

A Thesis on Blackness:  
Testimonies from Young Black Professionals

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Columbia University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

New York City, New York

May 2018

## **Acknowledgements**

To the narrators Ahmed, Autumn, Jesinta, Sarah, and Savannah: Thank you for sharing your near limitless wells of wisdom and knowledge. This project is for you. This project is for us. This project is for all of those like us. Young Black Professionals beating the odds.

To Mary Marshall Clark, Amy Starecheski, and OHMA: Thank you for encouraging and nurturing my ideas and gifting me with the perfect medium to express them. Without your constant support and guidance, I would not have been able to craft my thesis with such care.

To my mother and father, Deborah Austin and Ernest Miller: Your love and wisdom has been a steady beacon throughout my journey as an adult, academic, and good natured human. I have you both to thank for shaping me into the man I am and the man I am becoming.

## **A Clarification on Terminology**

The African diaspora stretches all across the world and that Black identity is as varied and expansive as the Mother continent herself. Keeping this in mind, I will note that “Black” in this project refers specifically to “African-American-ness” unless otherwise specified and clarified, as all of the narrators identify most strongly with this classification, although they come from multicultural backgrounds.

## **A Brief Index**

Greyed Text = Transcript Selection

**Bold Text** = The interviewer is speaking

[ ] = Words that have either been substituted or replaced in the transcript to facilitate understanding

( ) = In-text definition/explanation of slang words or other types of phrases that are key to understanding

(Laughs) = The person speaking is laughing

(Laughter) = Both people are laughing

*Italics* = Phrases or words that should be read with emphasis or gravitas

## Preface

In the United States, the field of oral history is largely assumed to begin with American historian Allan Nevins, who in the 1948 established the country's first oral history program interviewing elites at Columbia University.<sup>1</sup> However, my introduction to the discipline of oral history began with *Wisdom Sits in Places*, the legendary ethnography of the oral tradition of the Western Apache by Keith Basso.<sup>2</sup> Other than the griot traditions of West Africa, this was my first encounter with any sort of alternative form of knowledge storage and transfer that was not bound in books. Shortly after reading Basso's book, I learned of oral history's use as a method for documenting human rights abuses and studying memory and it was this method that I thought would perfectly suit the scope of this project.

So, why oral history? Oral history emphasizes two main goals in conducting qualitative research: a gathering of abundant amounts of testimony and in-depth, rich narratives. In this project you will read large pieces of even larger interviews. My goal in the space of the interview was to let these narrators speak for themselves, drawing from their own personal wells of knowledge and experience, so you will not see much of my voice in these interview snippets. You will also not see much in the way analysis from me other than where most relevant. My goal with this oral history project was to let the reader draw meaning from the testimonies of the narrators and for other aspiring young black professionals to potentially learn from these experiences as they embark on similar journeys.

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<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>2</sup>Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, 1st edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

## **I. Introduction**

When I began my time at Columbia University's Oral History MA Program, I set out to do a study of urban renewal and gentrification in New York City, hoping to draw parallels to my hometown of Washington D.C. by using oral history as a methodology. However, I soon realized that given time constraints and the magnitude of the story I was trying to capture, I felt I would be unable to truly do justice to the topic. At the same time, I also felt something else calling my academic attention. Since I was nominated for the Posse scholarship<sup>3</sup> over four years ago, I have always felt a unique pressure as a young Black professional (YBP) and scholar navigating the hurdles of a largely white, upper class world. It is the pressure of representation. As a student at Lafayette College, a predominantly white institution (PWI), I struggled greatly under this constraint. When I spoke with friends and associates in my social circle, Black individuals attending PWIs in different parts of the country, they expressed similar feelings of being under a pressure to perform and conform, overcoming seemingly impossible hurdles to achieve success that feel more easily achievable to their white peers. However, we never quite had the time to sit and reflect on all that we had experienced in a fulfilling way other than to exchange a brief but shocking anecdote followed by the all too predictable response, "yeah, me too."

Eight months after my graduation from Lafayette, I have decided to dedicate the focus of my time as a graduate student to having those conversations through the medium of oral history, a discipline which encourages the gathering of rich detail and lengthy testimony. Through oral

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<sup>3</sup> The Posse Foundation identifies public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes. The Foundation extends to these students the opportunity to pursue personal and academic excellence by placing them in supportive, multicultural teams—Posses—of 10 students. The Foundation's partner colleges and universities award Posse Scholars four-year, full-tuition leadership scholarships. <http://www.possefoundation.org/>

history interviewing, I have been fortunate enough to catch up with some of the important people in my life and take the time to process their undergraduate experiences, their current goals and aspirations, and contextualize of it all through their early life experiences and thoughts about race. These oral history conversations have been cathartic for both narrator and historian, in that they have given us a chance to reflect on what seems like the most fleeting four years of our lives. These conversations have also been extremely educational. I have thought about many ways to implement the knowledge gained from the interviews. Above all else, this project serves to complete three goals: The first goal is to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of my Black colleagues and closest friends. The second goal is to use these interviews to guide younger generations of Black students considering embarking on the same journey as the narrators and to reveal to them the reality of what it means to be Black at a PWI and out in the “real world” of the workplace. The third goal is to give a particularly focused picture of the Black experience in the U.S. from the perspective of these men and women. For example, a prompt such as *tell me about the first time you realized you were Black?* does so much more than prompt a short story about early experiences of race. It sets the entire context for the conversation of race as a concept, while filling in the listener’s picture of the narrator. In line with oral history methodology, this prompt also elicits vividly detailed, open-ended responses. This prevents the listener from “disappearing” the narrator, a concept with which filmmaker and oral historian Nyssa Chow contends with in her work.<sup>4</sup> Through a combination of cinematography and oral history, Chow forces one to be put on the same terms and in the same position of the narrator—that of the subject and the spectacle—by putting the narrator squarely, powerfully in the center of the frame, staring right at you, right *into* you, after hearing a clip of their voice from the interview.

