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Black body, Black mind

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Black Body, Black Mind

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This project includes a collection of five essays focusing on my personal experiences, struggles, and triumphs as a young African American woman growing up in Chattanooga. These essays offer an incisive, candid look at race relations from the perspective of a maturing youth. The essays also examine life in the Housing Projects, the Affirmative Action myth, the struggles associated with being Black in a white space, and black body objectification and mental illness. My essays also include an examination of the impact of the 2008 election on the underprivileged Black community I lived in. Some essays in my collection take place in public schools in Chattanooga like Orchard Knob Middle School and Brainerd High School, places that are often seen as warzones with no potential for redemption. The project also includes a short critical essay focusing on the structure of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English (BE), particularly its unique elements while also challenging misconceptions about the dialect.

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A Look into the History and Linguistic Patterns of AAVE

Since Africans were first brought over as slaves to the United States, African American Vernacular English (AAVE)¹ has been a powerful and often subversive dialect. Now with the growing influence of the internet in the 21st century, AAVE has rapidly become more widespread, more popular, and more used than ever. It's the ultimate signifier of coolness and chillness. The popularity and ubiquity of the dialect is reflected in popular culture. The dialect shines in contemporary, celebrated fiction like Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give*, and is a key part of the award-winning show *Black-ish* as well as the critically acclaimed and Oscar-winning (Best Picture) film *Moonlight*. AAVE is a staple in comedic films: *Bringing Down the House*, *Ride Along* and *Girl's Trip* all make regular use Black English. There is even Thug Notes (like SparkNotes, but in Black English) on YouTube. The ubiquity of the dialect has made it transcendent of race, class, and region. Whereas the dialect was primarily spoken by African Americans and/or those in the South (Harris and Johnson 52, 53) the dialect is now far-reaching and influential. 2016's phrase of the year is still a popular rebuke—"Ain't nobody got time for that!"² Still, even if one does not speak AAVE, encountering the dialect is inevitable-- words like *woke*³ and *lit*⁴ are so popular that even professors are including them as titles of lectures and courses. As a result, most people are at least slightly familiar with AAVE, sometimes called Ebonics⁵ or Black English. AAVE⁶ is not a difficult dialect to identify by any means of the imagination: it is unapologetically bold and purposefully different.

¹ I use Black English, AAVE, Ebonics interchangeably in this paper.

² The video of Kimberly Wilkins saying the phrase is a viral hit.

³ When one is woke, one is aware, especially as it pertains to social issues.

⁴ Lit means to be bustling with excitement, energy, chaos. Sometimes, "it's lit" can be taken to mean "It's on."

⁵ Ebonics is a somewhat outdated term, with many scholars now opting for terms like Black English or Black Vernacular. Either way, the term Ebonics will be used in this paper, since the term is used in my sources.

⁶ In this paper, we are speaking of AAVE in general terms unless specified. This is a broad examination of the dialect, just as one might study the general patterns of any language.

Despite its use in popular culture, the dialect is still shrouded with misconceptions and misunderstandings. Some believe that Black English is failed English, or for unintelligent people. However, while some may view the dialect as “bastardized English” or a marker of low intelligence, AAVE reflects the originality of its speakers. Syntax, pronunciation and pitch are just a few aspects that make AAVE a creative, spontaneous and ever-evolving dialect (Harris and Johnson 52, 53).

Black English is more than just slang or delinquent speak. Quite simply put, Black English is non-standard English. A great many African Americans speak the dialect, but people of other cultures and races use the dialect frequently as well. However, as John Rickford, an AAVE expert points out, most linguistics stress the *African* of AAVE, some even preferring to use the term *Ebonics*⁷ in order “to highlight the African roots of African American speech and its connections with languages spoken elsewhere in the Black Diaspora” (1). Because Ebonics is non-standard English, it often looks, sounds and functions differently than Standard English. Take this sentence for example: *He dippin’ down the street! He gone!*⁸ Nowhere in Standard English does *dippin’* refer to running speed. Also, note that on *dippin’* the *-g* is dropped, and in some cases the *n* might be pronounced a little longer. And in “*He gone*” notice the ‘to be’ verb *is* has been left out. This is a common occurrence in AAVE—sentences like “*He smart,*” “*She stupid,*” *etc.* are staples of the dialect (Rickford 1). Rickford identifies unique words, pronunciation, and double negatives as traits of AAVE. His examples include *phat* and *bling-bling*, which mean “excellent” and “jewelry” respectively (1). These are just a few convenient examples that show how AAVE and Standard English differ. And just like any language it is important to note that Black English is “not homogenous but characterized by heteroglossia”

⁷ See notes section at end of essay for more details on the naming of the dialect.

⁸ Literally: He’s running really fast. He can’t be caught.

(Harris and Johnson 52). This statement highlights the fact that different groups of African Americans and other speakers who speak the dialect live in different places, which means they speak, view, and utilize Black English differently.

Black English has somber origins. Most scholars theorize that the dialect began to form as slaves “learned English subsequent to their shackled emigration from Africa to North America” (Wolfram, Torbert). Geneva Smitherman, a distinguished professor and expert on Black English, defines AAVE as mixture of African language patterns with English words and patterns. Since the dialect developed during enslavement, Smitherman asserts that “without enslavement, there would be no African American English.” She also describes the critical role of Black English during slavery. It was a “transactional language between the master and the slave or between the master and those who were selling other Africans into enslavement ... But the more important purpose that African American English served in these slave communities is that it was a counter language, a bond of solidarity between Africans from different ethnic groups” (6).

While enslavement contributed to the creation of what Smitherman dubs African American English, the cultural influences that made AAVE a fully functioning dialect are still debated today (Rickford 1). While scholars recognize the history that created AAVE, some still claim the dialect itself mirrors European patterns more, while others stress the African influence. In any case, the exact influences of AAVE will always be difficult to pinpoint exactly for various reasons that Wolfram and Torbert explain:

Describing the early development of African American speech presents a historical, linguistic, and political challenge. Slave traders were hardly thinking of documenting their exploitation of human cargo for the historical record, and most references to speech in the early slave trade were connected to its role in moving and marketing human merchandise. For linguists, the reliance on limited historical records written for purposes other than linguistic documentation is always problematic, but the

difficulties are compounded for vernacular speech that society has deemed unworthy of preservation. Writing was a specialized—and illegal—skill for early African Americans in North America, making firsthand accounts rare and questionable in terms of accuracy with respect to vernacular speech. But there are also questions about authenticity for other recorders of black speech, and its representation runs the gamut—from racist caricatures that exaggerate stereotypical differences to inclusive portrayals that overlook any possible ethnic differences in speech. Observations about African American speech have never been far removed from the politics of race in American society, so that it is hardly surprising that the status of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been—and continues to be—highly contentious and politically sensitive.

Those who claim AAVE developed mostly from European patterns of speech emphasize the fact that many slaves spoke Spanish and French in addition to their native African languages. This indicates that slaves “simply learned the regional and social varieties of the adjacent groups of white speakers as they acquired English” (Wolfram and Torbert). And the same scholars often point out double negatives or negative sentences like “*I ain’t doin’ nothing*” that have the same construct, and pronunciation as other non-standard English dialects. (Rickford).

On the other side of the argument are the scholars who believe that the influence of African linguistic patterns greatly impacted the dialect as it developed through time and more than European influences. While the African languages that slaves spoke ultimately turned to English, some scholars believe AAVE is the result of American English’s inability to shake its African influence. To support their argument, these linguists point to the fact that “West African languages often lack *th* sounds and final consonant clusters” and this “occurs both in US Ebonics and in West African English varieties spoken in Nigeria and Ghana” (Rickford 1). Some even compare AAVE with Caribbean linguistic patterns by noting that both AAVE and Caribbean Creole “frequently drop ‘is’ and ‘are,’ and that both permit dropping word-initial d, b, and g in tense-aspect markers (Caribbean examples include habitual/progressive ‘(d)a,’ past tense ‘(b)en,’ and future ‘(g)on’)” (Rickford). “*He smart*” and “*He gon’ do it*” are examples of these two aspects in AAVE, respectively. Both the European and African theories are valid, so it is logical

to accept that AAVE most likely was influenced greatly by both as it developed into a dialect⁹ (Wolfram and Torbert).

