental health of the teacher or professor can come into effect. The poetry in this chapter dive into the expectations and the heartbreak that is introduced to those that are willing to fight against the system by teaching the next generation of teachers and academics of the system they will someday have to fight against.

## White Smiles

One of his white students asked him if he had ever experienced racism before. He used the same tone as when he questioned his Teacher why they had to learn about Black Person History Month, so the possibility the question was asked out of hopefulness to learn about another culture was minimal at best.

The Teacher, with his “I brush my teeth twice a day, three times on Chicken Alfredo Thursdays,” calmly tried to redirect the Child, along with the rest of the class, back to the lesson at hand.

“Have you ever been called the N-word, at least?” the boy casually asked, a smirk now starting to form on the corners of his mouth.

The Teacher with the crispy white smile continued to demonstrate the professionalism that he had had to learn not from watching his professors but from being told by them how they doubted he would ever become one.

He survived by remembering what his mama told him when he learned that Black was more than the color he hoped wasn’t lost in the box of crayons his mama had to pull a double just to afford.

“Show the world your beautiful, white smile and keep it moving, baby.”

The One Black Student in the class kept hiding her face in her arms, refusing to show them what a midnight rose looks like in room 103.

“Have you ever been a called a nigger...sir?” The white Child asked, hoping to finally make his way to the hall so he could bypass being in class for three days. He also could not wait to hear his old man say “I told you so, babe” to his mother, who would grab the phone to call the local news, Ann Coulter, and anyone that would fight back against “The Revolution” he was witnessing in front of his very eyes.

The Teacher, who had watched many of his Black mentors be devoured by the Angry Black Man who hid deep in the woods nobody speaks of, but everyone knows, questioned whether or not if he should beckon him to come forth in this dark hour.

“Yes, and it hurts. But, just like Kid Cudi said, keep moving forward, homie,” the Teacher remarked, flashing that beautiful, white smile his mama had spent years forcing him to learn. All those years wearing braces, wearing retainers, bleaching, and scrubbing had cultivated this lovely smile, this smile that has gotten him through some of his darkest times.

As the students were exiting the classroom, as the bell rang, he told the white Child to wait behind. The Child, now, with no audience, was voiceless. His smirk had transformed into a look of solemn recognition. The One Black Student with the midnight rose-colored cheeks stood before him. Unlike her Teacher, she lacked the crispy white smile. Her smile was the same color as the pain that stained the classroom, that she and her Teacher inhaled all hour.

An apology was offered. Forgiveness was not.



## Being a Black Teacher During Black History Month

I remember their white pupils with  
With the irises that don't match my  
Black, staring at me, some apologetically  
More with confusion. The teacher asks me to  
Represent the whole of the marginalized with  
Her earnest "you can educate us all" smile  
She practiced the day before while creating lesson plans.  
Deep breath, silence, deep breath,  
Shoulder shrug combo with the "I don't know."  
With a side of the cool pose, my reflections taught me  
Served to feed her need for inclusion.  
White pupils are still focused on me,  
I'm still challenged to educate them all,  
My diet now consists of shoulder combos,  
Chased down with the hope  
That refused to nourish my youth.

My Coworkers Call Me the Walking Urban Dictionary

**You Gonna Let Him Talk To You Like That:** You need to handle this situation violently or you are going to make people think that you are bitch-made.

**What's Really Good?:** Are you sure you want to fight? Because your actions are causing me to become froggy, and you're about to find out how far I can jump.

**He Wouldn't Talk To Me Like That:** I would have Street Fighter'd his ass right then and there if he were to disrespect me like that.

**You Can Catch This Fade:** Keep talking, and I will uppercut you—that simple.

**You Want This Smoke?:** You think you want a problem, but I assume you like breathing, so you need to rethink your recent decision.

**Let Me Show You My Hand Speed:** I'm going to hit you so fast you won't see me coming.

**It's On Sight:** I might drop kick you at a Walmart if I bump into you

**Cap:** You might be full of shit right now.

They break bread during Happy Hour  
And tell their friends  
About the one Black guy, they know at work  
Who isn't afraid to speak the language  
Of the lonely kids.

What I Learned About Culture in Graduate School

My White Male Classmates shit on me on Tuesday nights after learning about the culture,  
And thank god I don't linger close enough to get the stench on them,  
To remind them that the cologne they gifted me,  
Never belonged to them in the first place

They laugh at the domestic beer drinker,  
Behind closed doors, behind open doors, behind doors  
That their father hasn't built yet,  
And invite the intruder to test out all their locks.

You ask us to play music for you.  
They'll play you symphonies written by White Jesus and the  
Midnight Heat, and expect me to sing along.  
I play the bass and cry the blues like my religion taught to.

I can taste anger and pain with fingertips that belong to a version of myself,  
that a version of you will try to destroy someday.  
I keep Black honey and cranberries in the darkest part of my soul,  
So that they will be fresh enough to donate when that day comes.

### Chapter Three: Black Students, Public Schools

Black students in America are forced to learn about a side of America that their white classmates are capable of avoiding. Black students in public and private schools are forced to live up to their teacher's expectations, which may initially seem typical for an educational setting. However, when those expectations are influenced by a student's skin color, the issues become much more dire and potentially dangerous to the morale and psyche of the student. These negative experiences can be deemed as stressors that can trigger mental health issues for Black students. Though certainly not all Black students who are exposed to these triggers experience mental health issues, exposure to these problems does increase the likelihood of harm for all Black students.

Considering that “almost 87% of the United States elementary and secondary teachers are White” (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, and Garrison-Wade 48), Black students are often taught by people who may have preconceived notions of how a Black student is supposed to perform Blackness. Teachers who are not exposed to Black students and Black culture are highly likely to have an implicit bias towards Black students, which, in turn, can cause them to underestimate a student's character and ability (Douglas et al. 49). This treatment can cause Black students to be perceived as a disruption, a distraction, or even a threat in the classroom before they introduce themselves to their teacher. Black students are more likely to be suspended and to receive harsher discipline, receive a disproportionate education compared to their white classmates, and not be given opportunities that can provide them with exposure to experiences that can further their chances of obtaining a professional job (Graham; Douglas et al. 47-49).

The discussion takes a more dire tone when you consider that there is a correlation between disciplinary actions taken in public school to the prison pipeline. Edward Graham

discusses the many ways teachers and school administrators use discipline as a way to hinder Black student's upward trajectory. Graham outlines that

African-American elementary and secondary school students, who are collectively suspended at significantly higher rates than their white peers, are more susceptible to experiencing these kinds of negative outcomes...while socioeconomic status is a factor in student suspension rates, researchers have also presented a correlation between African-American students of all incomes and demographic categories and increased rates of suspensions, most notably for incidents where white students receive less severe punishments for the same offenses.