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<sup>4</sup> “Still.Life.” by Nyssa Chow is an oral history project documenting the women in Chow’s family and the politics of skin color in Trinidad. <https://www.tellinghistories.com/stilllife-portraits>

Though the field of oral history has gifted me with a methodology for the project, I have noticed an insufficient amount of research concerning its use in exploring the contemporary Black experience in the U.S. In general, I found a lack of research on the subjective experiences of young African-Americans in academic discourse. This project seeks to describe a specific aspect of the contemporary Black experience—that of the young Black professional graduate of a PWI. This project will contribute to the field of oral history and to academic conversations happening around Blackness by opening the possibility of using oral history as a tool to document that experience. This project will also use oral history in a new method: not just as documentary, but as *knowledge transfer*, in line with the second goal above. If an African-American or other person of color in this country can listen and feel comfort, understanding, solidarity or simply recognizance in response to the testimony of the narrator, I will have considered this project a success.

While contributing to the field of oral history, it is also my intention to be able to use this project to pursue other goals outside of the field. This project could serve as preliminary research forming the basis of a larger study of the experiences of students of color enrolled in PWIs around the nation. It could serve as a model advocating for the use of oral history in these studies because of its ability to draw out crucial qualitative data. This project illuminates a wide range of institutional and interpersonal barriers facing Young Black Professionals which deserve further, in depth research.

Finally, this project serves to make a statement about what I think is critical to understand about YBPs in today's world, and what this might imply for the future. From the interviews I have conducted, this can be broken down into several elements, or key themes that have arisen throughout the interviews:

- ❖ Experiences at PWIs
- ❖ Professional experiences
- ❖ Advice to Black Youth

Other themes such as how these individuals grow to understand the world, and their experiences in it as Black millennials have also arisen through this project and are discernable through the interview excerpts on which I have chosen to center the project. The young Black professional experience is infinitely layered and complex. Thus, it is necessary to listen both in and *between* the testimonies of these young men and women. You may draw out different meaning from their words than I. This is what I hope to accomplish with this project.

## **II. Memory and Subjectivity in the Thesis on Blackness**

Intersubjectivity, the reciprocal and collective interplay between two people in the space of an interview, was a determining factor in my interviews. Luisa Passerini, in her book *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity*, makes a good model of all of the different ways intersubjectivity affects not only the interview, but collective representations of memory, ideology and identity. Passerini describes how the idea of intersubjectivity reached its prominence in several fields (history, sociology, literature):

This change in the concept of subjectivity took place on both the individual/autobiographical and the collective level of the academic debate, and especially within feminist theory, not only for internal reasons of consistency in the debate as a whole. In addition, there was a growing awareness of the intercultural– as well as multidisciplinary nature of intellectual work. As those who had been seen as “other”– workers, women, Black people and many others– made their entrances onto the stage of the subject, it became impossible not to be conscious of the plurality of subjects and of relationships between them. Perception of the phenomenon of cultural diasporas as an unavoidable issue in all current research went hand in hand with feelings of anxiety about the role that Europe and North America have continued to play in the world as subjects. (2015:6)



It is specifically this “entrance” of other-ized subjects (2015:6) which my project centers around. It is time for an infusion of the subjectivity of these others onto the stage of academia, politics, and other arenas traditionally reserved for the powerful. As a member of this group myself, the intersubjective dynamics of my interviews are especially poignant.

As Passerini, states, “intersubjectivity [is] the basis of interpretation, and of the performance of the interview, in that narratives and their meanings [are] reproduced through interpersonal exchanges.” (2015:4) This means that throughout the course of the interview, the heterogeneity of two people’s experiences have a lot to do with how the interview progresses. There are many benefits to a heterogeneous interview encounter. On one hand, the interviewer may be able to spot certain blind spots or points of emphasis that the narrator tends to focus on, and can “zero in” on those areas. On the other hand, however, there are areas where the heterogeneous interview encounters can work to the detriment of parties involved. In the most negative instances, the differences between narrator and interviewer can lead to exploitation and further alienation. Without a sense of shared consciousness or memory, a stark dissonance can arise from the encounter.

While heterogeneity of identity and experience in an interview can have interesting implications for the interview, homogeneity of identity and experience also present profound meaning for how an interview is conducted and analyzed. For starters, a homogeneity of experience in interviews, such as the ones I have conducted, are for the most part insulated from the possibility of exploitation/alienation. Because, like the narrators, I am also a young, Black graduate of a predominantly white institution, I do not have to consider the implications of say, being a white, older, established academic interviewing subjects for a research study. One of the strengths of this project lies in my position as closely similar to the folks I want to interview, and

it is my hope that the reader will glean this from this thesis as I attempt to distill and analyze several key aspects of the young, educated, Black experience in the United States.

