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I AM My Hair, and My Hair is Me: #BlackGirlMagic in LIS

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I AM My Hair, and My Hair Is

Me: #BlackGirlMagic in LIS

Teresa Y. Neely, Ph.D.

No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, you are beautiful, you are powerful, you are brilliant, you are funny... I know that's not always the message that you get from the world. I know there are voices that tell you that you're not good enough. That you have to look a certain way, act a certain way. That if you speak up, you're too loud. If you step up to lead, you're being bossy

--Michelle Obama

In her 2015 Black Girls Rock (BGR) awards speech, Michelle Obama spoke directly to women and girls who look like me. She acknowledged us, enumerated the criticism we get all too often, and let Black women everywhere know that she was with us, and that she was one of us.¹ We don't hear words like that, coming from someone who looks like her, who lived where she lived, and was married to who she was married to, ever.

¹ Office of the First Lady, "Remarks by the First Lady at BET's "Black Girls Rock!" Event," (speech, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, NJ, March 28, 2015),

On February 12, 2017, in her acceptance speech for winning best contemporary album for *Lemonade*,² global icon and superstar Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter (Beyoncé), heavily pregnant with twins, read a powerful statement about the beauty in Black lives. Resplendent in a Peter Dundas designed, intricately beaded and embroidered gold gown with an image of her [Black] face, and the lyrics to her song “Love Drought” she had performed earlier that evening,³ she thanked the Grammy voters for the award, and then read, in part,

“It’s important to me to show images to my children that reflect their beauty so they can grow up in a world where they look in the mirror—first through their own families, as well as the news, the Super Bowl, the Olympics, the White House and the Grammys—and see themselves. And have no doubt that they're beautiful, intelligent, and capable. This is something I want for every child of every race, and I feel it’s vital that we learn from the past and recognize our tendencies to repeat our mistakes.”⁴

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/28/remarks-first-lady-bets-black-girls-rock-event>.

² Beyoncé, *Lemonade* (New York, NY: Parkwood Entertainment, 2016).

³ Nicole Phelps, “Exclusive: Peter Dundas Dresses Beyoncé at the Grammys, Launches Solo Label,” *Vogue.com*, February 12, 2017, <http://www.vogue.com/article/beyonce-grammys-peter- Dundas-dress>.

⁴ Giovanni Russeonello, “Beyoncé’s and Adele’s Grammy Speeches: Transcripts,” February 12, 2017, <http://time.com/4668482/grammys-2017-beyonce-speech/>.

In these speeches, Michelle Obama and Beyoncé were speaking to global audiences about Black lives and Black people. Their words are critically important to the mental healthiness of those of us whose career aspirations have led us to work at institutions and live in states, cities, and neighborhoods where there are few people who look like us. As Black women, their international personas on very public stages go a long way towards dispelling myths and misconceptions based on limited interactions with Black people in the aggregate, and Black women specifically. These misconceptions are keenly felt in higher education where there are far fewer Black women in the professoriate at any given predominantly white institution (PWI). As a Black woman who has worked in academic libraries in higher education for nearly twenty-five years, I have never worked at an institution where there was another credentialed Black librarian, female or otherwise, on the faculty. This is true for Black women faculty in academic disciplines as well.⁵

In a study commissioned by the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, less than five percent of the tenured, and less than seven percent of the tenure-track faculty surveyed identified as Black. Overall, people of color (POC) represented less than twenty percent of the tenured, and less than a quarter of those in tenure-track positions in PWI's in 2013. Specific numbers for Black women were not available for that survey.⁶ Three years later, three percent of

⁵ Debra A. Harley, "Maids of Academe: African American Women Faculty at Predominantly White Institutions," *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 19-36.

⁶ Corbin M. Campbell, Carolyn Sloane Mata, and Fred Galloway, "Meeting Today's Higher Education Goals via the National Center for Education Statistics' Postsecondary Sample

college and university faculty were Black women, compared to White women who made up thirty-five percent of the total group. Additionally, twenty-seven percent of White women were full-time professors, compared to only two percent of Black women.⁷ The picture for women who look like me in my profession, in higher education, is quite bleak, so we need to see Mrs. Obama and Beyoncé's faces and hear their words when they speak to these large international audiences about us. And many of our colleagues do too. Most days, our sanity depends on it.

Living and working in White spaces is spiritually and emotionally exhausting. In order to cope, you need to develop multiple personalities, clinically known as dissociative identity disorder,⁸ and basically live multiple lives, sometimes from meeting to meeting. You have to

Surveys,” August 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/MeetingTodaysHigherEd.pdf>; Valerie Strauss, “It’s 2015. Where Are All the Black College Faculty?” *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/11/12/its-2015-where-are-all-the-black-college-faculty/?utm_term=.03eae652f323; “Black Faculty in Higher Education: Still Only a Drop in the Bucket,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2006, http://www.jbhe.com/features/55_blackfaculty.html.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, “Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty,” *The Condition of Education 2017* (NCES 2017-144), 254-258, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017144.pdf>.