The syntax of AAVE is like that of Standard English in that Subject-Verb-Object is the most dominant pattern of sentence construction. A notably *different* syntactical practice of AAVE is the dropping of the ‘to be’ verb (called the omitted copula) and the unusual use of *be* and *been*. “She is smart” drops to “*She smart.*” While the sentences are noticeably different, the essence of both statements remains unchanged. In fact, sentences like “*She coming*” seem more convenient than the Standard way. In the case of *be* and *been*, the word *be* is commonly used in a way to denote habitual actions. In the sentence “*He be calling her all out her name,*” *be* roughly means regularly. In the case of *been*, it is a common occurrence to hear sentences like “*Man, I been told you that!*” in which *been* means already. The AAVE *been* is rarely used as a past participle.

The use of words like *gone*, *done*, and *have* are also unique in AAVE. In the sentence “*She gon’ do it,*” *gon* refers to an action that will occur in the future (1) In the case of *have*, most AAVE usage follows this pattern: instead of saying “She has to work,” “*She have to work*” is almost always said during discourse. *Done* is often used in place of *has* or *did*. “*He don’ started som’m*” is an example. It is always important to stress the fact that these patterns are not erroneous. They are within the grammatical system of the dialect. While some speculate that the patterns of syntax “reflect faulty attempts to produce Standard American English forms” they simply are wrong. AAVE was influenced by European languages but that does not mean AAVE is something that speakers *settle* for—AAVE is less a series of errors and more a rule-governed,

⁹ Of course, the debate of which influenced AAVE *more* will wage forever.

systematic dialect. What the syntactical patterns of AAVE often demonstrate is the dialect's flexibility and ability to manipulate the foundations of Standard English (Rickford 11817).

Furthermore, AAVE also uses modal auxiliaries and indirect questions uniquely. Modal auxiliaries are often used consecutively, or in pairs in AAVE. "*He might could do that*" is an example of this occurrence. While this occurs in Standard English as well, it is commonplace and more frequent in AAVE. For indirect questions, AAVE "often preserves the order of the main question, [as in] "*I asked him did he know.*" Here the exact question is within the sentence that refers to it, which is truly unique. For comparison, in Standard English the sentence might be "*I asked him if he knew.*" Here the original question is not preserved; it has been modified to fit the context of the sentence (Harris and Johnson 53).

In addition, AAVE makes regular use of double negatives, while the indirect object *them* is often used as a demonstrative pronoun in AAVE sentences. First, Rickford asserts that double negatives are a key feature of AAVE. Double negatives are logical and fully accepted in AAVE, so if one was to say, "Ain't nobody got time for that" there is no correction to be made, no grammatical rule broken, and thus no perception of bad grammar. Double negatives are used freely and easily understood.

Moreover, AAVE also uses the objective case as demonstrative pronouns. In Standard English, an indirect object usually indicates *to whom* or *for whom*, and the objects are *them*, *him*, *her*, *us*, *you*. Demonstratives are words that indicate *which* or *which ones*; that, these, those and this. But in Ebonics, indirect objects are used as demonstratives. In the sentence "*Dem grapes is good!*" *them* refers to which grapes instead of the people that the grapes are for. Maybe the most popular saying in amongst African Americans that showcases this practice is the sentence "*We dem boys.*" Again, *dem* or *them* refers to *which one(s)* and not *to* or *for whom*. In using the

objective case as demonstratives, AAVE once again proves that it is a flexible and quite creative dialect that thrives on its own unique syntactical patterns.

Furthermore, words in AAVE often undergo a semantic change when compared to Standard English. Rickford uses the words *kitchen* and *ashy* as examples of semantic change. While the words exist in Standard English, they are used in such a context in AAVE that might confuse someone not familiar with the dialect. *Kitchen* usually means a place in a house, but in AAVE it refers to the kinky hair on the back one's neck as well. *Ashy* might be taken to refer to something that is covered in ashes, but in AAVE it refers "the whitish appearance of black skin when dry." Rickford claims that *ashy* and *kitchen* (the hair) are a couple of words that are almost exclusive to African Americans. More examples of words that have an additional meaning in AAVE are *ham*, *steady*, and *stay*. In Standard English, 'ham' refers to meat from pigs. In AAVE, *Ham* means to go berserk, usually in a way that intimidates or threatens others. *Steady* in AAVE is synonymous with continually; "*He steady callin' me!*" *Stay* is similar to *steady*. "*He stay callin' me!*" is just as acceptable and common.

Pronunciation is also a key aspect of AAVE. Rickford describes several pronunciation patterns in AAVE:

Ebonics pronunciation includes features like the omission of the final consonant in words like 'past' (pas') and 'hand' (han'), the pronunciation of the th in 'bath' as t (bat) or f (baf), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like 'my' and 'ride' as a long ah (mah, rahd). Some of these occur in vernacular white English, too, especially in the South, but in general they occur more frequently in Ebonics. Some Ebonics pronunciations are more unique, for instance, dropping b, d, or g at the beginning of auxiliary verbs like 'don't' and 'gonna', yielding Ah 'on know for "I don't know" and "ama do it" for "I'm going to do it."

Examples of Rickford's observations abound. *More* sounds like *mo*, so that the final consonant sound is omitted. *Fire* becomes *figh* with a long vowel pronunciation. In general, the *-er* sounds morphs to an 'uh.' The *-th* sound, which can be rare in AAVE, becomes more of a d. Obviously, the *-g* on the *-ing* suffix is dropped and *-th* becomes more of a *-f*. *Truth* becomes */troof/* and

wrath becomes /*raf*/). These patterns indicate “distinctive Ebonics pronunciations are all systematic, the result of regular rules and restrictions;” they are not random errors (Rickford 1).

Furthermore, slurring of words and phrases is frequent in AAVE. Sentences like “You don’t even know” can sound like “*You ‘on neen know.*” The dropping of the initial consonants contributes to the slur. “Not at all” or “none at all” becomes *n’all*, and “Go on ahead” quickly morphs to “*G’on head.*” “*I am going to do it*” changes to “*I’mma do it.*” Practically anything is susceptible to slurring in AAVE, which can make the dialect hard to understand for those who are unfamiliar with it. Still, slurring makes AAVE unique and distinguishable from Standard English.

While syntax and semantics are often studied, intonation, or pitch has only recently garnered attention. It is one of the more overlooked aspects of AAVE. Despite being overlooked, pitch remains an essential part of AAVE—it signifies excitement, disappointment, sadness, incredulity and so on. Because so little research has been conducted about pitch in AAVE, linguists who now recognize its crucial role in communication conduct experiments in which they observe the speakers of AAVE. The experiments “[reveal] several intonational characteristics of the group which are reported to communicate sense of community, playfulness, and creativity” (Paboudijan 1912). In other words, pitch is used to display emotion and closeness and spontaneity. Pitch is utilized constantly and can change the meaning of the sentence instantly. “*He coming over here?*” is just a question, but when the pitch is higher, a sense of incredulity is usually being displayed. “*He coming over here? At this time of night? Oh n’all!*” In times of excitement pitch can change abruptly, even mid-sentence. An example is “You ain’t tell me you *havin’ a boy!*” Pitch is often used in AAVE to tell humorous stories with others

gathered to listen. In his 2016 Oscars monologue, comedian Chris Rock¹⁰ employed pitch frequently to delight and amuse the crowd. Conversely, when pitch is lowered, seriousness is evoked; in times of mourning, pitch becomes a crucial element in expressing condolences and grief. As more people who are curious about pitch and as those who speak AAVE regularly begin to contribute to research, the impact and critical role of pitch in AAVE will be more commonly discussed and explored.