### III. Experiences at PWIs

*Of course, there were things that could have been done differently, you know, in the program like there probably could be in any program. But the one thing that I recently just came across is that number one, I went to a PWI (predominantly white institution) but Point Park was pretty diverse. I would say it was about 17% Black, maybe 2% Hispanic, a lot of Middle-Eastern people. But within my Cinema Production class, it was all white people, maybe at the absolute most 10 Black people including myself. And I was one of two Black women in the class. The only Black women in the class and in our graduating class was me and my friend Ashley who's half Black, half white. So that was really interesting. And I never felt discriminated against in cinema class or anything like that. But what I did realize was we never watched any Black films. Ever. Not even Black films, we didn't watch any films made by women. There was no diversity in the education that we received, which was interesting because that was probably the most diverse class Point Park had ever had in [the] cinema [department] (laughs). We even had an international history class- we had an international history of cinema class [and] we watched only European movies. The only European movies that included people of color was-- I think it was called Punjab maybe. "Prince of Punjab" something like that and that was an Indian movie. And we watched the Last Samurai by Akira Kurosawa which was an Asian movie. Two movies that included people of color in an international cinema class-- which is crazy. Right?*

*Autumn Yancey-Estimé*

Throughout each of my interviews, the experience each narrator had at their alma mater was peppered with racially charged moments. Although potentially traumatic, these narrators catalyzed these moments to their benefit, transforming these moments into fuel for their development as Black students and professionals. In this section of my thesis, I hope to paint a picture of the kind of environments each narrator journeyed through in their college career. These snapshots of transcript are small windows into a period lasting four years, taken from interviews lasting several hours. My intention with them is not to present a definitive image of theirs or anyone else's experiences at predominantly white institutions, but to reveal and

comment on each narrator's subjective experience, identifying common elements of what it feels like to attend a PWI as an African-American.

As PWIs attempt to expand access to more students of color, those students may encounter institutional and personal racism both in and outside the classroom. Autumn Yancey-Estimé, for example, notes above that even in the classroom, the academic content that she absorbed as a student of film was absent of diversity. This shows the paradox that many institutions present when trying to recruit from diverse populations. Somewhere along the line a decision is made to admit more students of color, but many aspects of the institution must catch up in order to accommodate.

Ahmed Braxton, a fellow graduate of Lafayette College and president of Lafayette's Association of Black Collegians, spoke about the pressure to perform in an academic environment that was sometimes hostile to black students. Ahmed was diagnosed with epilepsy in middle school and experienced stress-induced seizures often at Lafayette:

When I'm at Lafayette I feel like I gotta prove myself 500 times over, you know what I'm saying? So like when I was in class or something and I'm like, "Nah forget it like you got you've got a grind harder. You're a Black youngin' in this institution, you're on a full-tuition scholarship: you mess this up, you're fucking up for a lot of people." So I would push myself to like the umpteenth degree. Like not leaving the library [for example]. You saw me during finals week. Maybe you didn't! But I had a blanket in the library because I was not 'finna (about) go nowhere. And so my seizures would be increased because I felt like I had to prove myself. Or like being the President of the Association of Black Collegians, I used to seize all the time just because I would be stressed with-- especially those two years that I was president because those were the years where we found out about the Trayvon Martin verdict, where the Baltimore situation was happening, Ferguson was going on, like everything was happening. And so I would have to be on top of all of this stuff and a lot of my seizures are triggered by stress as well as sleep deprivation. So I would be stressed thinking about all these images of like Black bodies like just in the street, bloody and everything, and grotesque-looking and then I would be planning all these events and nobody would be popping up because wasn't nobody trying to feel all that stress and I can understand, you know what I'm saying? But that's when I felt my Black identity and my struggles with epilepsy combining.

Studies have shown that perceived racism and discrimination can have adverse effects on mental and physical health.<sup>5</sup> This selection from Ahmed's interview shows the unique pressure that African-Americans feel to perform in white collegiate settings compounded with the difficulty of maintaining physical and mental health in the face of stressful circumstances. We see here how racism can exacerbate physical conditions such as Ahmed's epilepsy. The confluence of national issues (i.e. the unlawful shootings of Black men) and a racist apathy unique to PWIs (i.e. low attendance at cultural events programming) which added to Ahmed's struggles.

Savannah Miller, a graduate of the University of Vermont discusses a stressful time at one of her student government meetings:

This article had surfaced by a student from one of our school newspapers and they were writing about cultural appropriation. It was around Halloween and it was supposed to be like a satire on cultural appropriation. And he was writing things about who or what you shouldn't dress as but the way he wrote it was just very offensive. So he was saying you know, "Don't dress in blackface because how are you going to get all that black paint off after?" like that was the bigger issue or, "Why do you want to dress as a terrorist because you're going to get hot under all that cloth," stuff like that. So we were talking about it at student government and people weren't really seeing-- oh here's the other thing. It was the same exact night. I had recently found out, I don't know if you're aware, but UVM used to host the annual Cakewalk in Vermont. The Cakewalk was essentially brought about by this fraternity at UVM in, I think it was the 50s or 60s. And it was a fundraising event. And they would have students dress in blackface and parade around. And this was a huge thing every year. And the money that came from these events actually went to funding our current library. The Bailey/Howe library. So yeah. And they didn't get rid of it until I think the mid 70s. So as a student there, I was aware of it but thought, "Oh well you know UVM is so progressive, we're in a liberal state. There's no way they still support it or are talking about it." But I found out that in the library they still have the plaques that commemorate the people who started the Cakewalk or helped fund it.

### **Good Lord.**

So yeah I found that out around the same time that this article came out. So the two events happening really angered me-- of course it would anger anyone. So at student government I stood up in front of everyone and expressed my frustration because no one else really saw the article as a big deal.

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Freeman Anderson. *Diagnosing Discrimination: Stress from Perceived Racism and the Mental and Physical Health Effects*. University of Arizona. 2013.