⁸ Dissociative Identity Disorder is defined as “a severe condition in which two or more distinct identities, or personality states, are present in—and alternately take control of—an individual.”

"Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)," *PsychologyToday.com*, last

constantly watch your mouth and what comes out of it, and mind your countenance when you hear what comes out of the mouths of everyone else, no matter their hue. Every day is a struggle to appear neutral, to be the opposite of angry, because we all know the angry Black woman caricature,⁹ and no one wants to be labeled that. Even if we are, justifiably, angry. All the damn time.

Until relatively recently, words to describe the experiences of Black women were not prevalent in the library and information science literature; and even today, we still rely heavily on the research and theoretical frameworks from the Education literature and other disciplines to provide the context for framing our experiences. Patricia Hill Collins¹⁰ and CaShawn Thompson¹¹ have provided the context for Black women to view their experiences from what Collins calls “a special standpoint on self, family and society.”¹² Thompson wanted to find a way

modified February 24, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/dissociative-identity-disorder-multiple-personality-disorder>.

⁹ Wendy Ashley, “The Angry Black Woman: The Impact of Pejorative Stereotypes on Psychotherapy with Black Women,” *Social Work in Public Health* 29, no. 1 (2014): 27-34.

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problem* 33(1986): 514-32.

¹¹ Vanessa Willoughby, “Radical Magic,” *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, no. 71 (Summer 2016): 8-9.

¹² Collins, “Learning From the Outsider Within.

to “describe all the greatness [she] was seeing from Black women, despite the deluge of negativity [that’s] put out in media about us.”¹³

Building on Patricia Hill Collins’ seminal essay, “Learning from the Outsider Within,”¹⁴ Wilder, Bertrand, and Osborne-Lampkin found that Black women face obstacles to achievement and success as students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. Their review of the literature identifies and documents issues that Black women face in the academy such as “invisibility, exclusion, tokenism, poor mentoring and academic support, physical and emotional burn-out, and lack of respect.”¹⁵ Howard-Baptiste notes that although slavery and higher education are not closely related, connections can be made based on the “barrier and obstacles” Black women faculty face in the academy.”¹⁶ Additionally, she reminds us that Black women faculty have unique and dynamic experiences that “cannot be summarized as one universal experience;” and provides evidence that confirms that “Black female scholars are depicted by colleagues, students, and staff in negative ways.”¹⁷ In “Maids of Academe” Harley notes that “Black women who work in PWI’s are the ‘recipients of deprivileged consequences,’” “and

¹³ Willoughby, “Radical Magic,”8.

¹⁴ Collins, “Learning From the Outsider Within.

¹⁵ JeffriAnne Wilder, Tamara Bertrand Jones, and La’Tara Osborne-Lampkin, “A Profile of Black Women in the 21st Century Academy: Still Learning From the “Outsider-Within,” *Journal of Research Initiatives* 1, no. 1 (2013): 27-38.

¹⁶ Shewanee D. Howard-Baptiste, “Arctic Space, Lonely Place: ‘Mammy Moments’ in Higher Education,” *The Urban Review* 46, no. 4 (November 2014): 765.

¹⁷ Howard-Baptiste, “Arctic Space, Lonely Place.”

“subjected to ‘gendered racism.’”¹⁸ Howard-Baptiste calls these interactions “Mammy Moments,” “the overt and covert ways that students, colleagues, and others communicate disrespect and distrust Black women’s worth and abilities.”¹⁹

I am an academic librarian in a profession that is getting Whiter and Whiter,²⁰ and by its very nature, more hostile, by the day. “Arctic space” is a term used by Howard-Baptiste’s fictional “Dr. Monty,” who likened the experience of being a Black female professor to “being on an expedition in the Arctic.” A space that is the opposite of warm and where you are always “trying to break through the ice.”²¹ The ability to survive and thrive in the kinds of spaces that we do, to not be broken by the systemic microaggressions, tokenism, ignorance, and tired, racist assumptions, scares damn near everyone. In reviewing lawsuits filed by African American faculty against PWI’s, Harley found fellow faculty members, students, staff, and administrators often used the First Amendment as a defense for creating a hostile culture and work environment by “engaging in inflammatory comments and derogatory behavior” towards African American females.²²

¹⁸ Harley, “Maids of Academe.”

¹⁹ Howard-Baptiste, “Arctic Space, Lonely Place,” 765.