While the names Ebonics and AAVE refer to the African roots of the language, it is not solely restricted to African Americans. Denis Barron, a professor of Linguistics at Illinois University, tackles this particular misconception by contributing the following:

For one thing, not all African Americans speak Ebonics, and not all Ebonics speakers are African American. A significant number of whites, Hispanics, and Asian Americans who live and work closely together speak dialects that can be characterized as black English. As linguists study AAVE, they find that, just like standard English, it is not monolithic, but comes in flavors and varieties. In addition, as I've indicated above, mainstream English has borrowed heavily from the speech of African Americans. So, in many ways, it is easier to conceive of all the dialects of English as variable and continuous, rather than categorical and separate. For another thing, the problems Ebonics speakers face are shared by speakers of other nonstandard dialects as well, whether they live in the inner city, in rural America, or even in the suburbs.

So, anybody could speak African American English and particular factors, such as the internet and mobile devices, have made AAVE more widespread than ever, ensuring that it is never restricted to one race or culture. While it is important to note that anybody can speak AAVE, the dialect is mostly used by African Americans. The dialect also varies from region to region, with different parts of the country developing their own versions. The region that most actively uses AAVE is the Southern portion of the United States (Rickford 1). AAVE is “more common among working class than middle class, among adolescents than among the middle aged” (Harris and Johnson 52). Those in the middle class tend to switch between variants of Standard

Video of speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqhVNZgZGqQ>¹⁰

American English and African-American Vernacular English depending on their audience and sense of identity (Linnes 339). It is also important to note that some middle-class African Americans refuse to acknowledge that Black English is a staple of Black culture (Harris and Johnson 52). In some cases where this occurs, African Americans are aware of the perception that speaking the dialect is considered a marker of low intelligence. Many linguists like Rickford, Wolfram Torbert, etc. stress that this is not the case. Speaking a dialect with different grammatical rules and semantics does not indicate a specific intelligence level.

In fact, AAVE permits its speakers to express logical statements and complex ideas and reasoning (Harris and Johnson 53). Other linguists support this claim, describing the dialect as “systematic, rooted in history, and important as an identity marker and expressive resource for its speakers” (Rickford 11817). When Standard English fails, or seems too stiff to express an emotion or opinion, speakers seek refuge in the comfort of AAVE, a dialect they most likely have spoken since they could speak at all. Teachers in Oakland believed that using AAVE in the classroom could help students learn more effectively.¹¹ These teachers recognized the impact that language has on learning and expression.

AAVE still has to shake off the negative misconceptions, and there is definitely more research to be done in order to better understand the dialect. But over the years, considerable progress has been made. Since the 90s, studies of the dialect have been constant, and minds have been opened. A dialect has been legitimized, a people have been championed. Language is often

¹¹ In 1996, the Oakland Cal. School Board declared AAVE to be the original language of their African American students. They proposed using Black English to teach the students believing that it would help them learn better. Naturally, chaos ensued. The school board backtracked on its original position to quell the outrage from members of the community concerned about the impact such a move would have on their children’s future in academics (Baron). The school board defended their suggestion by noting they planned to use “Ebonics as a means to increase standard English proficiency among black students, many of whom were in dire need of culturally relevant linguistic enrichment” (Baugh).

the soul and reflection of its people, so while AAVE is still changing and being studied, so are those who speak it. For so long, speakers of AAVE have been burdened by stereotypes, racism, and those who ridiculed the dialect. It is important to stress that the dialect reflects the intelligence and creativity of its speakers. Now those who normally stand by in the shadows, get a chance to step in the limelight as their language and cultures are studied. For quite some time, the world had been sleeping on AAVE. But now the scholars are woke and the academic world is absolutely lit.

Notes

- By using and including the term “vernacular” in AAVE I am referring to Harris and Johnson’s definition of the term as “the first form of language that a person learns to speak.” *Vernacular*, as I use it, is not intended to be synonymous with “slang.”
- As indicated in the footnotes, I use the terms AAVE, Black English and Ebonics interchangeably, although most scholars believe the terms Ebonics and Vernacular are outdated.
- This essay makes no mention of a Student’s Right to Their Own Language, a lively debate in the 60’s concerning integration of Black English in classrooms.

My Way Forward: A Brainerd Tale

Brainerd had a way of making me feel diminished and shallow, kind of like nominal data. I was 14 when I registered for Brainerd High School. I was nervous and jittery, already acutely aware of my natural inclination to be overtly un-cool wherever I went. I was too young for a job, and it showed. I remember begging my mother to buy me anything, something else besides the holey shoes and the oversized hand-me-downs. She always insisted I looked just fine in my brother's clothes. This was back when my mother treated my being a girl the way most Americans treated the Syrian refugee crisis—she just ignored me until she couldn't. When we did go shopping, she'd always travel to these suspiciously sketchy, darkly lit stores just to buy me extra-large shirts and 14/16 medium in pants so that I could have extra growing room. My mother never understood that there were serious repercussions for dressing so shabbily—she would always ignore my requests, partly because we didn't get along and partly because she didn't want to spend any more than she had to. "It's school," she would hiss, "what does it matter?"

Although I wasn't very hip or cool like the rest of my peers at Brainerd, I thought I had one thing in my favor—being the younger sibling of the most popular guy at school. My brother was a safety for the upstart and new-attitude football team and he was well established at Brainerd; he was a senior and member of the honor society and knew every teacher. I thought his popularity would help me. It didn't. His lofty social status only further exposed my lowly state. We were *the* juxtaposition. It went like this: the crowd parted for him but fell back in when I

came through. I stumbled through the hallways, wide-eyed and uncertain, while my brother's gait was fluid and easy. When he spoke, people really listened. Whenever I dared to speak, all eyes would linger on my shoes, and after the taunts and jeers I would just turn around and be on my way. Soon, I realized that a lot of people thought my brother was attractive, which was okay, but not okay when they involved me. Girls would come up to me and beg for his number, like I had it memorized. They would also send him messages through me. "Tell him I think he's cute, ok?" I think they imagined him living in Wakanda, ruling his kingdom, or something, because every time he'd point to me and say, "That's my sister," there was either an "Oh," or "No it's not." I still don't blame them. My brother was Oroonoko, the Prince of Brainerd. I was a peasant, at *most*. He was undoubtedly where he belonged, and I was definitely out of my element. We were related, but so different. He was better—he was golden. I was yellow.

My brother was aware of it first. One day he came into my room and asked me how I was liking the school. I barely glanced at him. Even in minimal lighting, his brown skin glowed, as if his very soul was a ball of fiery contentment.

"I don't like it. Why are there always so many people in the hallways?"

"It's high school, you'll get used to it. Where are your friends?" he asked that suddenly, and I could tell he'd been working up to it.

"Friends?"

"*Friends.*" His eyes were narrowed. He could see right through me.

I told him I didn't have any. He insisted I was wrong and because he is a genuinely selfless person, he began to name all of his friends as if to offer them to me. I know he meant well by it, but the gesture only made me feel worse.

“Anyway, freshman year is always hard. You’ll be a’ight” When he left my room, I caught a whiff of happiness and comfort. It smelled good on him.

Soon, the melancholy came in waves and I was drowning in misery. School made me worrisome, doubtful, anxious. My father took offense to my displeasure. He lectured me on the importance of fitting in with my “people.” He didn’t get that the school was rejecting me. And besides, if they were my people, they’d all be Power Rangers, some red, some yellow and some black with names like Jason, Trini, Zack. I wasn’t their type, they weren’t my type. That’s just the way it was. But I got the essence of my father’s lectures. If I couldn’t get along with the kids of my neighborhood, my community, people who most likely shared a lot of the same socio-economic struggles as me, who would I ever connect with on this pale blue dot of a planet?

So, I tried. And almost every day I failed in the most spectacular of ways. One of the biggest challenges I faced was taking the school bus. When the bus came around to my neighborhood, it was almost always full. Some days God would pity me and there would be a seat practically gleaming in the dull light of the bus. Most days, I wasn’t so lucky. Before the bus doors opened, my brother would coach me up.

“Just find a seat. Sit down.” He’d give me a reassuring look like, *easy right?*

But it never was.

Everybody looked so mean and volatile in the morning. I felt that I had to ask, “Can I sit here?” Every time I heard a “no” I became more hectic, more anxious, because soon the lights would be off, and the bus would be in motion and I would be standing the whole ride, and everyone would be laughing. Somehow, I always found a seat. But it didn’t take long for the roar of the bus engine to make me nauseous and dizzy.