### **Were there other people of color in the room?**

There were. Yeah. And they were also upset. But I was kind of the first to actually stand up and, you know mid-sentence while I'm explaining what was wrong with this, I broke down and I cried and I left the room. And that was honestly the very first time I spoke out about, you know, just prejudice or something that offended me and that was a lot. It brought a lot of emotions because I felt like those years prior I had been holding everything in. I had been laughing things off. I had been telling my friends, "Oh it's ok that you made this comment about Black people liking watermelon," (laughs) "It happens." So after that that's when I kind of started to look at myself more and say, "You know you've got to stand up not just for yourself but for all those people who aren't able to stand up because they're present or can't."

Race is a significant element of the history of all predominantly white institutions, both young and old. This selection from Savannah's interview communicates the ways in which racially charged moments of the past and present can act on students. Not only is there a pressure, then, to perform in un-diverse settings, but a constant feeling of unease, of being surrounded by and implicated in a hostile environment that was not only not made for you, but in the case of Savannah's story, made specifically at the expense of people that look just like you. This moment also highlights a sort of representational tokenism that comes from attending a PWI. Savannah, like many students of color at PWIs, was tasked with the job of educator by her white peers, pointing out the implications of insensitive speech and UVM's problematic legacy. This role of the educator is not without personal consequences. Unlike her white peers, Savannah was not insulated from the effects of the racist remarks of the student's article, and the anger and frustration from those remarks on top of the apathy and naiveté of the white students present at the meeting had an adverse effect on Savannah emotionally.

The previous interview selections and analysis might lead one to believe that I think of PWIs as wholly toxic and completely unwelcoming. Let me be clear: I do not aim to make this project purely a critique of predominantly white institutions, for it was through these settings that the narrators were able to reinforce and support their identities. For example, as Savannah stated

above, her negative experience in the student government meeting led her to reexamine her ideas about identity and come to a realization about what she sees as her responsibility as an ally. In the following, Autumn learned to channel the racism and misogyny she experienced at Point Park University to shore up her self-esteem and inspire her work:

I remember one of the first racist incidents I had was this guy telling me he's not attracted to Black women and doesn't have "Jungle Fever".

**Wow.**

Yeah. And that is the very moment I was like, "Racism is alive and prevalent. Oh my gosh." I was truly shocked because, like I said, the white people that I did know in D.C. and L.A. were very-- they never-- that just would never be a thing that they would ever say because they were so assimilated to the melting pot culture, you know what I mean? So that was crazy. And I had the whole, "You're pretty for a Black girl" thing, you know, told to me and people asking me questions about my hair and my ethnicity and why certain Black people do this, you know, and I definitely was the token Black person in a lot of instances at Point Park. But I also am glad that that happened because that made me even more proud to be a Black woman in a sense. It's weird because you would think it was a burden. And it can be, but it definitely-- experiencing that and being at Point Park definitely put a large stamp into who I am today and made me prouder to embrace my artsy side but to also embrace my Black side too because I had all of these ignorant questions thrown at me and I had grown up thinking I was just as normal and just a human because I almost never dealt with that. So it was interesting for sure. I loved Point Park, though besides the racist incidents. I met the greatest people and I really grew as an artist and as a person because it showed me so many different things. So that was really my experience there.

Autumn's story represents the capacity of all of the narrators to push through the adversity that they face to excel both in college and, as we will later discuss, professional arenas as well. Sarah Washington, graduate of Bowdoin College talked about how her environment led her to develop a core group of friends which she could rely on throughout her college journey:

My first year at first I just kind of hung out with my roommates and then my second semester freshman year I met this group of freshmen Black girls and we all kind of started hanging out together and we formed a little group. We called it BGB for Black Girl Brunch because every Saturday we would have brunch. And up until I think my [graduating class] was there, there wasn't as strong-- or there hadn't been at the time-- as strong of a Black community. But we were very into it and kind of spearheaded it. So that was really nice to have my whole time at Bowdoin. Just to have a community that I can

go to. After sophomore year I wasn't as close with everyone in the group but it was always a good place to return to and a very supportive group. I think that was one really positive thing about my social experience. Even if there-- there was definitely like petty drama like there is with anybody but just having people that understand you in a place that's very different is good. You probably had a similar experience in college but, coming from a school like Latin that's like very informal and very chill and you're really close with all your teachers, it's weird to go to a place that's so-- not formal because I don't think that my school is formal in any way-- but there's just like a different-- first of all, a different sense of history. Bowdoin has been around since like 1794 or something. There's so many traditions and so much history and so much already of a story that didn't exist at Latin. And a lot of, you know, the culture of like preppy white people was not something that I was familiar with at all. And [at] Bowden that's like a lot of people.

In my interview with Jesinta Blaylock, a fellow graduate of Lafayette College, we discussed college as a training ground for the development of one's identity and the protective quality that comes with attending a school like Lafayette:

**So going to college gives you a safety net to really test everything out.**

It definitely gives you a safety net. You really could just do like-- when I think about it, you can really do whatever in college. But, Hm. It also depends on what kind of school you went to because I remember one time I was doing something in my [apartment] that obviously you're not supposed to be doing and [Public Safety] came in our [apartment]. And the other day I was [thinking] like, "If went to a state school and Public Safety ran down in my crib and saw stuff that they were not supposed to see, I would've gotten in so much trouble." But going to this small, private, white institution where they kind of have rules within themselves and, you know, things just happen. Your fate is just a lot different than just being another Black kid at a state school.