²⁰ Roger Schonfeld and Liam Sweeney, “Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries: Employee Demographics and Director Perspectives,” *Ithaka S+R*, August 30, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.304524>.

²¹ Howard-Baptiste, “Arctic Space, Lonely Place,” 778.

²² Harley, “Maids of Academe, 30.

Howard-Baptiste's "Dr. Monty" imagined there would be few warm spaces in the Arctic and concluded that one would probably have to build a fire or make an igloo, by themselves, as in solo, in order to survive.²³ This metaphor clearly reveals the magical ability of Black women to rise above, to go high when they go low, and to persevere in the face of adversity at its worst. As iconic actor Samuel L. Jackson explained, "People know about the Klan and the overt racism, but the killing of one's soul little by little, day after day, is a lot worse than someone coming in your house and lynching you."²⁴ #BlackGirlMagic enables me and my fellow sisters-in-the-struggle to rise above the fray, fashion a make-shift shield and coat of armor, and rise up to face another day. In her 2016 dissertation, Allison Michelle Smith invoked Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade*²⁵ to describe how the Black women in her study succeeded against all of the obstacles placed in their paths. "It is the resolve of 'making lemonade' out of all that they face(d) that has pushed them to exceed expectations, excel at their jobs, and encourage students to realize their full potential."²⁶ Serena Williams' open letter in *Porter Magazine's* "Incredible Women of 2016" issue on her struggle to be acknowledged for the success she has had in her

²³ Howard-Baptiste, "Arctic Space, Lonely Place," 778.

²⁴ David A. Keeps, "Tell It on the Mountain," *New York Guides*, August 21, 2011, <http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2011/theater/samuel-l-jackson/>.

²⁵ Beyoncé, *Lemonade*.

²⁶ Allison Michelle Smith, "Black Girl Magic: How Black Women Administrators Navigate the Intersection of Race and Gender in Workspace Silos at Predominantly White Institutions," Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2016, 61, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/3470/.

career the same way men in her sport are, echoes this resolve. “What others marked as flaws or disadvantages about myself—my race, my gender—I embraced as fuel for my success. I never let anything or anyone define me or my potential. I controlled my future.”²⁷

²⁷ Chelsea Stone, “Serena Williams’ Open Letter on Gender Inequality,” *Allure.com*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.allure.com/story/serena-williams-open-letter-gender-inequality>.

#BlackGirlMagic

CaShawn Thompson first used the BlackGirlMagic hashtag in 2013 to describe Black women who persevere in the face of adversity and inspire her with their positive achievements, which she says are like “magic.”²⁸

“Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women.”²⁹

Some days, most days, it is a real struggle to just get out of bed in the morning, knowing that a hostile workplace is waiting for you to arrive. A workplace that is hostile because you are the only Black faculty librarian who ever worked here, and your colleagues have no idea what it is like to be you.³⁰ As much as the United States is believed to be a big melting pot, and contrary to popular belief, most White people do not have Black friends, which presents a problem. In “Self-Segregation: Why It’s So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson,” Robert P. Jones reported that respondents to the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) 2013 American Values Survey revealed “the social networks of whites are a remarkable 91 percent white, one percent black,”

²⁸ Dexter Thomas, “Why Everyone’s Saying Black Girls are Magic,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmstory.html>. See also Wikipedia, “Black Girl Magic,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Girl_Magic.

²⁹ Thomas, “Why Everyone’s Saying Black Girls are Magic.”

³⁰ Smith, “Black Girl Magic”; Ebony E. White, “Exceptional but Not an Exception: Understanding How African American Women Make Their Way. Ph.D. diss., Montclair State University, 2017.

and one percent of all other races and combinations of races.³¹ Given this, the dynamics of my predominantly White workplace kind of makes sense. If you don't have Black friends or people of color in your core social networks, then you get a workplace where sometimes they say the most insensitive things,³² but, because it happens so often, you don't even bother to call them on it, because, no one would ever admit that they said or did something that could be construed as racist. In a 2014 monologue on the *Daily Show*, Jon Stewart said, "...we have made enormous

³¹ Robert P. Jones, "Self-Segregation: Why It's So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson," *The Atlantic*, August 21, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why-its-hard-for-whites-to-understand-ferguson/378928/>; Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, "In Search of Libertarians in America," *PRRI.org*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.prri.org/research/2013-american-values-survey/>; Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, "Race, Religion, and Political Affiliation of Americans' Core Social Networks," *PRRI.org*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.prri.org/research/poll-race-religion-politics-americans-social-networks/>.

³² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tyrone A. Forman, "I Am Not A Racist But. . . ' : Mapping White College Students' Racial Ideology in the USA," *Discourse & Society* 11, no. 1 (2000): 50-85; Karen W. Tao, Jesse Owen, and Joanna M. Drinane, "Was *That* Racist? An Experimental Study of Microaggression Ambiguity and Emotional Reactions for Racial-Ethnic Minority and White Individuals," *Race and Social Problems* 9 (2017): 262-71; Jonathan W. Kanter, Monnica T. Williams, Adam M. Kuczynski, Katherine E. Manbeck, Marlena Debreaus, and Daniel C. Rosen, "A Preliminary Report on the Relationship Between Microaggressions Against Black People and Racism Among White College Students," *Race and Social Problems* 9 (2017): 291-99.

progress in teaching everyone that racism is bad. Where we seem to have dropped the ball... is in teaching people what racism actually is ... which allows people to say incredibly racist things while insisting they would never.”³³ Bonilla-Silva and Forman summarize the literature on these “discursive maneuvers” where the phrase, “I am not a racist, but...” is used as a shield “to avoid being labeled as racist when expressing racial ideas.”³⁴

CNN’s Doug Criss hails the video for Joyner Lucas’ “I’m Not Racist” as “the brutal race conversation nobody wants to have.”³⁵ The video for the song begins with a White man wearing a red “Make America Great Again” hat, spewing the N-word freely and frequently, engaged in a diatribe containing every racist stereotype about Black men that you can dream up, aimed at a young Black man sitting across the table from him. After nearly four minutes, the White man sits down, winded and emotional from his efforts; and then the Black man stands up and begins his response. It is then that you realize both men are syncing Lucas’ verses—each interspersed and punctuated with the phrase, “I’m not racist.” The video ends with the two men embracing,

³³ A. Moore, “10 Quotes That Perfectly Explain Racism to People Who Claim They’re Colorblind,” *Atlanta Black Star*, July 20, 2014, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/07/20/10-quotes-perfectly-explain-racism-people-claim-theyre-colorblind/2/>.

³⁴ Bonilla-Silva and Forman, “‘I Am Not A Racist But. . .’”; Teun A. Van Dijk. *Prejudice in Discourse: An Analysis of Ethnic Prejudice in Cognition and Conversation* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1984).

³⁵ Doug Criss, “‘I’m Not Racist’ Is the Brutal race Conversation Nobody Wants to Have,” *CNN.com*, November 30 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/29/entertainment/joyner-lucas-not-racist-video-trnd/index.html>.

seemingly understanding each other's point of view. At nearly seven minutes long, if you can't make it through the first verse, you're missing half the story. Lucas explained to CNN, "It was an average white man speaking his mind on how he actually feels about black people, and it was an average black guy talking about his interactions with white people. These are suppressed feelings that both parties have but are afraid to express."³⁶ I include this here as evidence of at least one situation that shows both sides of the issue at the core of White and non-White relations in this country. While I think Lucas might be a bit naïve about the "suppressed feelings" on both sides,³⁷ the message is still clear. There is more than one side to a story and what my colleagues and other White people who live predominantly White lives often miss, is that the story for people of color, in my case Black women, rarely gets told. In part because of our numbers within the profession; and in part because our voices are rarely heard when nearly everyone else in the room is White. And privileged. And acknowledged.

³⁶ Criss, "I'm Not Racist."

³⁷ Maggie Astor, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor, "A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath," *New York Times*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-virginia-overview.html>; Carl Skutsch, "The History of White Supremacy in America," *Rolling Stone*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/the-history-of-white-supremacy-in-america-w498334>; Kenneth P. Vogel, "White Nationalist Claims Trump Directed Rally Violence," *Politico.com*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/donald-trump-rally-violence-237302>.

In my experience, in conversations with my White colleagues, when you describe the environment as hostile, they immediately flinch or recoil, and try to figure out what they may have said or done personally. In reality, it may not be the fault of any one individual at all. The institutionalization of racism and racist practices within the systems and organizations that govern where we live and work is the real culprit; higher education and academic libraries have yet to figure out how to combat it. In her research, Natasha N. Croom found that three central themes emerged from her data, including *racialized and gendered microaggressions* (all participants in the study reported this theme had been present throughout their academic careers).³⁸ Kelli Johnson's 2016 dissertation found that "microaggressions showed the prevalence of the daily injustices that minority librarians in higher education often experience."³⁹ Alabi's research on racial microaggressions confirms that although librarians of color continue to be subjected to this treatment from their colleagues, White librarians "are unlikely to recognize these disparaging exchanges."⁴⁰

³⁸ Natasha N. Croom, "Promotion Beyond Tenure: Unpacking Racism and Sexism in the Experiences of Black Womyn Professors," *The Review of Higher Education* 40, no. 4 (2017): 573.