One day, a girl named Crystal sat next to me in class. She was beautiful and well dressed and she pretended she that didn't know she was taking a chance by being seen with me. Her hair was long and straight, her skin was dark and smooth, and she was one of the few girls who could pull off electric blue eyeshadow. She made braces look cool. But what really struck me was her confidence, the way she never apologized, the way she asserted herself. She began to speak and even though I was watching her, it took me a full two minutes to realize that she was talking to me. She was easy enough to talk to and as we spoke I tried to capture everything distinguishable about her, so I wouldn't forget her, the girl who had been nice to me. Eventually she let me know that she rode my bus.

“You be lookin’ so shaky.” She paused to scratch her head. And then she chuckled.

“Stop asking people ‘Can I sit here?’ Girl, sit cho ass down. Don’t ask no question.”

Yeah, Crystal was fierce.

If I was shaky on the bus, I was petrified in Brainerd. Everyone seemed to know everybody, and if you knew no one, you were left out. All the other students looked so happy, so comfortable around their buddies that I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. The only person I knew was my brother and although he'd offered me a place at his lunch table, I declined. By then I was realizing that I didn't really thrive in the company of fellow humans, so there was no use of setting myself up to be embarrassed in front of the football team. During lunchtime, if the library was closed, I'd roam the school, pretending that it wasn't my stomach that was rumbling. I never fooled myself once.

Then, all my crumbs disintegrated to dust.

It all happened very quickly. I was walking, reading the slip my English teacher had signed. It was a written excuse for being late to Geometry, and I was beyond grateful because I had never been late to anything before. I walked swiftly, and since the hallways were long and straight, I could just make out my classroom even though it was a while away. There was a person ahead of me. He was coming as I was going, sipping a drink and trying to show off for the class that lined the left side of the hall. I moved closer to the wall to give him space. I glanced down at my slip and before I could look back up, he had bumped into me. Afterwards, I kept walking. I knew he wanted the attention. It was an intimidation thing. People walked into your path as if to challenge you. The weaker person moved out of the way. I was supposed to move—I was weak. I was a few feet away from my class when the Mountain Dew bottle came flying past my head, hitting the wall before me. Only then did I turn around to look at him. He was screaming obscenities and gesturing my way. A sickly yellow-green spot was on his white polo. His attempt to intimidate me had backfired, the soda had spilled on him. Now the bottle rolled aimlessly, the yellow liquid pouring out onto the floor before me. For a moment, I watched him. As he yelled, the lights at his end of the hallway seemed to flicker, and for a moment, I didn't know what to do. He had tried to hit me in the head, I was sure of it. Maybe I could have summoned up the courage to go back there to confront him—I probably should have, but I didn't. The way forward was the way that beckoned—my class was closer. And this way, the lights didn't flicker; it was well-lit. So, I trudged ahead. My Geometry teacher intercepted me before I crossed the threshold of the classroom. She was sixty-eight, with incisive brown eyes and short tawny hair. Her skin had shriveled and tanned from being out in the sun so much. She'd had six strokes, but her mind was still sharp. She asked me what happened. I told her.

“We gon' get 'em.” Like always, she was good on her word.

When the administration arrived, my brother had already been there for a good three minutes. Mrs. Sparn, the Geometry teacher, was trying to calm him down and I took advantage of the diversion to see if any drink had spilled on my stuff. Of course, it had. My backpack was soaked, but my books were okay. Despite being sticky and smelling like sour syrup, I was relieved, tired. I remember being dismissed early and sitting in the car while my father lectured me about the perils of having a ninety-pound backpack.

The Head of State

When I was about five, the SWAT team came to my home in East Lake. We were in the living room, sitting on the couch and watching television. My mother, the stereotypical nosy neighbor, had seen the black, lethal-looking SWAT truck turn onto our street but assumed it wasn't for us. Because of the design of the projects with two houses comprising a unit and these units being no more than a few feet apart, it was often hard to tell where exactly the SWAT team was headed. I remember my mother's gasp when she realized they were heading to our unit—it was dramatic enough that everyone in the house stopped what they were doing to look at her.

“Get down, get down!”

There were three children then—me, my older brother and our little sister. We knew the drill. We dropped to the living floor, pressing our brown cheeks against the cool white floor as my father ran over to join my mother at the window.

The knocks echoed throughout our silent house.

When my parents opened the door, the assault rifles were already drawn. One officer started asking questions about some man and while the others scanned the living room from the doorstep.

“Ain't nobody in here but my kids!” That was my mother's response every time.

They ignored her. More questions, this time louder. The light on one of the rifles passed over my face.

My mother was desperate. “I don’t care if you search the house, just put the guns away. I got children. Don’t point them guns at them.”

As it turns out, they didn’t need to search the house. When they left, we all just looked at each other. My mother sobbed and smothered us with wet kisses while my father cursed the air. It was all they could do.

In between SWAT run-ins, life in the projects was full of monotony. All the houses were brick, all the mailboxes gray and the whole place was a labyrinth, a maze of sameness, with no individuality or liveliness. We hid from the same thing, we left our houses for the same thing, and when the police got a hold of us or when we got a hold of one another, we oozed the same red blood. For my family, our routine was tight. We would go to school, come home and stay in the house, unless under adult supervision or with a friend. There was no wandering absent-mindedly through the projects, not unless you were of age. At the time, the East Lake projects were a bit of a food desert—so everyone went to the same stores, cooked the same food, and ate the same thing. People either did one or two drugs—crack or marijuana. The projects were a place of controlled possibilities--a place of repetitions due to lack of options. It was a place where Blackness was contained, chaperoned, and neutralized. It was a place my family tolerated until we had better. We left when I was seven.

In my family, we loved the movie *Head of State*. Out of four siblings, I had the honor of popping it out of its case and inserting it into the DVD player. After pressing ‘play’ I’d plop back on the couch, elbow my siblings for more room and laugh about the story of a struggling Black man getting elected to be the President of the United States of America. It was improbable at best. Yeah, right. When would a Black man be elected President?

Even though I was ten years old, the movie had way of sticking in my mind, so that I'd find myself thinking "what if?" although the what if only led to more disbelief. The movie went from something I'd watch casually, to something deeply personal—it contained truths I'd never spoken aloud, and possibilities I'd never dreamt of. Yes, we had moved from the East Lake to Eastdale, but I had carried the parameters of the poverty-stricken projects with me. I thought of my life as a big coincidence, one that shouldn't be fussed over. I had no dreams. I saw no future. But *Head of State* presented me with an alternative world—a fairytale at the time, but a new possibility nonetheless. The image of Black power allowed my mind to transcend the realm of whiteness and Black oppression.

I first heard of Barack Obama at when I was eleven years old and in the sixth grade at Chattanooga Middle, but when that school was gentrified, I learned more about him at Orchard Knob Middle in the seventh grade. Orchard Knob fostered my love of politics while educating me about my nation's white supremacist past. We didn't just love Barack Obama because he was smart, eloquent and a great orator. We loved him because he was Black, and as they say, there was no shame in our game.

Early on November 4th, 2008, Orchard Knob Middle School crackled with nervous, anxious, can-you-believe-this-moment energy. The unimpressive, outdated brick building was buzzing with final thoughts, predictions, and hopes. That day, nobody stood still. Even if you were talking, you were moving with your group. Never had I seen such a large group of Black people look so mobilized. There was a type of fluidity to it, the way in which it gained momentum throughout the day, the week, the year. We were on the brink of breaking through the white membrane that smothered the country, and on the way to election day was the beginning of

a new way, and this way was resolutely ushered in by the very people that had suffered years of countless terrors that ranged from slavery to segregation to the trigger-happy police.

We never expected Barack Obama to shield us from the countless dangers of being Black and poor. No one man could do that. No man could reverse centuries-old police mentalities, no one person could solve all Black people's problems. The things we expected from Barack Obama's presidency are the things his campaign posters advertised. Hope. A Black President. A role model that still holds up, even in the face of Muslim shaming and the rejuvenated white supremacist movement. An elevated sense of pride and self, and most importantly, a campaign that embraced Blackness and used it as a tool for inspiration rather than a shameful mark of inferiority.