**It's not Easton PD that's coming in, yeah. You know, we were shielded.**

We were definitely protected even though you don't always feel that way because I didn't always feel that way at [Lafayette], but definitely always protected. Not because you're black. You're protected in a different way. You're just protected because of the status of where you are, not because of the status of you. Whereas if you were white you're protected because you have your own social capital. When you're Black and in a certain institution you're only protected because you're in that institution.

I often discuss the benefits of attending college with friends and family in similar ways. College can be beneficial to your career and academic goals, but it also prepares you for "the real world" in a particular way. College is one of the few times in life where you are allowed to make



mistakes. Professional and academic mistakes, to be sure; but also emotional mistakes, social mistakes. You are allowed to mess up and not feel the repercussions as severely, had you not been under the jurisdiction of a higher education institution. In this excerpt, Jesinta describes a specific kind of protection that we were afforded as students of a particular institution. An organization as old, storied, and economically robust as Lafayette no doubt possesses a large degree of influence over its members and the surrounding community. So much so, that it is given a significant amount of autonomy by state and local officials to manage its internal affairs. However, Jesinta points out that unlike white students or students whose families have created a legacy at Lafayette (in Lafayette's case, all legacy students are white), there is a degree to which this protection extends for other, non-white students. Even within the cushion of the most elite, privileged setting of a private liberal arts college, power and politics are not distributed equally.

#### ***IV. Professional Experiences***

The young Black professionals I have interviewed hail from a range of different professional backgrounds. Autumn, a graduate of the film school at Point Park has recently begun as an associate producer at a commercial production company in Los Angeles. Ahmed has started down the path of one day founding his own non-profit by taking up a position as a college-prep instructor at For the Love of Children. Jesinta has begun working with Teach for America with goals of entering into the world of education administration. With plans to attend law school, Sarah is currently working at a prominent law firm in New York. Having graduated with honors from the University of Vermont, Savannah is currently working there as an undergraduate admissions counselor, gaining the knowledge necessary to pursue a career in

higher education administration. Considering their current professional trajectory, I am excited to see what heights each narrator will soar to in the next five to ten years.

Throughout their experiences, each narrator has drawn meaningful conclusions about the meaning of race in the workplace, or cited powerful anecdotes pertaining to the subject. I have found oral history to be a particularly useful approach in that it allows for much more space to gather rich accounts of the moment to moment lives of YBPs than a “regular” interview or research-oriented survey. In general, I have found that YBPs, in the lives of the narrators and in my own personal experience, experience racial encounters in the workplace which can compound the stress of trying to proficiently and effectively perform their responsibilities. In hearing the experiences of the narrators and in considering my own life, I have found that racial encounters in the workplace can compound already stressful professional responsibilities. Navigating Blackness is an unspoken part of the job. However, for the most part, YBPs I interviewed persevere and excel, reaching higher and higher in their careers. Take for example, the following moments from my interview with Sarah, who is multiracial and passes for multiple different racial identities depending on the situation:

So one of my co-workers at work now. We have a Diversity and Inclusion Committee that I wanted to join. She’s Black and the other person who was in the conversation is South Asian and we were all talking about it and she was like, “No *you* guys need to ask to be on that committee. You need to [explain your interest] as well-- [non-Black people]” because we wanted to be on it but they hadn’t let on it. And she was like, “You know, you, [South Asian coworker] as a brown person need to do this and you, Sarah, I don’t know *what* your race is but you need to ask to be on (laughs) the committee.”

(Laughter)

Then I was talking to her a few days later about an interview we had had with someone who was a Black guy. We were talking about it in terms of race and like the dynamics of that and she was saying, “Yeah, you know, I don’t know what your race is but blah-blah-blah,” and I just kind of stopped her and I said, “Just to be *clear*, I’m Black.” (laughs) Like, just so you know. And she’s also Black and she was really excited about it and she messaged me later saying, “I’m so glad to have another Black woman in the office.” But

it was just a really weird experience of [realizing], okay I have to explicitly be clear. But once I said that, she explained that her best friend is biracial and presents as white, so she doesn't want to assume anybody's race. Which is fair. But also for me [I realized] I need to be very explicit with you right now because you're clearly confused. And I think also a lot of people at my job thought I was Spanish or Latina. The first week two different people assumed that I spoke Spanish.

### **They just started talking to you in Spanish?**

No, first they were explaining our intake calls and my coworker was like, "Oh you speak Spanish, right?" and I was like, "Nope. You interviewed me, you've seen my resume. Nothin' about that says Spanish. [You are] literally just basing that on the fact that you think I look Latina." Then the next day one of the partners was trying to speak with the cleaning lady who only spoke Spanish and she said, "Sarah you speak Spanish, right?" and I was like, "I can't help you." (Laughs) I don't know anything about this. I'm not-- Like my mom and my sister [visited] and my mom's very clearly white. One of the lawyers came out and seemed very confused by [my family] standing there. At first I just thought it was because they were unfamiliar people. But in hindsight, I realized it was probably also partly because I introduced her as my mom and he was like, "You guys look nothing alike. What's happening?"