Graham brings up the disparity between Black students and white students' discipline rate because it is a microcosm of a more extensive message education is telling Black students: "you're a criminal." Black students are forced to be twice as disciplined, civil, or cordial if they want to avoid facing discrimination or racism.

Students are forced to not only assimilate to their teacher's culture when they are in the classroom, but they feel forced to gain attention by doing twice the work their white peers may have to do. Black students are forced to become overly exceptional to be viewed as a keen student. Students that do not reach that over excellent status are cast aside often by teachers who automatically assume a student's chance of success on the first day of school. Black students are not numb to this treatment, nor are they ignorant of how they are being perceived (Douglas 53-54). The consequences of being mistreated and ignored in school environments affect how students not just perceive education but affect how they attempt to mold themselves going in the future (Trent, Dooley, and Dougé 4-5).

One of the dangers of exposing young Black students to racism is the detriment to how they view themselves as people and as representatives of their culture. Maria Trent, Danielle G. Dooley, and Jacqueline Dougé have examined the impact of structural, educational, legal, and economic racism. Regarding how young Black students handle and internalize racism, the article states that internalizing hatred towards one's own self and community can be one impact, alongside social skills being eroded due to fear of performing negative stereotypes or being perceived as a negative representation of their race (Trent, Dooley, and Dougé 4). These detrimental effects of racism are caused when teachers or authority figures in the classroom use their power to exhibit racist behavior towards Black students.

“Stereotype threats” occur in classrooms where teachers may perceive a Black student as a potential problem before approaching them—and, as a key part of this term, the Black student then internalizes or takes on the weight of that identification. When this happens, Black students are no longer looked at as students but objectified as a living weapon (Douglas et al. 55). When a student feels that this is occurring to them, they react in ways that transfer and internalize that stereotype: they may attempt to take on elements of the identity they feel has been assigned to them, or they may, at minimum, be more likely to shut down in that classroom, causing them to perform to the level expected of their proprietor (Douglas et al. 54-55). Stereotype threats do not belong in the same category as microaggressions due to the magnitude of the actions. Once the teacher forces the stereotype or the idea of what that student is supposed to be in their eyes into and onto the student, a macroaggression is taking place. Students who internalize racism that is directed toward them see themselves as part of the problem by holding onto negative beliefs about themselves and their culture (Douglas et. al 54-56).

One of the main causes of the internalized racism that stems from public education is the lack of Black teachers and administrators. Black academic professionals, at all levels, are better equipped to communicate with Black students without causing students concern over whether or not they are being belittled or attacked for being Black. Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli state that only having white representatives as teachers can hinder a Black student's or student of color's perception of themselves and their race. They say in the article,

When mostly white faculty train teachers, it is likely that new teachers will develop pedagogy that serves the dominant culture. In addition, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force collected statistics on the racial demographics of teachers in the United States and found that 90 percent of all public school teachers are white and more than 40 percent of schools do not even employ one Teacher of Color. This means that most youths grow up with few to none minority teachers within their entire academic career. A predominately white teaching force can have adverse effects on a student's self-perception, especially if these teachers have minimal cultural understanding. (190)

This excerpt helps identify where racism and the damaging effects of racism on Black students originate from. By hiring too many teachers from one background, institutions are minimalizing the type of interactions that are in the classroom. Teachers who have minimal understanding of cultures that are foreign to them are more apt to commit microaggressions against students who do not practice the culture of the majority. Teachers who fail to acknowledge this, do more harm than good with their Black students and students of color, especially the teachers who fail to recognize their lack of expertise.

Students who pick up on racist behavior from their teachers are less likely to learn in the classroom, thus making it imperative for white teachers to learn how to incorporate skills that

focus on inclusion and how to approach diversity in the school (Douglas et al. 58-60). Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli offer a link between the lack of Black faculty in higher ed, discussed in Chapter One, here, and the impacts on secondary education: “88 percent of 35,000 full time faculty within university education departments are white; thus, the majority of teachers in this country are not receiving any teacher education from Professors of Color” (190). Students are significantly affected by their interaction with authority figures early on in their life. If a child only encounters anger and a lack of understanding from authority figures at an early age, it is only creating a vicious cycle that will continue until they meet an authority figure that can determine their life’s trajectory.

In 2020, there are public schools that do not force their teachers to learn how to interact with cultures outside of their own; there are teachers who do not understand that experience influences perception; there are teachers who believe that Black students are threats, distractions, and inadequate compared to white students. It has been fifty-six years since *Brown v Board of Education*, and yes, students are now brought together through this court action. However, the decision on *Brown* failed to account for the ways that integration would create a new ability to distribute racist agendas. White teachers are given the opportunity to stamp their racist viewpoints on Black boys and girls—in fact, this is a nearly inescapable consequence of system racism if white teachers are not trained to engage their own bias or to understand bias in the curriculum. This environment will, at best, make Black students question the value of education, the integrity of authority figures, and the validity of the information white people give them. At its worst, it makes Black students question their own worth.

Each of these effects pushes Black students away from being in a position to create change from the inside out. Systemic oppression begins when a Black student is told they would



be better off learning a trade, rather than being encouraged to go to college and get a degree so that they can work in a profession; when they are subjected to an unequal likelihood of suspension, expulsion, and in-school discipline; when they are presented with a curriculum that does not acknowledge their personhood. A refusal to educate Black students about opportunities that can further their academic career into a professional career is the equivalent of assisting white supremacy. Public schools in America have to make it a priority to enlighten Black students about opportunities that can further their life in a direction that can create meaningful change and opportunities for other Black students to follow.

## Poetry Connection

As a Black student, I have repeatedly experienced the reality of doing good work only to be overshadowed by someone who did work that was only alright—but who had a better relationship with the teacher because of their raced similarities. I never had a teacher that looked like me as I was coming up through public school, nor did I ever have a teacher that reached out to Black students and treated them equally compared to white students. For a long time, I would sit in the back of the class with other Black students to observe how easy it was for white students to just talk to the teacher and ask for help from them. My teachers always found a way to remind me that their expectations for me were lower.

I was in kindergarten class when I learned I was different from everyone else in my class. We were about to perform a class play. I volunteered to be the character “The Prince,” only to hear my classmates say that the prince of the play is not a Black character. I looked to my teacher for reaffirmation, and she told me with a sweet smile on her face that I might not be able to play the Prince, but I could be the Tree. In first grade, I was bumped up to Fox; in second grade I was promoted again, this time to Wolf, but I was never given a character that had any value. I was always the side character to a white “prince,” either the enemy to the hero or sidekick to the protagonist. The poems attached to this chapter are meant to depict the impact of never being looked at as good enough by people who are placed in a position to mold me, not just as a student, but as a thinker and person. I examine, here, how that affected the way I viewed myself. The poems in this chapter are meant to expose the impacts of internalized racism and show the damage of not having a Black teacher in the classroom for Black students.