And maybe it was because of his message of hope that Barack Obama was easily the biggest superstar in Black America. Even if you didn't like him, or his politics, you respected his journey. Little kids could be heard testing his name on their tongue, cautiously at first, as if they were running their palm over a flame. Deep in the hood, drug dealers, groovy grandmothers, and corner store owners all wanted to talk about Obama. Discussions varied, but someone almost always said, with brave optimism, "He gon' get it, watch and see!" This was sometimes countered by the other saying, real slow, with gradually rising pitch, "Now, you *know* they ain't gon' let him have it."

It's interesting to look back now, as these very people were often mocked for their political discourse and involvement. Why get involved? *You're poor! Your life will be the same!* But what about the belief that glinted in kids' eyes and the way their chests swelled with a predetermined triumph as they declared, "I'mma run for president!" Of course, this uprising irritated some. *You only vote for him because he's Black!* Being underage at the time, my mind

couldn't handle this accusation. I was twelve; I couldn't vote! But now, ten years later at 21, I say: what's so wrong with allowing these Black and brown bodies to hope the hope that white people have never had to learn? In addition, for centuries white was the unspoken prerequisite for being president. The country was never voting for the best leader, but for best next white male option. There is no way I will be shamed for wanting diversity in the White House—especially if it brings about one of the more intelligent, relatable, and qualified presidents in all of history.

Our homework on November 4th came from our seventh-grade social studies teacher Mrs. Hill. We had to color in the electoral map. That night in my bedroom, I settled in front of my rusty out-of-date television and got to work. It started off easy, but the closer things got, the harder it was to color within the lines. But it didn't matter—after a certain point in the tallying, I could barely see the map, anyway. All that was visible to me was the number needed, the number that ended the race. Instead of the cheers from the TV and the voices of the breathless news anchors, all I heard was the shouts of “He got it!” that came from different locations in the house, all at different pitches. After it was over, there wasn't anything to do but bask. We had no cellphones, no laptops. We said our words of disbelief, and belief too, and only reluctantly settled into bed, although we were already a few hours into Wednesday.

The next day at school, we had a party. It wasn't official or anything, but the only thing we did was review our maps and talk about the election and looked at bits of television coverage. The thing I remember most about post-election day was our teachers telling us that Obama had changed history, and because of that there were people who would not be happy. We thought we understood this—and we had already faced some of the white hatred not only during the campaigns, but in our lives that were spent and lost in the hood and projects. Still, at twelve, we

could have never predicted the swiftness of the backlash, the way it gathered steam and the way it brewed for eight long years. While we were dizzy with disbelief at the spectacle of a Black president, some of our white counterparts were busy thinking of ways to reestablish racial supremacy now that a man with Kenyan roots answered to the call “Mr. President!”

I worried about his safety. My family had lived seven years in East Lake Projects, a place where sound of SWAT boots hitting the concrete made people scramble inside, huddle by the window, and wonder who they were going to get this time. From my time there, I knew that in a matter of seconds, one perfectly placed bullet could shatter a skull, a hope, a childhood dream. Every time I saw a clip of Barack Obama, I’d think his security wasn’t close enough. It was all too easy to see that bullet piercing his skull and ending one of the greatest Black triumphs in all of US history.

Throughout Obama’s presidency, white people felt inclined to say certain things to me. Most of them were ridiculous and rude, and so outlandish that my brain rejected them immediately and without much fuss. But one incident has always clung to me. It happened 2014 backstage in Hixon’s Little Theatre.

We were supposed to be generating skits for the upcoming showcase. Our teacher was busy lecturing a newcomer about the do’s and don’ts of improv when Hailey, a white girl, leaned over a row of old, wooden seats and smiled at me. Hailey was the self-anointed top dog of theatre—and because of this, most of the class either regarded her with a sense of intense dislike or admiration. Her jazzy fingers approach annoyed me, but I didn’t hate her.

“Hey, I’m having trouble with government. Help me, okay?”

I hated polite commands, but I didn't want her pestering me and interrupting my creative process, so I set my notebook aside and dug through my bag for my own textbook and followed her backstage into our storage/costume room. We sat on the back couch and I began to explain to her the workings of US government using the visuals in the book. Hailey insisted she just couldn't get it.

Most of it anyway.

“Well, I get the president stuff, mostly because it's always on the news. Obama this and Obama that.”

She began to go on her White Tirade, something I was familiar with. I blocked her out good enough, but one sentence caught me off guard.

“Y'all niggers only voted for him because he's Black.”

As I looked at her, she began to sputter as if even *she* was surprised that she'd let that slip out her mouth.

I wanted to gather my stuff and leave, but I stayed. It wasn't me who didn't belong---it was her. She promptly gathered her stuff and left.

The “accusation” itself made me a little proud—I was only 16, and I wanted to vote so badly my hands itched, so I didn't mind being linked to Barack Obama's run. But it was the way her face contorted when she said “nigger” that let me know that she hated me, and that she blamed me for upending her world of whiteness. I was never able to look at her the same again. In my mind, Hailey would always be The White Girl Who Lost Her Mind and Called Me Nigger.

A year later, a white man accused Black people of taking over. He walked into a Charleston church, lifted a gun and aimed at Black bodies, hoping that the velocity of his bullets would satisfactorily express his hatred and long held belief of white supremacy. He wanted his white world back. The hatred that erupted during Barack Obama's presidency was always visible and visceral. The inauguration didn't just mark a new presidency. It marked the beginning of a revamped expression of white superiority and intolerance. The shooter's hatred, ramblings, and racist accusations reminded me of Hailey and the look of utter disgust on her face when she called me nigger. Dylan Roof was not a lone wolf.

The entire Orchard Knob student body gathered in the auditorium to watch the inauguration live. The huge screen was down and there he was, Barack Obama, with Michelle right beside him. The imagery reminded of a scene towards the end of *Head of State*, and it was strange but gratifying to see life imitate art. The school gave us goodie bags with a ruler, a bookmark and a bracelet, along with other things. Then the teachers sat down and watched with us. We cheered during the whole thing, clapping at moments and erupting when it was over. I remember talking with my friends about the crowd that had descended upon Washington. "All those people," we said, not knowing that years later, we would still be saying the same thing. I have the bracelet still. It is dark blue and rubber and has a flag on it along with Barack Obama's name and the inscription 44th President. The flag has faded, but the name, even with all the bracelet has been through, is still ever so clear.

The Great White Sacrifice

Not for the first time, the class discussion in my high school senior AP English turned to scholarships and colleges. Apparently, some Black dude had been accepted into *every* Ivy League school. We were blown away by this—collectively, at least. The conversation focused on race rather quickly.

One white, heavily bearded and fundamentally unsound guy named Jacob offered his take.

“He just got in because he’s Black.”

His fellows around him agreed heartily. Obviously, he’d said the sentence in hopes of easing his own academic incompetence, but as he continued to defend his view point, it was clear he actually believed the nonsense he sputtered. According to Jacob, colleges want Black people. So, all a Black person has to do is apply. This is how Blacks get into colleges, simple as that.

I thought that once I left high school and AP classes I would never hear that racist nonsense again.

Just the opposite.

I took Statistics my sophomore year of college. My African professor quickly noticed my intellect. He would urge me to the board to solve a problem for the class, and this day was no different. I was called to the board, I worked the question and took a step back. He smiled at me before turning to the class.

“Is she right?”

The class began to murmur.

“That can’t be right.”

“No, it’s the other way around.”

After a minute or so of this, Professor shook his head and peered over his glasses at the class.

“She’s right.” But even with the note of finality in his voice, the protests got louder.

“How can that be right?!”

“The problem said...”

By then it was clear to me that the entire majority-white class was offended. I had confronted them with their own stupidity. I had flashed my intelligence when I was supposed to be the dumb one. I was the one who needed Affirmative Action. Who was I to tell them that they were wrong?