³⁹ Kelli Johnson, "Minority Librarians in Higher Education: a Critical Race Theory Analysis," PhD diss., Marshall University, 2016.

⁴⁰ Jaena Alabi, "Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Survey of Minority and Non-Minority Librarians," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 1 (2015): 47–53. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2014.10.008; Jaena Alabi, "This Actually Happened: An Analysis of

In a recent library faculty meeting, we were discussing the campus' and library's response to the August 2017 Charlottesville, VA protests and subsequent aftermath. A female, French-born colleague, who is a full professor and known amongst her colleagues for her inappropriate and racist comments, began to explain how badly she felt for a student who found herself one of few in the minority opinion at an open forum discussion about the Seal at my University, which has been called offensive by student groups, and some faculty and staff.⁴¹ Throughout the discussion, this colleague repeatedly commented on how ugly the atmosphere got for the student who she saw as "brave and courageous" in her support of the current seal. The few faculty of color in the room were flabbergasted. She could clearly see the plight of this lone student, pleading her case, but could not make the connection to the plight of the people of color with whom she works on a daily basis, even after several faculty members reminded her that that is exactly what faculty of color face within the College on a daily basis. She just didn't get it, and she is not alone.

Librarians' Responses to a Survey about Racial Microaggressions," *Journal of Library Administration* 55, no. 3 (2014): 179-91.

⁴¹ "University Seal Remains the Same," *UNM Newsroom*, November 15, 2016, <http://news.unm.edu/news/university-seal-remains-the-same>; Pamina M. Deutsch and Jozi De Leon, "In Consideration of UNM's Official Seal," *In Consideration of UNM's Official Seal*, <https://president.unm.edu/campus-community-engagement/university-seal/university-official-seal-presentation.pdf>.

Twenty years ago when Evan St. Lifer and Corinne Nelson⁴² surveyed 400 librarians—100 each White, Black, Latinx, and Asian librarians (no Native American or Indigenous librarians were surveyed)—on the state of race in the profession, eighty-four percent of the White librarians surveyed reported “awareness of racism in the library profession had improved, twenty-one percent reported awareness had stayed the same, and seven percent reported it had gotten worse.”⁴³ Three hundred librarians of color were also surveyed and fifty-four percent of Latinx librarians, forty-one percent of Asian librarians, and forty percent of Black librarians believed that “awareness of racism in the profession had improved.” Even more telling, only seven percent of White librarians reported awareness had gotten worse, compared to nine percent of Latinx librarians, six percent of Asian librarians and nineteen percent of Black librarians. “Four of ten blacks, one-third of Asians, and one-quarter of Latinos” reported they were discriminated against in their libraries.”⁴⁴

In the same article, the then American Library Association President, Barbara Ford, said of the professions’ progress in diversifying its ranks, “it’s human nature for people to choose other people like them.” She continued noting there is “probably unconscious racism in all of us.”⁴⁵ The late Dr. E. J. Josey was also quoted in the article noting, “The old-fashioned racism,

⁴² Evan St. Lifer and Corinne Nelson, “Unequal Opportunities: Race Does Matter.” *Library Journal* 122, no. 18 (1997): 42-46.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

that's overbad."⁴⁶om Josey to Jackson to Stewart, racism and discrimination is alive and well in the profession and continues to impact us in the workplace. St. Lifer and Nelson's survey was released in the same year in *In Our Own Voices: The Changing Face of Librarianship*⁴⁷IOOV (1996) because the authors wanted to "explore the depiction [for] themselves."⁴⁸IOOV 1996 provide a wealth of evidence to show that the landscape is virtually the same in most cases, and in some, extremely worse..⁴⁹

I don't know how my library faculty colleagues would react and/or adapt if they worked in spaces that were overwhelmingly non-White, but fortunately for them, they will never have to. They will never have to weigh every single comment and conversation, trying desperately to mentally check the "not racist comment" box because, surely, my colleague could not have said what they just said, or meant it that way. A White woman I supervised once gave me a birthday card with a monkey on it. She said she saw it and it immediately reminded her of me. [*I had to fix my damn face with a quickness*]. Of course she didn't mean that it reminded her that I looked like a monkey, did it? Even if she truly meant well, couldn't she have given it half a second's thought before she bought it, wrote my name on it, signed it, and gave it to me, with a smile, all the while letting that trifling mess spew from her lips?

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁷ Teresa Y. Neely and Khafre K. Abif, *In Our Own Voices: The Changing Face of Librarianship* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ St. Lifer and Nelson, "Unequal Opportunities."

⁴⁹ Teresa Y. Neely and Jorge R. López-McKnight, *In Our Own Voices, Redux: The Faces of Librarianship Today* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, in press).