For Black students, it is imperative that they have someone from their culture leading them into the real world. The poetry in this chapter focuses on the derailment that can potentially

occur to Black students when they are solely taught by white teachers or teachers who lack understanding of their students' backgrounds. Douglas et al. discuss this impact, identifying that many White teachers work from within a hegemonic, Western, epistemological framework, which often predisposes them to have lower expectations of Black students and a lack of respect for the students' families and primary culture. Therefore, the possibility of effective teaching by these teachers is greatly reduced. (49)

The cognitive ramifications of not creating a safe space for Black students can be seen when they are presented with a challenge, whether in the classroom or outside of the school. When the social needs of Black students are ignored, those students can potentially view themselves as not the target for education. If Black students feel as if educators are not teaching them with the same purpose as their white peers, it can lead to a lack of academic curiosity and increase the chance of being a cog in the school to prison pipeline (Graham).

The poem "I Thought All Black Kids Grew Up With a Mr. Cooper" expresses this sentiment from a student's point of view. Black boys who grow up in public schools are often looked at as a future threat by white teachers. By having someone at their school that can vouch for their experience, the chances of them being disciplined disproportionately may be mitigated. As Douglas et al. address,

Teachers don't think in neutral terms but according to or in terms of personal frames of references. These personal frames, biases, and the like guide one's intentions and their interpretation of presently occurring experiences, specifically what they see and think about Black people" (57).

Black students are too often exposed to teachers' whose personal frames of reference exclude or devalue them, rather than those whose personal frames of reference necessarily include Black experiences.

The poetry in this chapter discusses the causes of the disillusionment Black students might have with academia and the effects it has on the way they see academia and themselves. The poem "Being a Black Student During Black History Month" expresses the impact of being alone in an environment that is supposed to uplift and challenge me to want to strive for higher academic achievements, yet has instead caused me to question the way I perceive myself and the value of my work. Placing more Black people in classrooms does more than educate. It can save students from the heartache of being isolated, from being forced to assimilate to a teacher's lack of understanding, and from feeling as if Black people are meant to only obtain blue-collar jobs instead of vying for the white-collar jobs that impact Black people's upward trajectory.

I Thought All Black Kids Grew Up With a Mr. Cooper

Or with a suit-wearing mentor like Steve Harvey.  
Someone that occasionally smelt the like the good  
Brown liquor you can't find in Wal-Mart today.  
A man that was not my family, but would  
Teach me that last names, DNA, and fingerprints  
Are subjective, and that I'm strong enough to  
Not let attenuated hallways devour me.

I've had pieces of my soul taken from me,  
Gifted to people that can moonwalk in classrooms,  
Grow up and suspend Jerome for doing the same thing.  
I've been hit by lightning before the sound of thunder  
And they mistook my pain for the violence  
They prayed to see in me.  
I washed the dirt off my psyche with  
Soil and my grandfather's stories  
Of their grandfather's version of the good old days.

Chad

I wonder if Chad has been asked if he knows how to rap by strangers?

Does Chad get harassed by cops when he walks out of a 7-11 with a cigarillo and a 40?

Do Chads even drink 40's?

Do people question Chad when he tells them he wants to become a college professor someday?

Does Chad ever get told that "C's are good for people like you" when he just wants to know why he got C on a short story about his upbringing in a tough neighborhood, his alcoholic mom, his dad who dipped to Walmart and apparently forgot he had a family, his brother who hates his name because he can't find a good job because of it, and why Karen got an A for writing a story about a dog named Leo who finally learned how to pee outside?

Do women want to get pregnant by Chad because their babies would be prettier than "normal" looking babies?

Does Chad ever get told to bottle up his emotions because real niggas don't cry?

Does Chad ever question if the people around him think he is smart for a human being, or intelligent for being a white person?

Does Chad feel weird buying grape soda in public?

Does Chad have to work twice as hard to get noticed by schools, bosses, or by people that can destroy his psyche with a single word?

Has Chad's student ever asked him if he's been in a gang or if he's gone to jail, on the first day of school?

Have Chad's students' parents ever asked him these same exact questions during parent-teacher conferences?

Does Chad ever thank Sweet Baby Jesus for naming him Chad instead of Jamal, Daquon, or Jerome?

Does Chad realize that Jamal, Daquon, and Jerome each wish they were Chad at least one time in their lives?

Being a Black Student During Black History Month

You're the forgotten ones.  
This role is not foreign to you,  
Nor is it kind,  
It's a burden to only be loved  
by memories of strangers,  
and it's painful to still be in love with  
nostalgia,  
because nostalgia is the only liar  
you are willing to accept love from.  
The last time yesterday's phantom embraced you,  
Was the first time you realized  
Your steps can take you backward,  
Sideways,  
And, with twice the endurance of a white man,  
Forward.

## Chapter Four: “You’re a Credit To Your Race”

For the majority of my life, white people have told me they appreciated my ability to assimilate in ways that take away from my identity. I have been told by white people that if more Black people behaved similarly to me, they would have more Black friends. I’ve been referred to as a “credit to my race” instead of as a credit to humanity. This rhetoric only amplified once I became a schoolteacher and entered graduate school. What most people did not know is that the idea of my Blackness being absent, in some crucial way, in my performance of life was damaging to the way I viewed myself as a Black man.

What was just as troubling was the way this rhetoric affected my relationship with other Black people in my proximity. Black people viewed me as choosing white due to where I was raised, how I spoke, and how I carried myself and due to my white coworkers and classmates comfort around me. My relationships with my white peers affect my relationships with my Black peers. Black people close to me would let me know that they felt as if white people were choosing me because I was the safe choice. I did not make white people feel threatened enough to keep their distance from me, and my inclusion was itself a sign of gatekeeping.

This problem is troubling because it is a crucial factor in developing a double consciousness. Double consciousness, a term coined by W.E.B DuBois, is a theoretical term used to describe a person who is juggling multiple identities and roles. These psycho-social identities are at play when a minority is in an environment that is counter to their natural essence, forcing them to assimilate or become conscious of their performance around this foreign culture. Du Bois believed that the Black person who understood double consciousness had a “gift” in terms of being able to bridge two different worlds. As Pittman summarizes in his review of the evolution of the term, double-consciousness can be understood



as a capacity for a sort of extra-sensory perception (e.g., of ghosts) or a kind of vision into the future—a capacity to see what is not generally visible. Gooding-Williams argues that Du Bois uses “second sight” to identify “the Negro’s” capacity to see himself through the eyes of white Americans. Because white Americans constitute what Du Bois refers to as “the other world”, a social group distinct from that of Black folk, whites’ perceptions of and views about Blacks would not “normally” be available to Blacks, for Gooding-Williams; it is second sight that gives such access.