These stories show both the malleability of race as a social construct and the trials many YBPs may experience as they settle into their work environments. While mostly humorous in this context, these situations can present a challenging, stressful dilemma for Black professionals in their workplaces. In my interview with Jesinta, she discussed the difficulty in teaching in a majority Latinx community as the only African-American faculty member and being mistaken as Dominican. She also identified age as being a major factor in how she gets along with her coworkers:

### **How do you think [your coworkers] perceive you?**

Well I know that a lot of [my coworkers] don't perceive me as [African-American] because, again, a lot of people think I'm Dominican because I speak Spanish, and when I do speak Spanish, I have more of a Dominican accent-- because, you know, Spanish has so many different dialects so I have more of a Dominican accent. And I guess I have Dominican features, or whatever. So everyone thinks I'm Dominican for the most part. I think that, age, shows more of any other part of my identity just because everyone is older. The school is going through a transitioning period because we have a new administration. My principal has only been there since last year so she's been [hiring] a lot of new, young, fresh teachers. So I'll say the age thing because I'm only turning 23

and everybody else is like 38, 40, 50, about to retire. So the teaching styles are different. What I'm learning in grad school and what my principal is expecting of us is very different than what the [previous] principals expected of the teachers that are there. So I think that-- not to say that I'm not always liked-- but I think that for that reason I'm not always going to be liked because I'm easily able to do the things that my principal asks of me because that's how I'm learning to teach whereas the other teachers are just like, "Well this is too much extra work," or, "We never had to do this," or, "I'm getting the union involved because they're making those--" (laughter) *Oh please!* The craziest things. So I think age really sets-- if any identity marker sticks out-- it's definitely age.

Jesinta's testimony brings me to another aspect of this thesis that I wish to discuss. The importance of age and generational difference. Because the narrators for this project are around the same age (21-24), the project yielded interesting results about adolescence, growth, and maturation. A growing body of research acknowledges that adolescence does not fully end until around the age of 25.<sup>6</sup> Further research should focus on the intersection of race and age, and the ways that external factors such as attending a PWI or settling into an unfamiliar work environment affect the process of growth and maturation in YBPs. Are YBPs expected or forced to mature faster than their white counterparts or other individuals of color, and how does this affect their performance in the workplace and in academic settings?

In line with the theme of maturation, I would like to highlight the wisdom that YBPs have accrued as they continue to grow and develop by including testimony from Ahmed's experiences as mentor/facilitator:

I do workshop facilitation with a college preparedness focus at this after school program. It's a nonprofit called For the Love of Children based in D.C. I took the job because I initially wanted to open up my own nonprofit. One of my long-term life goals has been to open up either my own nonprofit or my own charter school with an Afrocentric focus. And so my foot in the door was this opportunity. It's definitely not Afrocentric focused. But it allows me to kind of mentor kids that look like me who have went through similar circumstances that I have. I honestly see a lot of either my friends, or myself in the kids. It's both a very terrifying and very empowering experience because I've had some friends fall through the cracks. You know, I see-- I see my friends at that age in them and I'm like, "Fuck. I hope somebody-- I hope that it clicks for you." You know what I'm

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<sup>6</sup>"Brain Maturity Extends Well Beyond Teen Years," October, 10, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=141164708>

saying? What's the phrase? "You can lead a horse to water--" I ain't trying to use this [phrase] on kids because it sounds way too messed up-- "But you can't force them to drink." It's kind of that same type of scenario. I can preach to you and tell you, "Yo, you right. Maybe a college degree ain't the most promised thing in the world right now. Maybe it won't lead you to an eternal land of wealth. But at least it's a start." Especially in D.C. the cost of living has increased higher. They're making it way more difficult for people to get subsidized housing and things like that. So the cycle of poverty is going to get increasingly more difficult especially as the standards of living increase. And I just try to put that [reality] into them. I try to put positivity into them as much as possible. I have scholars whose friends from school have been murdered this year. It's a very real circumstance to explain to a scholar the institutional side of things, you know what I'm saying? [Explaining] what happened to lead to this. Like in this setting. I grew up in this setting. I heard the music that we listened to. I saw the stuff that we had to maneuver around. I remember walking up to KIPP<sup>7</sup>. Every day walking through KIPP was like hell. Walking to KIPP was like hell because you had two rival hoods (gangs) just beefing (warring). I remember one time my school had to go on lockdown because they were shooting up the block. That's a very real circumstance for kids and their friends get lost in this process. So I try to teach them things like conflict resolution. Before we get to this step, how can we--

### **Right.**

How can we simmer down the situation? We've been conditioned to view Black bodies as objects. That's why we're so quick to discard them. I try to feed that into them. I had a scholar tell me that her mother told her to hit people back if they hit her. And I'm like, "You're right. Self-defense." I grew up with that same mind-state. But then she was like, "But I gotta drag her down the steps. I gotta--" And I'm like, "Yo, why we got to escalate like that?" (Laughter) Like, just beat her ass. Just beat her ass, you don't have to kill her. That's what you sound like [you want to do]. But it's really like they just discard themselves. I hear the same comments of self-hatred that I heard thrown towards me as a youngin'. So one of my scholars-- he's got the same hair texture as me-- a young man in the 7th grade. He likes to jone (joke) on my hair because, you know, I'm "Knotty Negus" (one of Ahmed's many nicknames). I'm unkempt (laughter). That's just my chosen identity. And I'm like, "Brother we got the same hair. Your naps (curls) are as beautiful as mine." I try to feed those those [messages] of "love yourself," "respect yourself," "respect each other." Y'all are in this together. I try to feed that into them.