While employed at that same institution, I went out to lunch to my favorite Vietnamese restaurant with another White female non faculty colleague who reported to me. When we walked in she said, “We’re the only White people in here.” The only other people in the establishment when we arrived were of Asian descent. I had to remind her that I was not White. That was not the first time my dark skin, my proudest and most prominent feature, had somehow been disconnected from me with surgical precision. I am not sure what kind of psychological compartmentalizing it takes in order to accomplish this, but it rolled right off her tongue as accepted truth so naturally that I immediately looked around as if to confirm her observation. This type of mental agility and acuity must be the work of the same people who say they do not see color, a feat that is so hilariously ridiculous it would be laughable if it weren’t so terrifying. In a 2014 *Atlanta Black Star* article, Scott Woods (a White male) described the difference between how White people think of racism, and how non-White people actually experience it.

The problem is that white people see racism as conscious hate, when racism is bigger than that. Racism is a complex system of social and political levers and pulleys set up generations ago to continue working on the behalf of whites at other people’s expense, whether whites know/like it or not. Racism is an insidious cultural disease. It is so insidious that it doesn’t care if you are a white person who likes Black people; it’s still going to find a way to infect how you deal with people who don’t look like you.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ A. Moore, “10 Quotes That Perfectly Explain Racism to People Who Claim They’re Colorblind,” *Atlanta Black Star*, July 20, 2014, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/07/20/10-quotes-perfectly-explain-racism-people-claim-theyre-colorblind/2/>.

White people don't have to watch what they say and they often don't. I currently work with a White male colleague who uses the word diversity so much that it no longer has any meaning for me in the workplace. It has to be one of his favorite words because he uses it so often. He is usually the first to use the word "diverse" to describe our faculty make-up, particularly when we are interviewing candidates (who often are not people of color) for faculty positions. Once, with a faculty candidate present, he talked at length about how great it was to work with a group of people who were so diverse and who had such a wide diversity of ideas and job responsibilities. Because I haven't really found a delicate way to say, "that's not what diversity is, stop saying that right now," I sat in silence, assimilated, alone in my Blackness, and angry as hell. Once, during an interview with a White female candidate and the College faculty, in an effort to illustrate the freedom we as faculty in our College have to publish in peer-reviewed journals in any discipline, various colleagues began explaining their research areas. When I began to talk about my research, another male White colleague dismissed it with a wave of his hand before I could finish speaking. He pointed out to the candidate that I was rather unique in my research areas and that the majority of the faculty published on topics closer related to their job duties. Silenced.

[The Thing About Natural \[Black\] Hair](#)

Natural Black hair,⁵¹ not to be confused with natural hair as defined by women who are not of African descent, is another framework with which to view the racist, sexist, and

⁵¹ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (St. Martin's Press, 2001).

discriminatory mistreatment of women of African descent in schools, higher education, society, the media, and all walks of life. As Lurie Daniel Favors, Esq. frequently reminds us:

Black hair is not the same as White hair. It doesn't act the same, grow the same or look the same. And it is not supposed to. Black hair is nappy. Nappy hair has its own standard. That standard is not a brown version of the standard for Caucasian hair. Nappy hair has its own rules. Those rules are not a darker version of Caucasian hair rules. Nappy hair has its own needs. Those needs are not a negrofied version of Caucasian hair needs.⁵²

As the most prominent, visible representation of our African-ness, with the exception of our skin, our hair is often the target of colonized macro- and micro-aggression and oppressive behavior.⁵³

⁵² Lurie Daniel Favors, "Sarah, Your Natural Hair Ain't Like Mine. And That's OK," *Afro State of Mind*, accessed December 27, 2017, <http://www.afrostateofmind.com/sarah-your-natural-hair-aint-like-mine-and-thats-ok/>.

⁵³ Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead, "Hair It Is. Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (2014): 86-100; D. Wendy Greene, "Black Women Can't Have Blonde Hair...in the Workplace," *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 14 (2011): 405-30; Asleigh Shelby Rosette and Tracy L. Dumas, "The Hair Dilemma: Conform to Mainstream Expectations or Emphasize Racial Identity," *Journal of Gender, Law and Policy* 14 (2007): 407-21; Cheryl Thompson, "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being," *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 38, no. 8 (2009): 831-56; Nsenga K. Burton, "Let Go of Our Hair and Let Our Girls Learn," *The Root*, May 20, 2017. <http://www.theroot.com/let-go-of-our-hair-and-let-our-girls-learn-1795349148>.