Du Bois believed that Black people who had the ability to interpret white perceptions and their ideological viewpoints had an advantage very similar to the superpower, yet there is also a belief that this “gift” takes away from a person’s sense of self.

Black people who are able to assimilate around white people are often ridiculed for this by their Black peers. The term “acting white” is attached to the theoretical concept of double consciousness. Karolyn Tyson, William Darity, Jr., and Domini R. Castellino discuss the causes of the dilemma of “acting white,” engaging, for example, the problematic idea that speech and physical presentation are indicators of “Blackness” or a lack thereof (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 585). They offer an example of Black students being ostracized by their peers due to “speaking Standard English, [or] dressing in clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch rather than Tommy Hilfiger or Fubu” (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 583-584). Although the fashion choices in the article may be outdated, the idea that clothes and language define Blackness further illustrates the complexities of double consciousness and what it means to perform Blackness.

Du Bois's idea of understanding and assimilating with white people is crucial to understanding what is not acceptable by Black people. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino discuss the

ramifications to those that follow through with Du Bois's idea of assimilation. Due to stereotypes stamped on Black people outside of their community, Black people are looked at as underachievers in terms of academics, so when a Black person chooses to pursue achievements tied to academia, they can sometimes feel ostracized by some of their Black peers, even though communities and peers are largely supportive (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 593-594). Du Bois's concept of double consciousness stems from being able to walk both sides of a culture, but by attempting to do so, they are potentially splitting their identity in half, causing potential distress due to being isolated and ostracized by people on both sides of the coin.

One of the common issues that I have encountered during my time as a student in public school is figuring out where I belonged. As Du Bois stated, there were some positive outcomes from being around white people. I learned what microaggressions were, how and why white people view Black people the way they do, and how they think in terms of gatekeeping. My ability to fit into places that are typically reserved for white people has made it easier for me to accomplish getting my college degree and helped me assimilate at jobs where I am sometimes one of few or the only Black person at the worksite. The negatives that stem from this same border-crossing, though, are the perceptions that I am anti-Black and that I am not comfortable with Black people. Black people that I was and am close to are quick to point out that I am not one of them when the conversation starts to lean towards topics that pertain to Black culture.

What some Black people failed to understand was the amount of racism that I was being introduced to as a child, teenager, and adult. My family wanted me to attend a five-star school district; coincidentally, this five-star school district had a largely white population. My family also believed it would help me get better at assimilating if I was forced to be around white people, leaving me no option but to attend this district. As stated earlier, it helped me learn how

to assimilate to different environments, but I also believe I was exposed to racism more frequently than my Black family members and friends who did not go to schools in suburban communities.

Because I was exposed to racism at an early age, and because I was forced to become cognizant of what the world thought about me at such an early age, I was forced to learn how to balance my Blackness in a world that did not care if I failed in this endeavor. Nicole King, author of the article "You Think Like You White": Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle-Class Desire(s)," discusses the idea of "Blackness" being defined by the postmodern idea of how Blackness is performed in literature and how novelists depict social unity in regards of class and social standing. When discussing Black solidarity, King brings up Du Bois and Booker T. Washington's belief of elitism in the Black Community; she expresses the following

Du Bois's and Washington's own notions of elitism within "the race" suggest a less obvious yet equally formidable roadblock. Paradoxically, their philosophies of advancement recognized specific class stratifications within "the race" that could be both engineered and manipulated for the greater (racial) good. In this sense, Black uplift and Black racial solidarity might be said to have parallel histories. Yet the class diversity and social heterogeneity that is both the condition of possibility and the result of that "uplift" belies the challenges to the notion of homogenous Black identity. (214)

King asserts that Blackness and who Black people celebrate are tied to the idea of the performativity of what it means to be Black. For example, Black people in the upper-middle class may have a different idea of what it means to be Black compared to Black people of the lower-class. King, also, though talks about the topic of Blackness in literature, as taught in

universities, as a possible catalyst for the way white scholars and white people see Black performativity. By teaching certain ideas of Blackness, that is, some may see that as the only way Black can be expressed. She spends much of her work on novels that offer alternative visions, but her focus indicates the impact of other types of work—of works that constrain rather than open up possibilities.

The crux of the issue regarding internalized racism is the act of gatekeeping in terms of obtaining white approval in settings where Black people do not always have the ability to control the course of their upward trajectory. This is, of course, a cause of concern due to the amount of racism that plagues most professional settings. The lack of Black leaders in professional settings creates a ripple effect for other Black professionals attempting to climb higher in their careers due to the sense that there can only be one representative, a systemic quota approach that encourages unrepresentative work spaces and in-group competition. The act of Black people gatekeeping against people within their own culture, in an attempt to preserve their own “token” role, is not a new or foreign concept. Gatekeeping stems from acceptable performativity of Blackness and can affect much more than job security.

When people judge and attempt to correct a Black person’s “performance of Blackness,” it can affect their self-esteem and create doubt in their own identity, leading to anxiety, depression, stress, and chronic loneliness. Gatekeeping and internalizing racism are issues that can affect young Black people at an early age, making school systems some of the first places where the issue is encountered. Jelani Mandara, Maryse H. Richards, Noni K. Gaylord-Harden, and Brian L. Ragsdale, authors of the article “The Effects of Changes in Racial Identity and Self-Esteem on Changes in African American Adolescents' Mental Health,” help define the problems that Black students and students of color face when they encounter racism that challenges who

they at their core. They state in the article that children are capable of being affected by racism the moment they identify with a race, making racism a deterrent for children as early as they are capable of being cognizant of race. Once a child realizes the special preferences that specific people receive, their ideas of themselves start to shift. This realization can either be supported based on familial and communal support that encourages their inclusion in the culture—or can hinder someone’s view of the world and cause them to question their worth if they face exclusion from their community or culture.

As a Black English major, I have typically shared a classroom filled with white people who are far more hesitant to speak to me than to the other white people in the room. I have encountered professors who would not acknowledge me as a serious student and who, in some cases, encouraged me to drop out of a given program due to my not fitting into the culture. These experiences forced me to make adjustments to the way I think in order to survive my surroundings, which then contributed to feelings of anxiety and insecurity when engaging in dialogue in class discussions or interactions that may take place outside of the classroom, both with fellow students and with professors.