Professor had the last word.

“She is right! Japorsche go sit down. Give her a round of applause. We will work through it together.”

Apparently to be Black and in college means that one has found some loophole, or someone has felt guilty and scratched Harry’s name from the list and scribbled in Tyrone’s. That’s the brilliance of the Affirmative Action myth. It perpetuates the idea that Black excellence requires white sacrifice. That minorities have to take from a more qualified and intelligent majority in order to “make it.” People who utter the insult want to make it seem as though Black people aren’t smart enough for college, when in reality, they can’t accept that Black people are

just as capable and intelligent as anyone else. But not many white people are ready to face the facts.

My college advisor didn't mention Affirmative Action while helping me apply to colleges. She didn't sit me down and say, "So, you've got outside scholarships, university scholarships, and, we can't forget, Affirmative Action!" When I received my acceptance letters, she didn't come to me with a big goofy smile and say, "It's official! You've taken Annie Johnson's spot! Congrats!"

I know it's hard for certain white people to accept this idea of Black competence and achievement. No matter what Black people do, no matter how many colleges we are accepted to, no matter how many books or collections we write, there will always be that bitter white person in the background shaking their head and whispering, "Affirmative Action." But even if Affirmative Action is the reason some students of color get into college, it is important to regard the underprivileged, racial, and social barriers that Black students must overcome on their way to college.

Because my family was economically unstable, I bounced around from school to school. And of the renowned, cutting edge magnet schools in Chattanooga, Tennessee, I come from none. The schools that I attended are generally regarded as troubled, raggedy and dangerous by most Chattanoogaans. When I went to Brainerd High, my English teacher said someone came up to her and profusely apologized when they found out where she taught. Predominately Black schools don't need apologies. They need books for outdated libraries and more resources.

At Dalewood, it seemed that the only thing the library had to offer was encyclopedias and uninteresting biographies. Other than that, the chestnut shelves were blank and dusty and no

matter how hard I wished, no books ever appeared there. It was actually more difficult browsing an empty library than one packed with books. It took time for my brain to register all of the blank space. Brainerd High was similar. There were books there, but they all seemed to be encyclopedias, histories, or biographies. One day, I decided to skip lunch in order to get quality time searching for books. That's when I found my first book of poems on the back shelf. The book was a bluish gray color; it stood out from all the maroon-ish books. I opened it and read Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Before I could check the book out, I read the entire collection right there, on the spot. Learning and reciting poetry made me feel scholarly, cultured, and quite rebellious. Who would have thought that a Black girl at Brainerd could recite rhymed old white guy problems?

As a county, as a city, and as a country, we have conditioned ourselves to think that because the kids in places like Brainerd and Dalewood are Black, they aren't capable and don't deserve investment. This fits the white narrative of when these underprivileged kids do go off to college—It's Affirmative Action, because how else could we have made it?

Kids like me devour whatever is in front of them. We know how to make a decent loaf from bread crumbs. It's unfair, it's unjust, but it's our life. In most cases, we know we go to abandoned schools. We can tell from the tattered textbooks, from the crumbling buildings, and from the shark-like reporters waiting eagerly outside for comments on uneventful school fights. In places so underprivileged, one has to sort through all of the inequality and find an education. And we do. But even when students manage to flourish in such situations, they still have to deal with ignorance, intolerance and prejudice.

At Hixson, just a few weeks after I'd come over from Brainerd, a friendly girl asked me what school I came from. I told her Brainerd. Instead of leaving me alone, she kept going on and

on about how smart I was. I thought she'd tired of it, but she kept bringing it back up. Finally, she said what she meant to say.

“You're so smart.”

When I didn't say anything, she continued.

“But you're bla---aaaaah.” We made eye contact and had the rest of the conversation through narrowed gazes.

For the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Affirmative Action talk seems silly. When I applied to UTC, the requirements for acceptance were 18 ACT, 2.5 GPA, approximately. With such modest standards, is it so hard to believe that people of color can breeze through admissions and thrive with sufficient intelligence and determination?

I have a had a successful academic stint at UTC. In every college course I have taken I have earned an A, with subjects ranging from geophysics to independent studies on Pennsylvanian plant fossils to Spanish to Statistics. Some of it came naturally, some of it didn't. I will graduate with Latin Honors, and if all goes well, Departmental Honors. And it wasn't impossibly difficult. There was no late-night cramming. No all-nighters. I went to bed at 9, woke up at 4:40 am and just got it over with. Still, whenever I am asked my GPA or grade in a class there is always an element of disbelief in the voice of my peers. “You have a what in here?” “You've never made a B?” In some cases, the skepticism morphed into grade snooping. When we got our grades back in our Physical Geology Lab, a white guy who never bothered to introduce himself would always lean over and scan my grade. I thought that he would tire of seeing the 100's, but I guess he never did. While his voyeurism bothered me, I did enjoy the constant look of disappointment on his face.

Once, I was playing team jeopardy with a few members of my Statistics class. We soon encountered a difficult probability question, and while I jotted down the math, my white male teammate buzzed in and said some ridiculous answer that I knew was wrong just from hearing it. I looked over at him.

“Why’d you do that?”

“What would you have said?” There was a lot of doubt in his facial expression, as if *I’d* gotten the question blatantly wrong.

I tossed over the piece of paper at the same time our professor announced the answer.

I was right. And vexed. I’d gotten every question right, but he still figured me stupid. Incompetent. Unequal.

It’s this mindset that allows the Affirmative Action myth to thrive.

During the last month of high school my college advisor peered at me from over her computer. She was adding it all up—the grants, the scholarships—and me.

“You know,” she stopped for a minute, glanced at the screen, then back at me, “the tradition is to read the total amount in scholarships each student is offered. Aloud, to everyone in the room.” She read the number and raised her eyebrows as if asking for my permission.

“No.”

“What?” She went on a little rant, talked about how proud my family would be, how hard I worked, how I was being too modest. Eventually, I agreed, but only because if everyone was having their amounts read, it would be awkward if there was silence after my name. And a small part of me wanted to teach the idiots in AP a lesson. Class night came, and even before the

numbers were read aloud, I dominated the awards—I earned both departmental and faculty honors. I was awarded my UTC scholarship (one that I didn't even know about) in front of everyone. Then, the scholarships were read aloud, and the church's pews creaked as heads turned in my direction. I was already flustered from the unprecedented attention from the awards, so I pretended to read the program. I wish I would have had the courage to do a Serena twirl instead.

Only later did I hear of the white students' outrage. Supposedly, the valedictorian particularly had a problem. Apparently, he couldn't understand how I'd won so many awards over him. It's a humorous picture, a white boy having a breakdown in the back of a church, demanding answers about the Black girl who struck like lightning and stole his thunder.

Black Thought (White Friends)

Part 1

It was a muggy June afternoon in 2014 when I hopped in the car with you. We hadn't seen each other in a while, but you greeted me like it hadn't been months since we'd last talked. You were friendly and chatty while I was fidgeting, sweating, and fending off anxious thoughts. What would we even talk about? School? Grades? Majors? What else? What would we do? I didn't have a curfew, but I hoped we wouldn't be out too long. We didn't know where we were going—we were just riding through the city, looking for a cool spot to relax and have a good time. I didn't like surprises, but I had begun to feel that I needed to live a little. My summer break was marked by zero social interaction; I spent most of June writing failed first drafts, reading nothing, and texting friends my favorite line: *I'm not available today*. Saying yes to underdeveloped plans was my desperate attempt to experience adventure, once and for all. We stopped at Sonic, met up with a buddy of ours and decided to head to a bowling alley he claimed to know of. We followed him through town. The ride was longer than I thought it would be, but I didn't complain because we were passing through different parts of town and I enjoyed looking at the different modes of the city—rich, poor, white, Black, new, historic.

But then we passed the projects. You locked the doors. Suddenly.

“Sorry Japorsche,” you said.

I didn't think much of you locking the door when we came to a stop in by the hood. I knew that if I had felt uncomfortable, *I* would have done it too.

Did you apologize because you'd let it show that I was the one and only safe Black?