For all the good Beyoncé, Michelle Obama, and organizations like Black Girls Rock!,⁵⁴ have done for Black women, dispelling deep seated myths and long held assumptions and caricatures over the years, the movement to tear Black women down, at our core, is alive and thriving. The international, domestic, regional, inter-family, and intra-spective war on Black hair⁵⁵ raged in this country, and others in North America and on the African continent, long before Spike Lee introduced us to ‘Wannabees’ and ‘Jigaboos’ in 1988’s *School Daze*.⁵⁶ The all-out assault on the scalps of Black women (Gabrielle “Gabby” Douglas)⁵⁷ and Black girl children

⁵⁴ Organizations with missions like BGR! are few and far between. Since its inception in 2006, its mission has been “to change the world” by building “the self-esteem and self-worth of young women of color by changing their outlook on life, broadening their horizons and providing tools for self-empowerment and efficacy.”

⁵⁵ D. Wendy Green, “Splitting Hairs: The Eleventh Circuit’s Take on Workplace Bans Against Black Women’s Natural Hair in *EEOC v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*,” *University of Miami Law Review* (2017): 987-1036.

⁵⁶ Spike Lee, *School Daze* (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1988).

⁵⁷ Julee Wilson, “Haters Attack Gabby Douglas’ Hair Again and Twitter Promptly Claps Back,” *Essence.com*, August 8, 2016, <http://www.essence.com/2016/08/08/gabby-douglas-hair-haters-twitter-claps-back>; “Gabby Douglas Bows to Pressure Over Hair Controversy and Books Top Celebrity Stylist,” *Daily Mail*, August 16, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2189317/Gabby-Douglas-bows-pressure-books-celebrity-hair-stylist.html>.

(Blue Ivy Carter)⁵⁸ continues with secondary school dress code policies,⁵⁹ federal court rulings,⁶⁰ and historical norms dictating racist and sexist practices and expectations for how Black women

⁵⁸ April Taylor, “Are We At The Point At Which Black People No Longer Have Any Serious Topics to Come Together About??: Petition Launched Calling For Blue Ivy Carter’s Hair To Be ‘Properly Cared For’,” *AfricanAmerica.org*, June 11, 2014, <http://www.africanamerica.org/topic/are-we-at-the-point-at-which-black-people-no-longer-have-any-serious-topics-to-come-together-about?reply=395505057904186255>; Reniqua Allen, “Why Blue Ivy’s Hair Matters,” *The Atlantic*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/stop-protesting-blue-ivys-hairstyle-and-celebrate-what-it-really-means/373060/>; JT, “Comb Her Hair: Petitioning Blue Ivy,” *Change.org*, 2014, <https://www.change.org/p/blue-ivy-comb-her-hair>. A Change.org petition opened in 2014 petitioning Blue Ivy Carter (then 2 years old), to ‘Comb her hair’ received 5,766 supporters of the 7,500 needed before it was closed.

⁵⁹ Bossip Staff, “War on Black Hair: Baton Rouge Principal Urges Parents to Cut Their Children’s ‘Nappy, Uncombed Hair,’” *Bossip.com*, February 26, 2016, <http://bossip.com/1286890/war-on-black-hair-baton-rouge-principal-urges-parents-to-cut-their-childrens-nappy-uncombed-hair/>; Erin White, “WTF: This Teen was Called into the Asst. Principal’s Office Because her Afro was Too ‘Extreme’,” *Afropunk*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.afropunk.com/profiles/blogs/wtf-this-teen-was-called-into-asst-principal-s-office-because-her>.

look and what we do with our hair.⁶¹ Black girls, their parents, and others in South Africa protested when a 13-year old girl who wanted to wear an afro had to change schools three times due to dress code restrictions.⁶² After protests at that school, another school in Johannesburg amended a similar policy in a proactive “move to avoid ‘subtle or structural racism.’”⁶³ In the

⁶⁰ Victoria M. Massie, “Federal Appeals Court Rules It’s Okay to Discriminate against Black Hairstyles like Dreadlocks,” *Vox.com*, September 19, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/9/19/12971790/court-discriminate-dreadlocks>.

⁶¹ A. Moore, “11 Examples Highlighting the War Against Natural Black Hair,” *Atlanta Black Star*, December 11, 2013, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2013/12/11/11-examples-highlighting-the-war-against-natural-black-hair/>; Radioraheem, “Are We at The Point at Which Black People No Longer Have Any Serious Topics to Come Together About??”; Allen, “Why Blue Ivy’s Hair Matters”; JT, “Comb Her Hair.”

⁶² Lynsey Chutel, “Hair is Political: It Took a 13-Year Old Girl with an Afro to make South Africans Notice their Racist School Dress Codes,” *Quartz Africa*, April 31, 2016, <https://qz.com/770696/it-took-a-13-year-old-girl-with-an-afro-to-make-south-africans-notice-their-racist-school-dress-codes>.