My Black friends and peers did not see the internal struggle that I was facing because I did my best to follow cultural protocols for Black men and bury my issues to the point. I succeeded to the point that I ultimately did not know how to address those buried issues. Because of me never addressing my issues to my Black friends who did not go to college, they viewed me as running away from racism, whereas they believed that they were more affected by racism in their workplaces. This disruption of cultural relativism causes a wedge in understanding the shared experiences of racism. That divided understanding can prevent the development of a shared conversation—of the ability to coordinate and organize to dismantle racist rhetoric in the

workplace or in public institutions. The refusal to understand the micro, in contrast to the macro, is a key reason for division amongst Black people. Instead of disavowing racism wholly, people break racism into pieces, saying some parts of it are more dangerous than others.

Any act of racism has impacts that can hinder the way Black people process the world around them compared to their white contemporaries, especially in a setting where students are judged based on their intellectual capabilities. Laquan Garvey, author of the article ‘I Hate Myself’: A Look Into Internalized Racism Among Black College Students,” looks at how Black people who attend college are confronted with internalized racism and how that confrontation affects their mental health. Garvey states that “students are aware of the ‘social costs’ that comes with their racial identity which include mistreatment, discrimination, and much more.” Quoting from Werlhof, he says that students face the prospect of being “overwhelmed...[or] destroyed” by these costs (Welhof wtd. in Garvey). “As a result, students seek ways to mitigate these social costs and one way this is done is through the popularization of the ‘myth of meritocracy’,” or an emphasis on individual gains, advancement, and achievement (Garvey). Garvey is depicting a sad reality for Black people that attend colleges that do not make decisions designed to accommodate and protect them. Black people in white surroundings are looked at as having to accomplish great feats before they receive the same respect their white counterparts receive. If a student pushes themselves twice as hard as another person in hopes to reach the same level of appreciation from an academic gatekeeper, they are at higher risk of mental exhaustion, which can lead to more complicated mental health issues.

Working in a predominantly white location can also carry the same issues for Black people. I have often experienced racism wherein a white coworker received significant and ongoing recognition while my contributions were ignored, leading me to question whether my

efforts were of inferior quality even when I knew their (and my) worth. Garvey places this sense of damaged self-worth, a result of internalized racism, in the context of academic achievement, outlining that

A significant component of internalized racism involves Black Americans internalizing the belief that they are naturally intellectually inferior. As a result, Black American students may experience lower levels of self-efficacy which contributes to lower academic achievements... In the realm of academics, self-efficacy is extremely important as it affects academic scores among students of diverse ages and backgrounds.

Internalized racism, then, both makes Black students question their own work—and then leads to conditions that may actually impact that work. Pulling that classroom conversation into a professional setting, Black people are faced with a series of institutional challenges in which they are expected to overcome external bias and its internalized impacts, in a cycle that always emphasizes individual responsibility over systemic understandings and revisions. Black people in the workforce and in the classroom witness preferential treatment to their white peers, which encourages them to adjust their cultural norms in order to climb a ladder designed specifically for white people.

### Poetry Connection

When connecting poetry to this section, I wanted to synthesize the importance of combating the internalization of racism with depictions of those moments where racism subverts the subject's sense of self. When attempting to navigate through the effects of being a minority in a white environment, I found it to be similar to riding a bike between a narrow corridor with pedestrians refusing to move out of the way for you; at the end of my bike ride, people are offended by my presence, instead of accommodating me and my situation. The poetry attached to this segment depicts the consequences of trying to assimilate into a culture that is not willing to accept me. The poems "The Matchbox Theory," "Prosciutto Wrapped Melon," and "Therapy in a Blazer" and the narrative "A Sunday at the Lite n' Nite" detail moments where the speaker is facing tribulation due to existing in an environment that constantly tries to correct them, with the ramification of an internalization of racism that affects their perception of themselves.

Black people are forced to assimilate or be ostracized when working in white places. By either assimilating or working in exile, Black people are forced to look internally to decide how not just to operate but to survive the workplace, attempting to minimize situations where their identity and culture are slandered. For some people, self-hate can be the result, fomenting resentment towards their own skin color and people that share their skin color. Ronald E. Hall, author of the article "Self-Hate as Life Threat Pathology Among Black Americans: Black Pride Antidote Vis-à-Vis Leukocyte Telomere Length (LTL)," discusses this occurrence. Hall discusses the ramifications that occur to Black people who are gaslighted in the workplace and the damage that takes place mentally and physically, specifically considering "the pathology Black Americans suffer as a consequence of their experiences with self-hate" (403). Hall outlines that "Despite the groundless accusations of 'playing the race card' by Whites and their



self-hating Black counterparts, Black men encounter decreased life span longevity otherwise unnecessary” (Hall 403). Hall’s research suggests that the stress experienced by Black people who work in white environments ages them and causes ailments that can be prevented by incorporating a safe, comfortable work environment. Connecting this back to the stereotype threat that Douglas et al. saw experienced even by students in secondary school, as engaged in Chapter Two, reveals the lifelong health impacts of internalized racism.

The connection is evident in the poem “Matchbox Theory,” where the topic is both gaslighting and a refusal to see the subject in the poem as a person instead of as a potential danger. Black people who voice their displeasure with modern American institutions and systems are often ostracized and vilified by people that benefit from them. When the system that is put in place lacks the proper measures to protect Black people who work in white environments, it is essentially abandoning them, allowing those that control the upward trajectory of Black people the opportunity to dismiss them and their cultures. The repercussions of this broken system are felt by the lack of representation in white-collar positions and can be felt by Black people when they are forced to look at themselves and determine if suppressing their culture is worth staying at a job or a school.

When discussing the balancing of the act of surviving white environments, the question of how one goes about keeping and practicing comes to mind. Marwan M. Kraidy, author of the book *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, offers a definition of hybridity, a term used to discuss the juggling of multiple cultures at the same time: “As I use it, “hybridity” refers mostly to culture but retains residual meanings related to the three interconnected realms of race, language, and ethnicity” (1). Kraidy especially emphasizes a longstanding link between language and race (2). Kraidy’s scope of research spans across historical Creole culture and several

European cultures; however, we can apply this definition of hybridity and focus on its presence in environments where Black people are asked to assimilate to a culture that is not theirs in order to perform their job. If we accept this definition of hybridity, we can apply it to the everyday intermingling of cultures in the workspace and in education. Though surrounded by people who speak the same language, in different codes, the majority always choose which code is the norm and which code is foreign. This occurrence correlates to race and ethnicity due to ethnicity and race being understood and interpreted as signs of the different cultures, and so being the reason for or source of additional codes. The balancing act begins when those in a control position mandate how they want their subordinates to practice the social norms deemed acceptable in the workplace.