It didn't help that immediately after you apologized for your white slip, you doubled down.

"I hope this place we're going to isn't ghetto."

You were looking out your window and scanning the projects while saying this. I had never heard you use the word "ghetto" before. And yet, it flowed smoothly and freely, as if it was always in your vocabulary. Like you'd been using it with your other white friends when I wasn't around. Did you use that word to describe me? For you, is the word ghetto a euphemism for Black? You hoped, wherever we were headed, that Black people were not there? You hoped to not see people who looked like they came from the projects?

It was the irony of you, a rich white girl, using the word ghetto that irked me the most. Have you ever been to the ghetto? Do you even know what the ghetto is? What it's for? And anyway, can any other place besides the ghetto be "ghetto?" If there are, please let those who know the ghetto decide.

These questions and thoughts nagged me during the ride, and I hated you for making me self-conscious of more than just my sweat-stained shirt. I hated that I was overly aware of my Blackness in relation to your whiteness, in relation to those projects and to my own sense of being. By the time we arrived at South Side Social, I already longed for home. As we crossed the street and stepped on the property, I could tell that I was not welcome. I could count the Black people on one hand, and one was a server. White, tipsy people dominated the crowded and poorly lit place. The tables were too close, there wasn't enough room to walk between them with comfort and ease. The amount of alcohol in the open startled me—we weren't twenty-one, but if

we really wanted to, we could have easily grabbed a few drinks. The bowling section looked underdeveloped and bland—it could have been more colorful. Despite my uneasiness, you were excited; you had scanned the massive white crowd, and you knew it too.

This place was made for you.

From *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (Feb. 9th 2017)

Southside Social unveiled a new extensive dress code policy Wednesday evening on its Facebook page.

No backward ball caps, visors, do-rags or skull caps

No plain white tee shirts, sleeveless shirts, ripped or torn pants, cut-offs on men, jerseys unless its game day or sports promotion, excessively long shirts below the bottom of back pockets, loose or baggy clothing, gym clothes including running/track suits or sweat pants, hooded sweatshirts, excessively long shirts below the knees, biker or gang colors, construction/combat shoes or boots, oversized chains, excessive jewelry, sunglasses after dark, clothing with offensive or foul messages, and see through or revealing clothing on women

No back packs, gym bags or duffel bags.

"It's a matter of safety and comfort for EVERYONE. We realize not all will agree with the dress code, but if you can't adhere to it, then you have many other options. Our goal is to ensure every one of our guests feels welcome and safe. If you disagree with this policy or aren't willing to dress to impress, then there are other options around town for you. We wish you all well, but wish for only the grown, sexy & mature crowd to party here. We feel it's necessary to enforce a strict dress code AND code of conduct for the safety & comfort of ALL our patrons. Those not willing to play ball with our policies are certainly welcome and able to party elsewhere. We're choosing to keep it classy Chattanooga. If you agree, welcome aboard. If not, please feel free to patronage another establishment."

Two years later in 2016, I knew our friendship was ending. When you and your family made no effort to hide your support for Donald Trump, I suffered through it. But when your mother and your brother in law started to talk about which people should go back to their land it was hard to pretend that I didn't hear the hate for the Other in their voices. They made the waiting room of the Breakout Games feel like a volatile white holding cell.

“That’s what he needs to do. He needs to round them up and send them out. They’re illegal. That’s the point.”

“They’re like criminals and rapists living off of our hard work.”

“Exactly.”

I pretended to be busy with the brain teaser wooden puzzle that was on the table. You joined me eventually, and while they talked of illegals and borders, we tried to make the pieces fit. We never solved it.

During the January of the 2016 election year, you texted me. Asked me how I was doing. I was dumb enough to think that the chalking incidents around UTC’s campus would disturb you as much as they did me. I told you of UTC’s white supremacist chalking inspired by Donald Trump and the growing confidence of racists. School is divided, you stated. You said something like it is hard being a conservative and that you were under attack. I didn’t bring up the topic for us to compete over who had it worse--I wanted a conversation, not a competition. My reply was that the escalating racial tensions had to stop. That politics shouldn’t be so important. I ended the conversation with a wish you well and a white heart.

I haven't heard from you since.

Black Thought (White Friends)

Part 2

I still don't know why *Black Panther* bothered you so much. It's a Marvel movie, and we've seen every Marvel movie together since we were fifteen, rain or shine.

But, maybe I am lying. Maybe I knew when you said "what if it was called white ..." that you had a problem with the Blackness of the film. Still, I entertained your thought. What if there was a White Leopard? That's not probable, but even if it was, it wouldn't be *racist*. And if you had bothered to see the film, you would know that there is a White Wolf. And, no, it's still not racist.

Why is the term "Black Panther" so racist to you?

The comics and the political group are separate. But yes, even so, certain ideals are interconnected. Both the comic and the movie promote Black pride; both, to some degree are political. But this is hardly our first political hero. Let's not forget *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the story of a lucky white man who is injected with some type of "super" serum. Don't you realize he's the myth of America? He's white, noble, and never wrong. He gets to be Captain without actually being qualified to be a Captain, but no one hardly questions it. He fights with his prized shield—but never with a gun or sword because his "great" conscious won't let him.

You should know that his shield comes from Wakanda.

We never saw Black Panther together. We went to see *Jumanji* instead. You laughed at your favorite coon Kevin Hart. This is all Black people can be to you. Objects of confusion, bewilderment or entertainment. Objects that either thwart or encourage your enjoyment of your

white space. I did not enjoy the movie. I did not enjoy you. I did not enjoy how after the movie, you wanted to talk more politics. You forced Donald Trump on me at a time when I felt like I should not have had to ward off political advances. But I did. Out of frustration, I told you something that I'd been wanting to say to white people for a while.

STOP comparing Donald Trump to Barack Obama. One was presidential and the other is...orange.

I blocked you out after I said that.

I remember when you approached me about the Black Lives Matter "riots" a few summers ago.

"They're rioting for nothing. Those Black guys were unarmed yeah, but they were like, thugs," you said.

"It's not a riot. It's a protest. There's a difference." I said.

"Okay, then pro-protest." Why did the word sputter from your lips? Did it hurt you that much to admit the truth?

I tried to let your comment slide. But your ignorance began to unsettle me. Why did every Black activist campaign have to be painted "violent"? And why must you make everything "violent"? Is violent "bad"? How do you think the Natives were detached from their land? Violence. White people are the kings of violence, yet you stay in constant fear of it. Violence is *your* heritage, not ours.

A month ago, on our way to the movies, you told me that the officers that had been acquitted of murdering unarmed Black men had all been hunted down and killed by Black people. I asked you for your source.

There was silence. I broke it.

“That doesn’t seem right. That would be breaking news, right?”

“Well, it’s only happened a couple of times,” you say too quickly.

“But you said all.”

We didn’t talk again until we were inside the theatre heading to our movie. You felt the need to strike up a conversation about President Trump. Is it your guilty conscious that makes you seek to defend him at random moments? Confess random things like “I voted for him”? I never asked you that.

“I just don’t get why people say he’s racist.”

“He called African nations and Haiti shithole countries. It was all over the news, didn’t you hear it?”

You seemed quite defiant and slightly triumphant when you replied that you hadn’t. and even if he did say it, Africa and Haiti are in ruins. The words from your mouth stop when you see the flash of hurt animate my face.

This view and your refusal to see Black Panther are interconnected, dependent on one another. You don’t want to see a Black hero—let alone an African one. It’s not just because you are a white supremacist—it’s because you are ignorant and genuinely believe that Africa only has huts and topless women. A fictional nation has shaken your fragile ego, contradicted your

white washed history lessons, and you refuse to see anything that doesn't reflect your whiteness back to you. You don't want to see Blackness and you don't have to. This is your privilege. But the world stops if I pretend that I don't see you.

When I told you of your privilege, you clutched your imaginary pearls like it was the worst thing I have ever said to you. It's the reaction I should have had when I told you that the apartments where my brother lived were for rent.

"I dunno. I want to live somewhere where I don't have to worry about crime and like guys raping you while you jog."