⁶³ Chutel, “Hair is Political”; Greg Nicholson, “South African Students Speak Out Against ‘Aggressive’ Ban on Afro Hair,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/31/south-african-students-speak-out-ban-afro-hair-pretoria-school>; “Pretoria High School for Girls Faces Fury after Black Pupils told to ‘Straighten Hair,’ August 29, 2016, <http://www.heraldlive.co.za/news/2016/08/29/pretoria-girls-high-faces-fury-black-pupils-told-straighten-hair/>.

same article, the author reports the outrage that followed when a parent posted a picture of Black girls queuing up to be subjected to a test for neatness. Their hair had to fit into a swimming cap or a school cap to ensure they were in compliance with the school dress code.⁶⁴ In a country where White people make up less than ten percent of the population,⁶⁵ they are still enforcing rules and regulations that oppress the majority, including demoralizing attempts to destroy Black girls' heritage, and sense of self-worth, while forcing them to assimilate and conform to European beauty standards.

Beyoncé directly countered the attacks on her daughter Blue Ivy in her 2016 gold single *Formation*, singing, "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros," while simultaneously celebrating her husband Jay-Z's African features, "I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils."⁶⁶ Again, having someone so prominent and influential reframe the definition of Black beauty is affirming and noteworthy.

Shortly after my career got underway at Colorado State University (CSU) in 1993, I decided I wanted to grow my hair into dreadlocks (locs). I was a 28-year old (the youngest

⁶⁴ Jeanette Chabalala, "Bloemfontein High School re-Evaluates Hair Policy," *News24*, August 30, 2016, <https://m.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/bloemfontein-high-school-re-evaluates-hair-policy-20160830>.

⁶⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Africa: South Africa," *The World Factbook*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html>.

⁶⁶ RIAA, "Gold and Platinum," <http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/>; See also Saturday Night Live, "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black," YouTube video, February 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w>.

librarian on staff there), single, childless, Black woman beginning her first professional job in an academic library where there had never been another Black librarian, and where the demographic makeup of the school and library was overwhelmingly White.⁶⁷ In 1996 I wrote about my decision to grow my hair into locs, the reception that decision received, and the advice I received from White women.⁶⁸ Since I had chemically straightened hair at the time, in order to achieve the style I wanted, I would have to either wait until my hair had grown out so that the locs could be started with virgin (natural) hair, or shave my head and start fresh. There are some loc styles that do not require what is commonly known as the big chop, where you cut off all chemically processed hair, however, I wanted to grow my own traditional locs, so in 1995, I shaved my head. I had no idea at the time, but that may have been the beginning of me, unconsciously or not, using my hair as my primary mode of professional, political, social, and personal

⁶⁷ Colorado State University, Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness, “Facts at a Glance 1998-1994,” <https://www.ir.colostate.edu/facts-at-a-glance-1998-1994/>. In 1993, less than ten percent of the students enrolled at Colorado State University were non White. There were 290 Black students, less than two percent of the 21,110 population, excluding international students. See Colorado State University, Statistics for faculty for fall of 1993 are not available. In fall 1994, seven percent of the faculty were minority. There were six Black faculty (0.6%) employed with the ranks of professor, associate professor, assistant professor, instructor, and lecturer.

⁶⁸ Teresa Y. Neely, “The Jackie Robinson of Library Science,” in *In Our Own Voices: The Changing Face of Librarianship*, ed. Teresa Y. Neely and Khafre K. Abif (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 183-84.

expression. It has become my armor, even though the close cut I currently wear, reveals every part of my face and head. When you look at me, there is nothing to obstruct your view. You see a woman. Who is Black. And Woke. Because even at my current rank of associate professor in academe, standing at the precipice of full professorship,⁶⁹ sometimes, I still feel invisible, unseen, unappreciated, assimilated.

My Profession is Predominantly White and Female, But I Persist

I love being a library and information professional; however, if given a choice, I would seriously reconsider the route that led me away from working with and living among people who are not homogeneous. I know Black women in my profession and in other professions, whose physical, emotional, and spiritual health have suffered greatly from persisting in spaces that are overwhelmingly White and combative. Some of us remain, holding out hope that it will get better, or improve, in some small measure; and others just leave. I am conflicted about working outside of institutions with some means to support my academic pursuits; but I will be forever grateful for the opportunities I have been afforded to pursue my education, and to do the scholarly work with my brain, rather than my back.

⁶⁹ In the fall of 2016 I submitted my dossier to be considered for promoted to (full) Professor of Librarianship at the University of New Mexico. In the fall of 2016, the University of New Mexico reported there were three Black full professors on main campus. In June of 2017, I learned I had increased that number to four.

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