Hybridity can be visualized in the hybrid piece, SLN, where the autobiographical narrator is assimilating to a new environment while recognizing that assimilation. I was adapting to a new way of life, but I was also critiquing the life that was being pushed onto me. Speaking from experience, the cultural balancing act helped me attain new friends and associates who helped me get used to my environment, but it also caused confusion. There were many times where I questioned if they were associating with me due to my assimilating to their culture, and if they would still do the same if I refused to engage in their cultural practices. In the process of trying to fit in, I could feel the pieces that made me who I was being suppressed, causing me to question my own identity while trying to survive working at a gas station, barely making minimum wage.

Although the poem PWM is not a narrative that exhibits situations that Black people might be confronted with at work, it illustrates what happens when Black people are raised in environments that are outside of their culture. My grandparents adopted me when I was thirteen,

and I was instantly trained on how to get by in my new environment. My father, who was raised in Newport News, Virginia, was never trained on how to assimilate to our new surroundings, something my grandfather regrets not helping him with. My father did not make it long in Oklahoma and opted to leave his family behind to go back to Newport News, Virginia. As I got older, I learned that he had trouble fitting in and making friends and found himself going through the same trials and tribulations I went through as I was growing up in Oklahoma in my adolescent and early adult years. In that poem, I am discussing the effects of being raised with a dual mindset where I attempt to find that balance where I can function in society and still find peace with who I am.

The consequence of double consciousness is addressed in all of the poems attached to this chapter. Kevin Wright, the author of the article “The Relevance of Double Consciousness among Black Males in College,” connects the struggle of Black men in college to the Black men who are not in college and establishes the fact there is not much wiggle room for Black men to make mistakes when working with and associating with white people. Wright declares,

It is exhausting to look at one’s self to make sure it is measuring up to the work of others; the term “Black tax” came up in the interviews quite often. Black tax is the notion that Black people have to work and perform regular tasks twice as well as White people in order to receive the same level of recognition. When it comes to credibility in the workplace or even the classroom, double consciousness has a presence in neither space because of the Black tax. The interviewees would ask themselves why their efforts were so problematic to their White counterparts. Du Bois wondered why White people did not directly ask him, “how does it feel to be a problem?”

The Black tax, related to the concept of cultural taxation discussed in Chapter Two, is a toll that Black people must pay when they are the only Black person at a job site or any location where they are viewed as the token Black person. This is sadly a reality for Black people who are in and out of college because at some point in their life, they will have a peer who questions “why them,” a question that belittles the qualifications that most Black people have already exceeded just to claim a seat at the table.

Suffocating standards are placed on Black people by white people and Black people who have bought into the idea of Blackness as action instead of as a trait of a living being. The consequence of striving for more in avenues that have been sparsely touched by Black hands can be difficult for Black people who are on their own path. The lack of allies and the abundance of people who question your existence can lead to internalizing the idea that you are not enough, or that people who look at you like you are not supposed to be in the seat that you’re taking are right, or that you are doing a disservice to your culture for not following in your culture’s steps in terms of occupation or lifestyle. Society has placed rules and standards on skin color in order to prevent change from occurring within the system. By getting rid of certain stigmas that hinder Black people in work in educational settings, the chances of increasing visibility and creating change in avenues that can trickle down the system become greater, but the only way to get this accomplished is by working together and understanding that progress is the most important goal.

## The Matchbox Theory

The environment is the match, and my presence is the rough exterior that the match is lit from  
The key to not combusting and alarming those that believe they are in danger  
Is by keeping yourself drenched in false modesty and the tonality of a gust of wind  
The fear of your exterior causing the match to light draws ire, distance, and  
The unease of whether your intentions are to destroy or enlighten those around you to the world  
Trepidation of the unknown leaves you to be  
Thrown away,  
Kept out of reach for those that might accidentally wander upon you,  
It's your fault that cities turn to ash, that schools become engulfed in flame, neighborhoods  
smolder,  
We don't blame the match the strikes the flame.  
We blame the granite box that reacts to it.

## Prosciutto Wrapped Melon

I'm not a bitter man, but my dreams are  
lemon coated and dipped in old vinegar.

My grandfather asked for my redemption  
When I was born, because he knew the  
Heartbreak would leave scars on muscles  
I will never be able to exercise in  
daylight, the time of day Violets  
Shine the brightest.  
part of Midnight.

Invest in me, and I'll gift you with  
The chance to watch a cub  
Devour the hyenas.  
doubles.

With every victory that I earn,  
much  
The weight of my last name outgrows  
to.  
The shadow attached to it. We share  
The same face, but my blood is made of  
Norfolk instead of Roanoke,  
their last.  
And I choose to wear my pain  
wheeze brimstone  
On my fingertips instead of my  
god that  
Knuckles  
snakes and dragons.

I've been sweet for bad habits that are  
Drenched in sugar stained nightmares

94th street calls me dangerous  
And rewarded me with peace,  
The type of violence the old  
God flexes. I let my broken, scarred  
Knuckles inhale air, and exhale the  
The darkest

I once missed a shot to grab  
My rebound. I live for  
Triple

You want me to lose as

As the white folk expect me

I don't blame you, every boy  
Dreams of their first name  
Costing more than

You drink fire and

While you look for a

forgives

## A Sunday at the Lite n' Nite

My old boss once agreed to let the cops to use her store as a trap to lure in The Biggest Meth Dealer in Northwest Oklahoma. She told me this right after I clocked into work, a day after I asked for extra hours, hours I needed so I could travel back home because bumfuck Alva was rubbing off on me in the worst possible ways. I started to become the person that referred to towns with a population of over one hundred thousand people as “big cities.” I also began to refer to gas stations as restaurants and learned how to rope a calf while wearing the Jordans I bought when I used to make “let’s buy a pair of Jordans” money. The cops that walked in that night were dressed like the white guys you meet at bars. The white dudes who must let you know that they still listen to Tupac and how *Friday* is their all-time favorite movie. They told me that things could get extremely dangerous tonight and that I should prepare my mind for the worst. So, I decided to train my mind to sue, to sue the fuck out of everybody if I got injured. The Biggest Meth Dealer in Northwest Oklahoma walked in slowly, pissed off that he had to walk inside of a store that had a camera at the entrance, trained on the middle aisle of the store, and right in front of the beer-cave. The Snitch that was used to lure in the Meth Man shook profusely, scared because he was a firm believer in the book of Snitches gets Stitches in the Crime Bible. The Meth Man took a look at the undercover cop next to me and decided to run to his car. The two fans of Friday and Tupac ran towards the vehicle with the same amount of urgency I showed when it was my turn to take out the trash that people poured their chewing tobacco cups into. The driver pushed on the gas towards the two cops, barely missing them as he drove into and through the ditch in front of the gas station. After driving for almost four hours, highway patrol finally arrested him in Kansas. The next day at work, my boss wrote me up for not mopping the floor before I clocked out.