"It's a good neighborhood."

"But it's still like dangerous...for me. I just want to be somewhere I feel comfortable."

Later that day, I texted you two long paragraphs. I told you that the apartments are in East Brainerd and are predominately white. I refrained from calling you racist because most racists only get worse when they are called out. But I did tell you of my concerns of walking through an all-white neighborhood and ending up shot by a white man with a hero complex. Eventually, I questioned you. What makes you think you are the only one who has to worry about rape? Because all Black guys in the neighborhood can't resist random jogging white girls? Because only Black guys rape?

You have offended me, I texted.

Your response was quick and shallow.

I'm so sorry, I never meant to offend you. I just meant that I didn't want to live in a dangerous neighborhood.

You never acknowledge the fact that you assumed the neighborhood was dangerous because my brother is Black.

How did we get here? So divided and polarized?

We first met in homeroom. You were in the corner muttering to yourself and running your hand through your hair. I was lost and alone—it was only my second week at Hixson High. I had left everyone I knew behind at Brainerd.

“Hey, can you help me with this?”

Before I could say no, you shoved the paper at me and I had to suppress a series of questions. Why were you struggling to define words like flippant and flamboyant? Why were you struggling to illustrate these words? I was concerned for you. I told you that I don’t do other people’s work, but that I would help you, and I did. I helped you with your English work every day after that and I didn’t mind. It was all very natural for me, and you obviously weren’t the “word” type. By the end of 10th grade we were hanging out regularly, going to restaurants and fourth of July parties. We never talked of politics or movements and I think we should get back to that, back to when you didn’t seek to explain your prejudices and back when I didn’t have to defend my Blackness. Back when we talked of precalculus and B’s like they were the worst thing the world had to offer.

Our friendship has changed since Trump took office. We know it, but we won’t be admitting it anytime soon. Just as freely as you flaunt your whiteness, I will talk of Black problems, Black bodies, and Black news. It will be difficult for me to hide my eagerness to invade and interrogate your white world with my unyielding Black thought.

Black Body, Black Mind: A Personal Essay in Response to A Final Essay Exam Topic of
Intersectionality and Black Women's Oppression

I am restless. It's the end of my four years, and I can't rest—there are too many thoughts, too many worries. I was supposed to end my academic run with a bang by giving a grand presentation on all my findings on the Black Body and have my classmates marvel at my intellect, but all that fantasizing came to an end when, despite having a 4.0 GPA, I had an episode of doubt, fear and trepidation so severe, I could feel my heart as it strained in my chest.

My anxiety.

I often disregard my own disability, dreaming of and promising scenarios and situations that, at times, just aren't possible. And this is why, at times, I abhor my disability. I want to talk freely, I want to share my thoughts on feminism and oppression and intersectionality. I want to color the white world with my Black thoughts; I want to have an impact. I want these things, I really do. But it's hard out there for Black girls like me. For Black girls with disabilities. Especially for Black girls with mental disabilities. Crenshaw's idea of Black females facing daily obstacles "greater than the sum of racism and sexism" is accurate, but it is a truth I have known for quite some time now. Being a Black woman means experiencing contradicting stereotypes and expectations. I am oversexed and repugnant at the same time. My butt is assumed to be big, but my nose, hair and lips are scrutinized and critiqued. My hair is always assumed to be fake, but I am always expected to be the one to keep it real. I am a woman, but I am also Black which means I can look forward to getting paid less than almost everyone, male or female. Still, I am

expected to be a steadfast “Queen.” My mind is often dismissed, along with my intellect and any mental health issues.

Black girls like me don’t exist. That’s what the media tells me every day.

April Lundy, author of “Caught Between a Thot and A Hard Place,” articulates the oppression of Black women with grace and conviction with this statement: “Most representations of Black women in popular culture are grounded in dominant ideologies as controlling images that are rooted in the maintenance of hegemonic power and serve to justify and legitimize the continued marginalization of Black women” (58). The hegemonic power here is the media, and by hegemony, I mean white control and oppression that has the collusion of other races. The media, the white man’s tool that is consumed and supported by all of us, shows Black women as a “depreciated sex object, historically referred to as the jezebel or mulatto” (58). Historically, Black women have been depicted as jezebels or whores with sexually explicit and animalistic sexualities. Lundy claims that thots are the modern-day jezebels. T.H.O.T or That Ho Over There is now what Black women and women who aren’t Black call Black women. This term is deeply problematic, especially as more people use the term to refer to any unknown (Black) woman. Some argue whether it is hurtful or not, but why does that matter? Either way, the term refers to an oversexualized woman, and the fact that Black women are often the recipients of the term and use it “to degrade one another...demonstrates an intragender oppression that further demeans Black women collectively” (62). This combined with the fact that most Black female representation in the media is reality television shows in which Black women squabble and demean one another is a visual example of hegemony. Why can’t there be more positive images of Black women in reality television? White women have multiple positive portrayals. Why must Black women continue to be jezebels and thots? Why must we degrade one another? This is

sexism, racism, fetishism, white supremacy, and hegemony all in one. As Crenshaw indicates, the oppressive forces burdening Black women are bigger and more complex than just racism and sexism. Here's what Black women's media representation (and lack thereof) tells us: Black women can be Jezebels and thots, but not mentally disabled or mentally ill.

It is important to remember the poor Mammy, a once popular stereotype. The Mammy is "faithful, obedient domestic servant" that was created "to justify the exploitation of house slaves" (74) and while this may seem like an outdated stereotype or controlling image in the media, Collins argues that this idea continues in a subtler way, like when whites expect Black women to be strong while carrying everyone's burdens. Black women being the mammy can have a pronounced economic effect, especially if "whites expect Blacks to assume [the role] for them" (73). In the past, Black women had "mammified" jobs like buttness and house maid and they were at the service of their white female superiors. By having the Black Mammy work for the white family, the Black family was deprived of "decent wages and Black women's emotional labor in their homes" (74). Today, Collin argues, we see this Mammy image in Black women making less for the same work. This function is strengthened when it is retaught by Black women who "teach their children their assigned place in White power structures" (73). By teaching Black children their place at the bottom of a social, racial, and economic order, and by embodying the ideas of a Mammy, a hegemonic function is fulfilled and continued. And more importantly this stereotype further degrades the humanity of the Black woman and makes it that much harder for her to be real and openly struggle with real issues such as mental health.

Stereotypes can't have panic attacks.

In high school, I basically had to ask permission to be alone. Whenever I took a break from writing or rehearsing plays or whenever I sat in a corner and did my work my myself, I was

dubbed selfish, or accused of feeling sorry for myself by both students and teachers. I was expected to be working all the time and investing my all while everyone else sat around and watched. I couldn't even take a physical let alone mental health break without having to dodge words like "lazy" and "dramatic" or "attitude."

I still remember when I tried to get help for my anxiety the for the first time. I was seventeen, a senior in high school, severely depressed and extraordinarily anxious. I usually hid behind a wall of humor, a wall of self-deprecation but I peeled back that facade readily—desperately—because I felt that my family would be more understanding. One evening as we were watching television in the living room, I just blurted it out.

"I think I have social anxiety."

My mother turned to look at me.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I am awkward. I get nervous around peop—"

"That's just you, though." My younger sister chimed in.

My father entered the living room. He was on his way out, but he wasn't too busy to "settle" the conversation.

"You don't have social anxiety. I don't want to hear that no more in this house."

"But I do."

"No, you don't!" He left, and I believe that he genuinely thought that he could single-handedly dismiss the anxiety that burdened me so frequently from existence.

I had to wait until college to get the help I needed.

My anxiety is real. But unless the situation seriously requires it, I won't be getting any help for it. In this world, I don't have the time. Now that I will be graduating from college, I have to find a job— and get paid less than my coworkers. I have to struggle for socio-economic stability while my white friends all stumble upwards to new jobs and new opportunities. And even if I wanted to, I don't have the money to treat my disability outside of college. The pills cost, the doctors cost, and I am broke. I am broken. But for now, I will just have to drag all my pieces with me, and trudge forward in a world designed to oppress my body and disregard my mind.

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