### **Respect Black life. Black life is precious.**

Exactly. Exactly, it's precious. And [over time] you realize that. I lost my father and my family lost a cousin probably around the same year. This was back when D.C. was the

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<sup>7</sup> K.I.P.P. (Knowledge is Power Program) Schools are a growing network of charter schools which serve minority students of color who come from mostly low-income backgrounds. In Washington D.C. and many other cities around the United States, KIPP schools are situated in the neighborhoods they serve. This is beneficial to students who do not have access to suitable schools in their neighborhood, but can also make for a dangerous commute in underserved neighborhoods with high crime rates. <http://www.kipp.org/kipp-foundation/>

murder capital.<sup>8</sup> D.C. may no longer be the murder capital, but *bodies is dropping*, bro. I turn on the news and it's a new teen *gone!* It's wicked out here.

For kids in the circumstances described in Ahmed's testimony and in the life experiences of many of our narrators, Black children are forced to grow up faster than their white counterparts as a result of, among many factors, a prejudiced perception of Black children. A 2014 study shows that "Black children are seen as older than adults."<sup>9</sup> This may explain why YBPs like Ahmed are already so full of the wisdom they seek to impart to later generations. This knowledge becomes necessary to survive in a world where the odds are already stacked up against you. Personally, I have also felt that as a young Black male growing up in an urban setting, I was forced to grow up faster than my white peers. For example, at the age of 11 I was expected to learn to navigate public transportation to get to and from school, giving my parents more time to work and provide for our family. While these experiences can have a deep psychological effect on the mind of a child, catching the subway at a young age taught me a lot about how to survive in a city. I learned who to trust, who not to sit next to, how to anticipate and avoid danger, and gained a solid sense of direction from catching D.C.'s metro from a young age. These early experiences contributed to, in my opinion, an accelerated rate of maturity.

## **V. Advice to Black Youth**

In closing, I would like to leave the reader with advice from each narrator. The following are responses to a combination of the questions: "What advice do you have for current Black students/students of color at your alma mater?" "What would you say to freshman year you?" and, "What advice do you have for a younger sibling?" It is my hope that this knowledge and

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<sup>8</sup> "Washington D.C. from murder capital to boomtown," August 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28605215>

<sup>9</sup> Culotta, Di Leone, DiTomasso, Goff, and Jackson, "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2014, Vol. 106, No. 4, 526–545

wisdom might ring throughout the future as our country continues to yield to more and more educated Black individuals.<sup>10</sup>

#### Autumn

Be nice and be yourself and hustle. That would really be it. Be nice, be yourself, and hustle because that's what I would have told myself as a young person. I feel like as a younger person, I struggled with who I was and as I'm getting older I'm realizing that just being me is totally fine (laughs). So that's definitely what I would tell my sister and a person coming up in the world. To be nice, because it pays off-- number one you feel good when you're nice, number two it's just the right thing to do. And number three, it comes back to you if you're nice. If you're just a nice person, it works out. And to hustle, because there's really no other way you're going to achieve your goal besides hustling. So, that's I would say.

#### **What kind of advice would you give Black students who are at Point Park right now?**

That's a good question. Stay true to yourself and don't be afraid to stand up against somebody saying something crazy that seems to invalidate your skin color. That would definitely be a form of advice. Don't be afraid if you-- don't be afraid to express how you feel about a certain situation when it comes to your race or when it comes to race in general. Expression is great. I guess the biggest piece of advice I would give to a Black kid at Point Park is to definitely just do you. Focus on your studies but when it comes to you as a Black person, be ready to educate. Because there's going to be a lot of people who are genuinely, and they don't mean it unfortunately, they just genuinely, are ignorant. So be ready to educate and be proud to be Black. That's it (laughs).

#### Ahmed

Get in your bag, stay on your bully! Keep your grind up. Stay Black as hell, and in time you will excel! (Laughter)

You're the ruler of your own destiny.

You are everything that you speak into existence.

To Black students Lafayette, I'ma break this down between the different populations because Blackness is so diverse. I would recommend that the global diaspora just have a sit down where they exchange knowledgeable pieces of information.

The Black students [at Lafayette] have got to avoid the *elitist bubble*. It's very easy to [just] sit up in your in your "not-necessarily-Ivy-League-education" but not "bare-

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<sup>10</sup> "How Millennials today compare with their grandparents 50 years ago," Pew Research Center, March 16, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/16/how-millennials-compare-with-their-grandparents/>

minimum-education-either” [institution]. It’s very easy to get wrapped into that bubble and not interact with the population of Easton, [and] within that community.

Love one another. Y’all are all y’all got.

Black students at Lafayette: talk to anybody that could possibly be a DACA recipient and hear out their struggle because I think it's very easy to get wrapped up in our struggles as [Black] students. Talk to different members of institutionally oppressed groups. So [that] one, you know you're not in this alone, and two you can find a way to make a change for all of y’all.

### Jesinta

It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay. And you’re not the only one [struggling]. In all aspects. Financially, academically, socially, relationship-wise, familial-wise. It's going to be OK, and you're not the only one. It's ok to be different.

Ask for help. Don’t *ever* be afraid to ask for help. No matter the situation. Whether it is money, whether it is like you're having a breakdown, you're breaking down every day. Whatever. Ask for help. Ask for help because it's really hard to go through things alone. It's funny because [a friend] was telling me yesterday that you grow up--especially when you're a minority and you just have the weight of the world on you-- sometimes you don't even know that you have this weight of the world on you. But you do. And you feel like you have to be independent. You feel like you're not supposed to ever ask for help, [but] you are. At some point in life you are supposed to ask for help and you're not supposed to feel bad for asking for help either. So definitely ask for help.

Don't be afraid to try new things because when you graduate, none of it's going to matter anyway. Whether you did it or didn't, (Laughter) it literally is not going to matter.