## Therapy in the Blazer

Be my friend and carry my pain,  
While I wonder along oily, decrepit roads,  
Occupied by crimson-stained saints,  
Who are begging to be loved by people of glass  
Who lack remorse for showing me  
wrongs I've created and gifted to those  
that used to get high off exhaling my name,

Be wolves and eat my sorrows,  
Inherited from memories that still  
Scream in my frontal lobe and  
Linger into my marrow and  
DNA my father's phantoms  
Left behind for me to bear,  
calculating and measuring the days I have left until I cry sanity

Be the dawn that eradicates  
the dark stains thieves have  
Left on my psyche, with their promises  
To return and cleanse away with  
their bare hands, and warm lips  
that never claimed me  
not even on Sundays



121db

I've been thinking about the sound of my voice lately.

As a boy, I used to muffle my voice to  
See if anyone could hear me from the other  
Room.

When I was a child, I screamed into a dirty towel, hoping they would save me from tomorrow.

I always apologized,  
But

Nobody ever heard me to accept.

How many times can a boy cry coyote and not be accused of being one with a Phantasm, a  
reality that must not exist if the gaggles and the Mediocre Egrets are not the ones  
Being devoured. If midnight tears create waves in oceans that they will never see, can God At  
least feel fucking sorry enough for me to let my stones hit plastered walls without being stuck  
Inside the rusty buildings my grandfather was never allowed to help build?

There are no saxophone backgrounds playing

For the kid who must endure for the sake of a fool's gold testimony.

There are no certificates of participation for the mandatory shit eating contest on aisle 13.

There are no "remember the good old days" for the Dark-Voiced Man with sable-stoned  
tendencies in Carrara marble dining rooms.

I always apologized,  
But

I've recently learned

My voice carries weight

your grandfather's plastic red wheelbarrow can't hold.

My voice pours the rivers my grandparents buried under their family tree  
Into the deserts

We learned about in American History on Tuesdays.

When you spend your entire life

Listening to the sound of smoke

You learn how to speak the language of dragons.

Pray for my tongue?

No.

Pray that the boy's words screamed into the dirty towel

Reach the mountain's peak and rain down on those daring to climb it.

## Conclusion

As an adult, I have had many moments where I have considered abandoning those of my passions that involve writing. Expressing myself has always been something I regret knowing how to do. There have been countless nights where I have regretted correcting white people on their racist rhetoric, only to be called crazy, combatant, hostile, or to have my character assassinated by being called soft for speaking up on racism when racism enters my immediate vicinity. There is not much solace in seeking reaffirmation from Black people who chose not to get a degree. Black people who decided not to pursue college or to work in a white-collar field view me as privileged, thus making my experience not one worthy of discussing as potentially bothersome. They view me as competing alongside the white people against them, when, in actuality, I have only been allowed to compete against myself the majority of my academic career.

In 2020, I won the teacher of the year at my school, the first Black man in my school district to win the award in the past twenty years. As honored as I am to have won the award, it should be pointed out that it took me scheduling a meeting with the superintendent of my district to ask what is he going to do to better the educational environment for Black children at my school. I also gave an hour-long presentation to my coworkers to discuss bias, microaggressions, and blatant racism; before this meeting, half of my coworkers had never heard me speak before. As a Black man working in a profession where I am not surrounded by people that look or act like me, I am expected to do the same thing as my white colleagues. It was not until I was compelled to address systematic racism by watching George Floyd and many other Black people get killed less than two weeks apart from each other that I decided to try to fight systemic racism for my students.

My experience as a student, teacher, and professional has lead me to believe that I have chosen the wrong course for my life at times. As a student, I found zero solace from any authority figure; the same can be said during my tenure as an undergraduate student. Before 2020, I had never had a literature professor speak about identity or race in a classroom. All the literature that had been presented to me as an undergraduate student had been given only through the gaze of white men and women. The curriculum rarely included the perspective of Black people or people of color, thus leading the class to only think from a white person's lens. As the only Black person in my English classes as an undergraduate student, this problem led to me feeling as if I had no choice but to think like my white classmates in English courses, a constant disadvantage for me that they never had to experience.

If education and professional work settings want to create a safe, inclusive environment for Black people, they need to do more than just focus on the Black experience during Black History Month. Work and school environments that appreciate their existence are necessary for Black people to maintain healthy mindsets; choosing to ignore Black culture and identity is a sign of racism that can negatively impact mental health. For Black people who are graduating from college, an environment that can be problematic for Black people in the first place, there is significant social, familial, and cultural pressure find a good job and maintain employment at this good job for the rest of their life, or until retirement. Given the state of racism in American employers, this expectation asks Black people to ingest racism, as it requires that they move forward without causing issues for their employer or anyone else who affects their upward trajectory. There's no situation where a white employee is asked and expected to do the same thing in silence.

In 2011, I told my then-employer that I had subjected to discrimination from coworkers and management. My employer decided to cut my hours the next week due to my complaints “bringing down the store’s morale.” Because my hours were cut, I barely had enough money to pay my next set of bills, including rent, car insurance, and groceries. Due to the lack of job opportunities in the town, I continued to work there for two more years until I finished my undergraduate degree, facing, nearly every day, an employer that refused to acknowledge race without feeling personally attacked by the conversation. My experience is not an anomaly for Black people, nor other people of color. For Black people in America, speaking up and demanding to be perceived as a human being can often mean being ostracized and being punished by people who affect your livelihood.

Depression, anxiety, self-internalizing hatred, and having a negative view of your self-worth are problems that arise from being surrounded by people who refuse to acknowledge a perspective different from their own. Despite work from community organizers, there are still significant social stigmas around discussing mental health for many Black people, and especially for Black men. The belief is that nobody cares about what you are going through as you try to maneuver in America. All forms of government agencies have viewed Black people as obstacles instead of people who need equal treatment and aid. Instead, health agencies have let Black people down repeatedly, causing members of many Black communities to view any agency that has authority over Black people as potential threats. The system that has been in place to help Americans only seems available to help particular citizens, those who America deems worthy of help.

Systemic oppression has consequences that are hard to ignore by the ones it is meant to oppress. Black men and women are forced to ignore signs of deteriorating mental health due to

the fear of being penalized and experiencing further racism from agencies that have the power to make life for Black people more difficult. The ramifications of racism and identity politics reach is more protracted than police brutality, redlining, and fundamental, visible discrimination but can be seen and felt through basic human needs. Racism steals our experiences, our joy, and our youth; it should not be able to steal our mental health.

As a Black man that is currently working as an educator, and as someone who has always been the only or one of the few Black students in a literature class, I have always been at odds with my identity. Peers view me as standoffish for not speaking, the stereotype for speaking, and out of place for doing either at the wrong time. I've felt anxiety, depression, and self-esteem deteriorate from watching my white peers not being forced to struggle to get to the same point I am in my career or in my educational field. There have been more nights where I have questioned my decision to follow through with my path or to give up and choose to work in an environment that will never sincerely attempt to embrace me. But as I was writing this thesis, the main motivation I had was the image of Black kids being stuck in a room with white people who choose to not understand them, leaving them with the notion that they are alone with this feeling. I write this for the Black kids that don't feel at home anywhere, the ones who continuously think that they are alone in a crowded room, the ones who believe being uncomfortable is synonymous with Blackness. Mental peace shouldn't be solely reserved for the privileged. It also belongs to the kids who are forced to be taught the world's ugly truths at a young age—the kids who are forced to slay demons in history class while still being encouraged to be happy.

## Works Cited

- CDC. "Deaths: Leading Causes for 2017." *National Vital Statistics Reports* vol. 68, no. 6, 2019, pp. 1-77.
- Chae, David H., et al. "The Role of Racial Identity and Implicit Racial Bias in Self-Reported Racial Discrimination: Implications for Depression Among African American Men" *Journal of Black Psychology*, vol. 43, no.8, 2017, pp. 789-812.
- Turner, Claudine and Liz Grauerholz. "Introducing the Invisible Man: Black Male Professionals in Higher Education." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, vol. 39, 2017, pp. 212–227.
- Cunningham, Timothy J., et al. "Racial/Ethnic and Gender Differences in the Association Between Self-Reported Experiences of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Inflammation in the CARDIA Cohort of Four US Communities." *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 75, 2012, pp. 922-931.
- Douglas, Bruce, Chance W. Lewis, Adrian Douglas, Malcolm Earl Scott, and Dorothy Garrison-Wade. "The Impact of White teachers on the Academic Achievement of Black Students: An Exploratory Qualitative Analysis." *Educational Foundations*, vol. 22, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 47-62.
- Edwards, Frank, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito. "Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race-Ethnicity, and Sex." *PNAS*, vol. 116, no. 34, 2019, pp. 16793-16798.
- Goodwill, Jannelle R., Daphne C. Watkins, Natasha C. Johnson, and Julie Ober Allen. "An Exploratory Study of Stress and Coping Among Black College Men." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 88, no. 5, 2018, pp. 539-549.

- Graham, Edward. "School Suspensions and the Racial Discipline Gap." *JSTOR Daily*, 21 July 2017, [daily.jstor.org/school-suspensions-racial-discipline-gap](https://www.jstor.org/school-suspensions-racial-discipline-gap).
- Hall, Ronald E. "Self-Hate as Life Threat Pathology Among Black Americans: Black Pride Antidote Vis-à-Vis Leukocyte Telomere Length (LTL)." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, pp. 398-408.
- Hill, Shirley. *Inequality and African-American Health: How Racial Disparities Create Sickness*. Policy Press, 2016.
- Flaherty, Colleen. "The Souls of Black Professors." *Inside Higher Ed*, 21 Oct. 2020, [www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/21/scholars-talk-about-being-Black-campus-2020](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/21/scholars-talk-about-being-Black-campus-2020).
- Jackson, Brandon A., and Adia Harvey Wingfield. "Getting Angry to Get Ahead: Black College Men, Emotional Performance, and Encouraging Respectable Masculinity." *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 275-92.
- King, Nicole. "'You Think Like You White': Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle-Class Desire(s)." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 2/3, 2002, pp. 211-230.
- Mandara, Jelani, Non K. Gaylord-Harden, Maryse H. Richards, and Brian L. Ragsdale. "The Effects of Changes in Racial Identity and Self-Esteem on Changes in African American Adolescents' Mental Health." *Child Development*, vol. 80, no. 6, 2009, pp. 1660-75.
- Mereish, Ethan H., Hammad S. N'cho, Carlton E. Green, Maryam M. Jernigan, and Janet E. Helms. "Discrimination and Depressive Symptoms Among Black American Men: Moderated-Mediation Effects of Ethnicity and Self-Esteem." *Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2016, pp. 190-96.

NCES. "Characteristics of Post-Secondary Faculty." *National Center of Education Statistics*.

[nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_csc.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csc.asp). Accessed 23 Oct. 2020.

Perez Huber, Lindsay, Robin N. Johnson, and Rita Kohli. "Naming Racism: A Conceptual Look at Internalized Racism in U.S. Schools." *Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2006, pp. 183-206.

Pitman, John P. "Double Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 21 Mar. 2016, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness).

Sellers, Sherrill L., Harold W. Neighbors, and Vence L. Bonham. "Goal-Striving Stress and the Mental Health of College-Educated Black American Men: The Protective Effects of System-Blame" *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2011, pp. 507-518.

Trent, Maria, Danielle G. Dooley, and Jacqueline Douge. "The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health." *Pediatrics*, vol. 144, no. 2, 2019, pp 1-14.

Tucker, Terrance. "Confessions of a *Bakke* Baby: Race, Academia, and the 'Joshua' Generation." *Overcoming Adversity in Academia: Stories from Generation X Faculty*. Ed. Elwood Watson. University Press of America, 2014, pp. 22-38.

Tyson, Karolyn, William Darity, Jr., and Domini R. Castellino. "It's Not 'A Black Thing': Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2005, pp. 582-605.

Wahba, Phil. "The Number of Black CEOs in the Fortune 500 Remains Very Low." *Fortune*, Fortune.com, June 1, 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/06/01/Black-ceos-fortune-500-2020-african-american-business-leaders/>



Ward, Earlise, and Maigenete Mengesha. "Depression in African American Men: A Review of What We Know and Where We Need to Go from Here." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 83, no. 2–3, 2013, pp. 386-97.

Watkins, Daphne C., Jaclynn Hawkins, and Jamie A. Mitchell. "The Discipline's Escalating Whisper: Social Work and Black Men's Mental Health." *Research on Social Work Practice*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015, pp. 240-250.

Watkins, Daphne C., Julie Ober Allen, Janelle R. Goodwill, and Blake Noel. "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Facebook Project." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2017, pp. 392-401.

Watkins, Daphne C., Rheedra L. Walker, and Derek M. Griffith. "A Meta-Study of Black Male Mental Health and Well-Being." *Journal of Black Psychology*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 303-330.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. "The Modern Mammy and the Angry Black Man: African American Professionals' Experiences with Gendered Racism in the Workplace." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 14, no. 1/2, 2007, pp. 196-212.

Wright, Kevin L. "The Relevance of Double Consciousness among Black Males in College." *The Vermont Connection*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2018, <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol39/iss1/12>