I've been trying to figure out the best way to say this because it sounds bad, but, thicken your skin before you graduate because going to a PWI will definitely coddle the shit out of you. When you get to the real world, they don't give a fuck. They don't give a fuck about how much you know about race. They don't give a fuck about how much you know about feminism or being a womanist or patriarchy. They don't give a fuck about none of that shit. You are just existing in the larger society. So definitely thicken your skin and understand that the real world is vastly different than being at a PWI.

### Sarah

Do things that interest you. Don't really be as concerned with the end product or where it's going. If you're doing things that interest you and you keep [at them,] without even meaning to it will make sense and it will figure itself out. I didn't take Africana Studies classes or become a major because I thought it would get me somewhere. I just liked what I was doing and liked working for a legal nonprofit. Just do things that interest you- - to the extent that you can afford it. That's a big caveat.



Don't let bad things stay the way they are. Fight for change. You may not get the result that you want but I think even the act of fighting and the act of working for something is really important. Even if it doesn't help [your institution] grow, it will help you grow and understand things. Get involved. Don't just let things happen.

Ask questions and follow up on literally everything.

### **Savannah**

Definitely don't be afraid to stick up for yourself. And also don't be afraid to be yourself. Just because your being who you are doesn't identify with a certain person doesn't mean you need to change anything about yourself.

And just find your voice. I don't have to tell [my sister] that because she is honestly my inspiration because she is way ahead of the curve (laughs) with all of that. But for anybody who has kind of struggled with their Blackness and their identity coming from either a predominately white institution or predominantly Black [institution] and feeling like you don't [belong] in that community, stay strong because it will get better you. Just don't lose sense of who you are.

### **For Black students at UVM right now, what would you say to them?**

Don't take any of the bullshit. (Laughter) UVM may seem perfect but it's far from it. You need to be ready and be courageous enough to call them out on it-- which a lot of students of color [have already done]. There's been a couple recent incidents and I'm really proud that students are speaking up against it but just know that the work is not done. (Laughs) There so much [to do] even in a liberal state.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have attempted to show the uniqueness of some of the young Black professionals (YBPs) in my social circle and their ability to persevere through throughout their college careers at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and in the workplace, sharing the knowledge they have gained along the way. Throughout, I have highlighted how these individuals have grown to understand the world and contend with their position as marginalized individuals within it. They are not content to just survive in their positions but desire to excel, taking each new experience by storm and trailblazing for those who are sure to follow in their

footsteps. It is my hope that these testimonies have, among other things, inspired and reassured other African-Americans (and other people of color) in similar or aspiring positions.

As I have pointed out earlier, the United States is trending toward a more educated population. Inevitably, this means a larger and larger number of African-American and other racial minorities will be enrolling in predominantly white institutions around the nation. This thesis has demonstrated that while progress has been made to accept and accommodate these minorities, there is still much work to be done to create a truly inviting and supportive space for students of color, especially African-American students. One could argue that the current patterns of student activism and the pushback from those who would like to maintain the status quo at PWIs is an indication that the change that is occurring is not progressing at a fast enough pace. However, I prefer to think of this current moment in our history as a necessary catalyst to future change. As more young adults in this country are becoming educated, the issues in our academic institutions will receive more attention, with new young people approaching the problems of the early 21st century with the solutions of the future.

## **Afterward**

In future research, I would like to expand the scale and scope of this project, potentially breaking it down into two parts: the college life and professional life of black individuals. As I have stated earlier, a set of policy recommendations may arise from such a research project, designed to change the way we think about and address the needs of the ever-increasing number of black students enrolling in academia here at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This project may also lead to a series of lectures and workshops which would be designed to address feelings of alienation, isolation and exploitation on college campuses and work to remedy those sentiments.

The following is brief set of recommendations for incoming students of color at majority white institutions and the administrators of those institutions inspired by narrator testimony:

- ❖ **Cultural Sensitivity Training (CST):** CST's are well-known and widespread trainings in workplaces around the country. However, in the space of academia, these trainings could be more effective if they were tailored specifically to the academic setting, and be mandatory for professors who are one of the first groups of school officials to make contact with students. As Autumn stated earlier, she took a global cinema course which really only focused on European cinema. Cultural awareness and sensitivity trainings/activities could be aimed at revamping/adjusting course curricula to better serve incoming students of color.
- ❖ **Hiring Professors and Administrators of Color:** Many institutions nationwide are already aiming to make improvements in the diversity of their faculty and staff, but there is

considerable work to be done.<sup>11</sup> Hiring policies should not only seek to hire qualified candidates, but go a step further and offer professional development to those candidates who represent promising profiles but do not possess the “perfect” resume/CV. As Ahmed’s testimony represents, Black mentorship works because mentors/mentees are able to relate to each (in Ahmed’s case, he could literally *see* himself and his friends in the young students he advises). In the space of a PWI, a space that can be isolating for students of color, older, more experienced faculty and staff can foster crucial relationships necessary to maintain enrollment and graduation of students of color.

- ❖ “Cultural Capital” Training: This would entail a series of lectures, seminars, activities and workshops aimed at conveying to students of color the skills to thrive socially in unfamiliar, predominantly white environments. The eventual outcome of such a workshop would be to arm students with the ability to pass seamlessly through unfamiliar cultural environments both in school and the workplace. As Jesinta indicates in her interview, established PWIs afford a relative degree of insulation from the repercussions of mistakes, but this insulation varies according to several factors, one of which is race. It is important to make students aware of this, and teach them how to navigate these complex environments.

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<sup>11</sup> McGill, “The Missing Black Students at Elite American Universities.”  
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